

Editorial: Capitalism(s) and the future of adult education policy

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Introduction

More than a century ago, Max Weber ([1904-05] 1930) spoke of the capitalist economy as ‘an immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and which presents itself to him, at least as an individual, as an unalterable order of things in which he must live ([1904-05] 1930, p. 19). On this basis he criticised the capitalist economy for forcing the individual ‘to conform to capitalistic rules of action’ ([1904-05] 1930, p. 20), which are based on private ownership by individuals or corporations, market competition and the pursuit of profit. Of course, fifty years ahead of Weber, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels ([1848] 2002) had already examined and critiqued the expansive and exploitative nature of capital in the *Communist Manifesto* and they continued to build and elaborate these ideas throughout their lives (Marx, [1867] 1990). These and other thinkers have created a rich body of scholarship exploring the tendencies and characteristics of capitalism through history¹ from varied ideological positions (e.g., Braudel, 1981; Marx, [1867] 1990; Polanyi, 2001; Smith, 1776; Wallerstein, 1980 inter alia).

Debates on the nature and direction of capitalism, and its relationship to flourishing and freedom, continued for most of the twentieth century. But from the 1980s onwards for both political and intellectual reasons work examining capitalism largely fell out of favour in social science, even amongst critical theorists (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018). In the past decade this has shifted again and there has been a remarkable renewal of interest in such work in both the mass media and mainstream academia (Dörre, Lessenich & Rosa, 2015). This change can be attributed to the impact of a particular ‘event’ in recent history,

as well as the effects of long wave of capitalist globalisation, and growing concerns and the future direction and sustainability of the contemporary social order.

The event, of course, is the 2008 global financial crisis, the effects of which rippled outwards leading to major recession and which prompted a great deal of reflection and research on the tendencies of capitalism. Related but distinct from this is the growing evidence of a secular rise in inequalities in wealth and power (Piketty, 2014; Sayer, 2015; Staab, 2019) and dramatic signs of the intensifying environmental crisis (Latour, 2018; Malm, 2020; Raworth, 2018), linked by the expansive logic of capital accumulation. This new body of research has also served to remind us that capitalism is the result of material and ideological interactions between social groups, over property rights and the pursuit of profit and social stability, rather than a natural fact (Piketty, 2020).

Although capitalism has experienced, and continues to experience crises of all sorts, it has continued to expand its reach causing new type of challenges (Beck, 1999). It remains unclear whether capitalism might be replaced, in foreseeable future, with anything other than merely a version of itself (Tanuro, 2013). Among other things, capitalism has shown a marked capacity to creatively absorb diverse critiques (social, environmental, feminist and cultural) and oftentimes uses them to its own advantage (della Porta, 2015).

In summary, capitalism's extraordinary dynamism has created a highly complex world system which is now beset by crises. A world, as one commentator put it, of 'brave new anxieties', in which there appears to be a lack of confidence in the future, increased pessimism among the working classes, and the rising and worrisome support for political extremism (Collier, 2018). Without a theory of the dynamics and tendencies of capitalism, it is argued, not only will we fail to grasp a great deal of what is happening in the world we will also be unable to shape it in any meaningful sense (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018; Harvey, 2016; Sayer, 2015; Wright, 2010).

Capitalism and adult education (policy) research

Despite this renewal of interests in capitalism there is still relatively little sustained discussion of capitalism in adult education. While critiques of neoliberalism, human capital theory and instrumentalism are very common in adult education research situating this in a more general analysis of capitalism is quite rare. Perhaps this is because historically, as Griff Foley argues (1994, p. 121), there has historically been a relative 'neglect of political economy' within the field. Certainly this criticism applies to a great deal of liberal and humanist forms of adult education research but includes also a great deal of critical pedagogy and even to Freire (1972, 1998),

In issuing the Call for Papers for this thematic issue the ESREA Policy Studies in Adult Education wanted to create the conditions for a sustained examination of the topic in contemporary adult education. Our hope is that this will build on previous work on this topic for example, and this is no way an exhaustive list, in comparative adult education and research on lifelong learning (e.g., Jarvis, 2008; Rubenson, 2009), adult education and development (e.g. Youngman, 2000 adult education and work) (e.g. Livingstone, 2010; Sawchuck, 2003), and among critical researchers (e.g. Finger, Jansen & Wildemeersch, 2000; Heller, 2016; Olson, Dahlstedt, Fejes, & Sandberg, 2018; Walters, Borg, Mayo, Foley, 2004), and researchers interested in institutionally mediated 'varieties of capitalism' drawing on Hall & Soskice (2001) (e.g., Rees, 2013; or critically Reichart & Kaufmann-Kuchta, 2020) or on the idea of varying forms of capitalist welfare states (e.g. Desjardins & Ioannidou, 2020).

The ESREA Policy Studies in Adult Education acknowledges that policy developments are subject to various trends, among which globalisation, the trans-nationalisation of education policy making, and a renewed pressure for strategic and policy relevant research. At the same time, the network believes that alongside critiques of capitalism(s), and debates around new forms of capitalism, scholarly work is needed to unleash the ‘sociological imagination’ (Wright Mills, 1959; see also Rasmussen in this issue) not only to explore how different forms of capitalism interact with and influence adult education, but also - paraphrasing Paul Collier (2018), to assume an alternative point of view on ‘the future of adult education’. In light of what we have written above about futures it follows that thinking carefully about the future of adult education requires exploring if capitalism can be managed, substantially altered or transcended. How this can play out on day to day basis is illuminated in a recent study of learners’ will formation, which suggests that adult education in many forms is orientated to adapting ‘to the prevailing societal situation—that of late capitalism, which is a situation not considered by the adult students as possible to change’ (Olson et al., 2018, p. 95). The relationship between capitalism and alternative futures has become of even sharper interest over the 2020-21, with some researchers tracing the increasing incidence of zoonoses to the way capitalism is organised (Foster & Suwandi, 2020) and also evidence that it has consolidated the power of capital while social inequalities have worsened (William, 2020).

The articles in the thematic issue

In launching this call we also wished to begin to mark out how adult education might be fruitfully linked to research on capitalism in other disciplines. In this regard we discern four areas within contemporary research on capitalism that are especially pertinent to the articles in this thematic issue. First, there is the question of how we define periods and phases within capitalism, and the importance of the precise way one describes contemporary capitalism (e.g. whether one terms present day capitalism as neoliberal, financialised, cognitive, accelerated, ‘late’, etc.), and how this is positioned in relation to previous phases of capitalism (e.g. Fordist, welfare, monopoly, Keynesian, social democratic etc.). As we will explain below the coordinates we use to look backwards and forwards in thinking about the future, and the associated politics of memory, is a key concern in this issue and taken up in striking and unusual ways. Second, the articles in this thematic issue illustrate commonalities and differences in capitalism across national and regional boundaries. Third, each article grapples with how we might best analyse how the symbolic and material aspects of capitalism mesh. Fourth, all the articles treat adult education as both a force for social reproduction and resistance to capitalism drawing mainly on radical, Marxist and post-structuralist informed accounts of capitalism today.

The first two articles in this thematic issue focus on the futures in adult education through a careful evacuation of past ideas. Both articles are also concerned with how we can hold onto and enlarge our sense of possibilities in a period of crisis. In this sense the history of adult education is read strategically and ‘to seize hold of a memory as it flashes it up in a moment of danger’ (Benjamin, 1992, p. 247).

In the first article Palle Rasmussen focuses on the sociological imagination as a precondition of a truly democratic politics and society. It only looks back at Charles Wright Mills and Oskar Negt as adult educators who saw a critique of modern society and capitalism as a foundational part of critical adult education and a living democracy. Rasmussen works through and critiques their contributions and also argues for the value

of dystopian (and utopian) fiction in fully developing a sociological imagination in adult education that is able to (however indirectly) hint at the possibilities of preventing social, environmental etc. degradation.

The second article by Barry J. Hake draws on Raymond Williams' cultural materialism to trace the way various adult education scholarship has been linked to capitalist and sometimes anti-capitalist imaginaries. Combining sociological analysis with a fine-grained historical account of adult education policy development Hake casts a critical eye on the way we remember and use notions of the past in adult education in response to contemporary capitalism. Hake describes the three post-war decades as a crucial period of interest. The author demonstrates convincingly (and perhaps surprisingly to many) that it was just that era that gave rise, in the Western world, to a number of central assumptions of the technocratic and managerial approaches to governing society that emphasise the role of education and learning – approaches we often tend to associate with the emergence and establishment of neoliberalism in the 1980s. Notably he also suggests that critical adult education research needs to be wary of nostalgia for the past and the need to hold onto a sense of the deep conflicts over the purpose of adult education across and through distinct phases of capitalism.

The third and fourth texts focus on problematic aspects of social practices and economic orientations of education policies in the context of global capitalism. Through comparative analysis they contextualise the various ways capitalist logic operates in specific national and regional contexts.

Borut Mikulec and Tadej Košmerl's article explores changes in adult education policy in Bavaria and Slovenia and seeks to identify some of the key characteristics, drivers and modalities of marketisation processes in adult learning and education. They outline the various ways this can occur and then, based on empirical research on policy documents and interviews, outline the extent to which marketisation is being promoted by federal and national states and to which this is then responded to by adult learning and education institutions. In doing so they draw on critical theories of power alongside work on varieties of capitalism on a 'macro' level to situate the study. They also deploy a framework developed by Lima and Guimarães (2011) in exploring the findings. From this they discern drivers towards marketisation from 'above' and 'below', and clear evidence of neoliberalisation of adult learning and education but also resistance to this agenda.

The final article of the thematic issue theme by Alisha M. B. Heinemann and Lilia Monzó focuses on second language education in Germany and the USA. Building on critical pedagogy and humanist Marxism they situate their discussion of second language education in relation to capitalism, racism and migration. The article examines the links between the logic of capitalism and specific historical traditions, institutions and practices in adult education in their two contexts. They argue that second language learning is primarily being used to ensure social reproduction in Germany and the USA. Both contributors share a keen interest in the ways educators and education organisers can resist the implementation of current education policies and make the case there is also space for a 'pedagogy of dreaming' and the creation of what Foucault termed 'heterotopian spaces' of dissent and alterity.

When we started considering a thematic issue on capitalism(s) and (the future) adult education policy, it became apparent that such a broad field cannot be fully covered by a few articles brought together in a single thematic issue. In spite of this, we believe that the collection of articles herein included depict the relevance, breadth, and dynamism of the debate among adult education (policy) scholars, and we hope might spark further discussions, venturing well beyond the usual critique of neoliberalism and human resource development policy, as we have known it since the late 20th century. Taken

together the contribution to this thematic issue prompt further research in at least two directions. The first direction invites to focus on capitalism in terms of both its general characteristics and the way its development has been shaped in the past generation. The second direction calls for in-depth analyses and critique of selected manifestations of global capitalism, and its changing forms, including by unfolding crises in health, the economy, the environment and democracy, as we write.

Open papers in this issue of RELA

There are three other articles featured in this issue of RELA.

The fifth article in this issue is a fascinating theoretical essay by Peter Alheit entitled 'Biographicity as 'mental grammar' of postmodern life'. Peter Alheit is one of the key figures in European biographical research and has over several decades analysed the modes, structures and processes biographical learning with great acuity. As part of this Alheit and Dausien (2000) elaborated a theory of biographicity (building on work by Martin Kohli and others) which seeks to understand how people reflexively and creatively reshape their lives. Alheit has continued to refine this idea and in this article draws on neurobiology and work on linguistics as well as a longstanding interest in Bourdieu and Luhmann, who he also critically engages with here, to puzzle through the complex interplay of agency and structure in modern life in a non-deterministic way. In reviewing these ideas he reflects in particular on gender. The implications of the arguments in this article for how we think about research and adult learning are profound and worth quoting some of the conclusion Alheit offers directly. He discusses '*Biographicity* as a unique social grammar of the individual [...] an '*inner logic*' grows, which can also change again and again through new external impulses. But it does not change according to a principle of determination' Alheit's careful discussion of agency is highly stimulating and adds to his very rich body of work

Paula Stone is the author of the sixth piece and is also concerned with auto/biographical learning and in particular the injuries of class. In the article Stone tells 'the story of 'who I was' to 'who I am now'', in a bid to address issues around misrepresentation and exclusion' She focuses in particular at her experiences in academia and doing a PhD. The author offers a compelling account of how the classed assumptions of the academy and particular academics help produce feelings of vulnerability and misrecognition in working class academics. Using a feminist and critical lens and a 'sociological imagination' Stone thoughtfully discusses how social class inequalities are produced, experienced and researched and how class and gender have shaped her own trajectory through education and the dilemmas and questions this has provoked. Bridging feminist standpoint theory and Axel Honneth's critical theory she concludes by discussing how the award of her PhD gave her some of 'the desired recognition that Honneth (1995) argues is essential for human flourishing'. In doing so Stone deftly illustrates the way agency operates and is constrained through a careful and evocative reflection on her lived experience.

The final piece in the issue comes from Paula Guimãres and Borut Mikulec and this is a comparative analysis of recognition of prior learning (RPL) policies in Slovenia and Portugal based primarily on documentary analysis. They succinctly and helpfully outline the various models of RPL and then detail the continuities and discontinuities in the development of RPL policies in Slovenia and Portugal. They also discuss the strong influence the European Union has played in the development of RPL, not least in linking RPL to employability. The article illustrates just how differently embedded RPL is in

different European countries (RPL is quite central in adult education in Portugal but is more marginal in Slovenia). A key finding across both contexts is that RPL is being developed in a utilitarian and market driven way and even more strikingly that RPL aimed solely at professional certification currently lacks educational and social value. This points to the need for careful consideration of how we link adult education to decent employment.

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