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Populism, democracy and a pedagogy of renewal

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Abstract

Laclau and Mouffe have long argued the democratic possibilities of 'left populism' underpinned by their agonistic critique of liberal democracy. We are currently witnessing the attempted application of their theories by European political parties. However, there remains very little international scholarship taking up the challenge of situating these arguments in the broader literature on the relationship between democracy and education. We argue that this is an urgent task, particularly in the context of populist trends which appear inimical to educational practice. Thus, we explore the implications of populism for adult education aimed at defending and extending democratic life. We question the conflation of agonistic democracy with left populism on several grounds, and we consider how a focus on education might help to ground their theory and clarify its ambiguities. We argue that adult educators can surface aspects of the context which representations of populism on the one hand, and populist representations on the other, often hide. Our argument is illustrated through two vignettes of populist events and the educational problems and opportunities they posed.

Introduction

Is populism the cause of a democratic deficit in different nation states across the globe or is it a consequence of them? Are populist movements necessarily inimical to democracy? The rise of populism generally is associated with the dog whistle politics of racist, bigoted, xenophobic and homophobic language, the 'othering' of social and ethnic groups, and the cult of 'strong leaders' who claim to speak for the people. Furthermore, the political turn towards an inward looking, insular and chauvinistic nationalism in the US, UK, Turkey, India and many West and Eastern European states reinforces such concerns that populism is intrinsically bad for democracy. However, in what circumstances might populism provide opportunities for enriching democratic life? In this article we argue that despite the inauspicious circumstances, the contradictions of the current context also create possibilities to further adult education for democracy.

Firstly, we develop our argument drawing on the theoretical work of Gramsci (1971) on hegemony, and Mouffe (2000) and Laclau (2005) on populism and agonism. Following Gramsci, we argue that the wave of populist politics reflects a breakdown of the hegemony of liberal democracy. However, the case is made that populism is a vague term which has been used to (mis)represent a wide range of different

mobilisations of discontent covering very different ideological positions and educational possibilities. It is precisely in the fact that people are mobilised to engage in the political arena that populism can generate a public space for critical education where 'problem definitions' and 'solutions' are critically assessed. Whilst representations of populism in the west are often antithetical to critical thinking, in the Latin American context (and historically in the US) populism was associated with a progressive politics where education and action were aligned (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Nevertheless, critical education does not always have the choice of engaging with a progressive politics and must also operate in relatively hostile public spaces.

Secondly, we illustrate this argument through two vignettes, one local and the other national in scale: in the former, one author reflects on their professional work responding to a media generated campaign of hostility against the relocation of a sex offender into a community. This example captures a number of elements of populism (although not explicitly political populism) stirred by a hostile media campaign and generating a difficult public space for educational intervention. The second vignette is on a national scale and derives from another author's engagement with the Scottish independence referendum in 2014. The campaign for independence had many of the characteristics of a populist movement which also created opportunities for critical education in public spaces.

According to Streeck (2017a), populism signals 'the return of the repressed' as the victims of austerity, who had been ignored in mainstream policies, found a way to vent their anger at the ballot box by rejecting parties which they no longer trusted and offered them little real choice. We can categorise Brexit and the election of Trump in these terms without, at the same time, downplaying the nativism and 'othering' of marginalised and minority groups that were evident in both these events. Nonetheless, we suggest that anger can be a powerful motive for learning, and how educators respond to this anger is significant.

In reversing the way populism has been rejected tout court we need to explore the context in which populist trends have emerged and the function of populism in politics. This analytical and conceptual clarification is the essential precursor for addressing what educators can do, in these circumstances, to enhance democracy. By this we mean the capacity of people to engage in political institutions and procedures as well as to participate actively and critically in political thinking, analysis and debate. Democracy as a political system has to be built on the foundations of democracy as a way of life, as an ingrained cultural practice, because without such a solid base the institutions, procedures and practices of democracy can be readily

undermined. It is in developing a democratic culture based on critical thought and emotion that adult and informal education in communities has a key contribution to make in resourcing democracy.

The interregnum: the struggle for hegemony

Gramsci's notion of the interregnum is a useful way of thinking about the current political context and its contradictions. In Gramsci's analysis, an interregnum is an indicator of the decline of hegemony of the ruling forces and a stalemate in the creation of an alternative. 'The old is dying', according to Gramsci (1971, p. 276) 'but the new cannot yet be born and in such circumstances many morbid symptoms are evident'. It is, as Gramsci understood, 'a time of monsters' where Caesarist political options emerge in terms of the 'strong man' who can channel the collective will of the people and resolve problems. Caesarism, for Gramsci, was a concept that encompassed the rise of fascism but could also apply to more progressive political outcomes (Gramsci, 1971, p.219). The reactionary political forces in the US and across various states in Europe, and other parts of the world, are indicative of this dangerous political development.

Gramsci's formulation of hegemony involves the active consent of the masses to their own subordination through processes of formal and informal learning in civil society. When this is no longer given, the ruling group has to rely on coercion which, though indicating the fragility of their rule, can further undermine their authority. Coercion might involve naked force, however, it can take subtler forms, such as welfare coercion to ensure people comply, or hostile ideological framing and demonisation of particular groups. At the same time, a fragile hegemony is an opening for new ideas, values and priorities to come into the light. It is in these cracks that the space for critical education occurs. Populism, in this sense, can represent an affective disavowal of the existing order of politics, yet this doesn't imply that it provides a coherent cognitive map for critique.

Streeck (2017b) argues that the disintegration of the dominant hegemony is not because a new, more appealing ideology is hegemonic, but that capitalism is decomposing from its internal contradictions as inequality reaches grotesque proportions, public and private debt mountains grow and rampant globalization increases insecurity. Whereas the state stepped in to bail out the banks in the subprime crisis of 2008, it has primarily been the emergence of right-wing populism that has reasserted the authority of the nation state to provide security in an unstable world. The frailty of democratic institutions to defend social protections has been

exposed – instead, the dominance of neoliberalism since the late 1970s has ensured these institutions are part of the problem. This is why we need to go beyond liberal democracy whilst also preserving what is valuable in it (namely, social, civil and political rights).

Streeck's (2017a, 2017b) analysis of the future is deeply pessimistic with no foreseeable end to this interregnum. However, we ought to ask ourselves the question Stuart Hall (1996, p. 233) posed: 'are we thinking dialectically enough?' This question challenges us to look beyond the surface of social forces, however reactionary they seem to be, to understand their potential contradictions. As Mayo (2015) notes, Gramsci himself never used the term 'counter-hegemony' as if the problem of social change could be posed in simplistic binary terms of 'good' and 'bad' trends. Building the kind of intellectual, moral and cultural basis for a progressive politics, that is to say, a participatory political process of informed and critical engagement, has to work on and through people's experiences of the contradictions and conflicts of everyday life in a dialogical process of understanding people's affective and cognitive motivations. In our view, hope lies in terms of rekindling democratic life and transforming it. Simply defending liberal democracy as we know it ignores the need to become the midwife 'to the new that has not yet been born'.

Civic literacy and 'epistemological populism': are we thinking dialectically enough?

Considered from an educational perspective, populism can certainly be read as a manifestation of the neoliberal attack on 'civic literacy' (Giroux, 2016). In this analysis, the privatisation of public space and subordination of everyday life to the accelerated rhythms of digitally networked capitalism, all combine to diminish the democratic intellect. Lifelong education has, in turn, been reduced to mere lifelong learning—a project of the 'resilient' self under conditions of labour market precarity, in lieu of state-based welfare (Crowther, 2004).

Arguably, this hollowing out of lifelong education has, over time, generated the conditions for 'epistemological populism', marked by the open hostility towards intellectuals in democratic life, a studied impatience for complexity in the face of 'crisis', and a concomitant valorisation of 'common sense' solutions (Moffit and Tormey, 2014). Such 'epistemological populism' is recursively cultivated by populist political leaders, who have little interest in enriching the fabric of democratic life in communities, and more interest in arrogating the will of 'the people' to their own agendas (Müller, 2016; Moffit and Tormey, 2014). della Porta (2017) classifies this

as a plebiscitary relationship between leaders and followers, rather than a participatory one.

Whilst such analysis helps us to understand the present, our interest lies in asking what educators might achieve by starting from the presupposition that populism might be employed 'dialectically' to resource learning for democracy. In order to achieve this, it follows that educators wishing to intervene in such contexts ought to be equipped with a critical understanding of populism—its functions and features — in order to practice skilfully, reflexively and creatively.

Regarding the *function* of populism in public discourse, educators concerned with civic literacy ought to pay close attention to the ways in which heterogenous political developments are gathered together and evaluated under the signifiers 'populism' and 'populist'. The first point to note is that populism is often used pejoratively—it remains unusual for individuals to self-identify as populists (Moffit and Tormey, 2014, p. 383). Thus, it has been argued that populism is used by privileged groups in the media as a rhetorical device to justify the status quo by creating a cynical false equivalence between the idea of a democratic people and the idea of dangerous, uneducated throng (Fraser, 2017). This proposition alone might act as a useful provocation for educational work, in the sense that it offers a starting point for the collective deconstruction of media representations of populism itself by diverse communities, who are interpellated under the undiscriminating banner of populism.

Considering the above in the context of our aims, it is therefore logical to turn towards the work of those who might conceptualise populism in a non-pejorative fashion, as a resource for critical adult education as well as the left. This is advocated by the late Laclau (2006), and currently by Mouffe, who argues urgently "*pour un populisme de gauche*" (2016), as an alternative to the 'false choice' between the populist right and neoliberalism. Laclau and Mouffe's (L&M hereafter) political theory has, in an unlikely turn of events, directly shaped the strategy of European political parties such as *Podemos*, *Syriza* and *La France Insoumise* (Desmoulières, 2017; Fassin *et al.*, 2018; Hancox, 2015; Iglesias, 2015). Below, we outline L&M's critique of liberal democracy and their alternative theory of agonistic democracy. We then go onto articulate the left populist position, before arguing against the temptation to conflate agonistic democracy with populism. We conclude the section by reasoning that a politics of affect is central to populist politics and agonistic democracy, even whilst we maintain that there are good reasons to keep the concepts distinct from one another. The implication for educators working with communities is that the development of agonistic democratic spaces is an affective, and not merely cognitive, task.

Populism and agonistic democracy: a problematic equivalence?

L&M's (1985) 'agonistic' alternative to liberal democracy is based on the ontological proposition that social identities and practices (at any scale) are radically contingent, only secured through the precarious exclusion of other possibilities (Mouffe, 2013). This pluralist position rejects the liberal idealist tradition of political philosophy, in which it is imagined that the plurality of values and perspectives in the world-at-large could objectively constitute a 'harmonious and non-conflictual ensemble' (Mouffe, 2013, p. 3). In trying to build a consensus out of plurality, exclusions from liberal democratic orders are framed by their proponents as the irrational 'other'—a threat to the pragmatic rational consensus, reproduced by politicians and technocrats. Against this liberal idealism, the word agonism denotes the generative power of antagonism, of dissent, of conflict. In particular, Mouffe (2013) speaks of a 'conflictual consensus' as a different kind of regulative ideal for democratic life.

L&M view the construction of a 'people', in opposition to a common adversary, as the central task of democratic politics, where this construction is neither intrinsically left or right in ideological orientation (Laclau, 2006). Whilst it is commonplace to suggest that populist political movements oppose 'the people' to an accountable cadre of corrupt 'elites', L&M argue that, whilst the 'people' of populism is an intrinsically oppositional construction, the source of antagonism can be constructed in multiple ways exceeding 'the elite', depending on what is politically expedient: for example, 'the liberal elites', 'Europe', 'globalisation', 'immigrant workers', 'ethnic minorities', 'neoliberalism', 'Westminster', and so on (Laclau, 2006, p. 65). How this is filled out with ideological content is contingent, however, what it can do is generate alternative political narratives which motivate people to engage in politics. The current wave of populism demonstrates the degree of discontent that 'politics as normal' generated through its failure, globally, to rein in neoliberal globalisation, inequality and poverty.

The significance of ideological content is particularly important in creating spaces for educational engagement. The ideological narratives of populisms as well as the structuring of relationships between people and political leaders are critical points. For instance, della Porta (2017) and Fassin *et al.* (2018) both home in on the obvious ideological differences between contemporary left and right populism: firstly, whilst left populists oppose neoliberalism and favour the forging of cosmopolitan alliances for social justice and inclusive welfare, right populist claims (whilst critical of vaguely expressed 'elite' power), tend towards xenophobic and racist welfare chauvinism. Clearly there are significant differences at the level of "sociopolitical content of their claims" (della Porta, 2017, p. 34), but we also need to avoid the

fallacy of equating the claims and interests of a populist leader with its 'populist' people. What motivates the former and what motivates the latter may overlap but can be radically different in many respects (see our two examples discussed later). Therefore, it is important to also understand populism in organisational and relational terms.

An important threat populism poses to liberal democracy, is related to the nature of representation. The legitimacy of liberal democracy has depended on a balance between avoiding 'too much' participation (a threat to the autonomy of the elected representative) and 'too little' participation, which undermines political claims to represent the authority of the electorate. How these interact in populist moments can be significant. Increased political participation, as discussed in vignette two (on the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014) can deepen democratic possibilities and create significant spaces for educational work as well as challenges for educators. 'Too little' participation, in the sense of passive engagement with political leaders, can lead to authoritarian outcomes. della Porta (2017, pp. 34-38) distinguishes 'progressive social movements' from reactionary populism by focusing on the *participatory* organisational structures of the former, and the *plebiscitary* organisational relations of the latter. Plebiscites without participation in political thinking amounts to tokenistic involvement (see Arnstein, 1969). In addition, we need to factor in Gramsci's argument about Caesarism, in that the 'will' of the 'the people' becomes embodied in the 'strong man' who eventually has little need of plebiscites or any other form of political participation to legitimate his actions. This is the road to fascism where educational possibilities are crushed.

The relationship between participation and populism is important to educators because whilst sophisticated dialogue in and across communities can be a democratic learning process, the plebiscitary invocation of the people is structurally different in its opportunism and indifference towards democracy as a collective learning process, involving both cognitive and affective capacities. Populist movements fueled by misogynistic, racist and xenophobic political rhetoric have to be confronted for what they are, without necessarily attributing these values and beliefs to be intrinsic to people who find them persuasive at some level. Alternative narratives are also possible and may gain traction in different circumstances (see vignette 1). More importantly, the emergence of populist politics has stirred an engagement with politics amongst groups of people who have long been alienated from traditional political elites. As Fassin *et al.* (2018, p.84) highlight, young people, racialised minorities and disaffected working class groups, might provide a potential vein of support for a more critical politics, but such groups need to be listened to rather than dismissed as the problem. Of course, there are hardcore racist, sexist, homophobic

views that are deeply ingrained in some people who are unlikely to change their perspective through educational intervention. But in general, people who have been systematically ignored by political elites are not the inevitable constituency of the far right, and creating educational engagement that enables people to reframe their positions is important.

L&M's theory of agonistic democracy urges us to be attentive to the fact that the ontological need to express dissent—and the affective repertoires that manifest this need—often exceed the range of existing possibilities in liberal democracy. This creates a problem and opportunity for democracy and educational intervention. Populism has been used to reflect the motivation, by a wider cross-section of disaffected communities to engage in politics which, in many cases, has been articulated in politically regressive ways but this political direction is not inevitable. Critical education cannot stop fascism but it can work with the participatory social forces and disaffected people who have been alienated from 'post-politics' (in Mouffe's terms).

Towards a more agonistic public sphere

The challenge for educators to develop civic literacy is to find spaces and opportunities to build a culture of agonistic dialogue, of 'conflictual consensus', such that the passionate claims, interests and analyses of local communities find expression through participatory relations that are critically and reflexively informed, rather than being interpellated as 'populist' expressions, through 'plebiscitary relations' or the Caesarist politics of reaction.

Critical education has to start from the premise that any representation of 'the people' is a hegemonic operation, in the sense that *particular* interests and identities attempt to speak for everyone. As a result, dissenting and minority voices, such as intersectional feminist justice claims, can often be suppressed and excluded, even in supposedly 'left' spaces (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017). In the authors' political contexts, prior to the EU referendum in the UK, when everyday discussions of 'Brexit' turned to the forgotten working classes as a proxy for 'the people', we might rhetorically ask to what extent did this tacitly refer to the embodiment of general 'working class-ness' in specific cultures of white heteronormative masculinity? This point has been made recently by sociologist Les Back (2018, p. 197): in a context of "white populist movements who claim to be the rightful heirs of society's resources", he argues that "there is an urgent need for community development workers not simply to concede to populist claims but open up a critical space within communities affected by economic decline." Eddo-Lodge's (2017) discussion of race and class

offers a clear account of how dominant cultural imagery attaches working class identity to whiteness, in spite of a wealth of empirical evidence demonstrating the intersectional complexity of working class identity in Britain. These are some of the kinds of resources that educators might bring to bear when working with communities to reflexively examine exclusionary constructions of 'the people'.

Ultimately, Laclau (2005, p. 88) argues that since social division is intrinsic to the construction of any 'people', the affective need to express it can often be stronger than its attachment to any particular political commitment. This reasoning partially explains why ephemeral outbursts of community politics can be channeled in different directions in moments of vacillation, including right-wing populist nationalism. To bring these arguments down from the lofty realm of social ontology to the messy educational realities of communities, an engagement with the feminist politics of affect serves as an important bridge. Feminist writers have highlighted the significance of emotion as both structuring and being structured by power ridden social and cultural relations (Ahmed, 2004; Davidson et al., 2005). Emotions such as rage, anger, fear and shame are profoundly relational, generated by and expressive of the historical, social and cultural context in which human beings are embedded. A neoliberal culture founded on unequal power relations and individualist explanations of social problems, thrives on emotions of fear, mistrust, rage, hate and apathy. This undermines solidarity and collectivism, encouraging the type of retreat into personal isolation which undermines any form of coherent protest (Forster et al., 2018). Arguably, negative emotions then can be channeled to authoritarian ends, potentially making people unwittingly complicit in their own oppression.

A curriculum to engage with either representations of populism or populist representations will have to make space for exploring emotions as locations of, and resources for, political learning and struggle (Amsler, 2011, p. 58). The important point from this is that people have inevitable blind spots, depending on their own standpoints, in relation to whether they see an affective response (desire, hope, happiness, anger, frustration, disgust, embarrassment and so on) as legitimate or illegitimate, as the product of personal trouble or public issue, especially where attributions of privilege and responsibility are brought to the fore (Ahmed, 2004).

Below, we seek to demonstrate how this conceptual framework relates to a scaled down version of populism stoked by irrational fears of a sex predator being relocated to a community. Vignette one addresses how genuine fear in a local community, misdirected by the simplification of social problems fueled by the media, was turned towards a more critical and participatory process of educational engagement on the issue of violence against women. After this, we turn to our second vignette, which is

scaled up to the national Scottish context where the demand for independence from the UK was framed in the media as a populist nationalism. In this example, we outline how official and unofficial campaigns for independence from the UK generated distinct, whilst overlapping, opportunities for participation in political thinking and spaces for educational work in communities. These examples relate to the kinds of populism we have previously discussed although, in the first vignette, the right-wing populist rhetoric related to the sex offender is on a different scale and less directly connected with formal politics. It demonstrates, nonetheless, how engagement in a local issue, driven by an epistemologically populist analysis of sexual violence against women, provided an affective opening for people to mobilise, and subsequently, an opportunity for the educator to develop critical engagement with this issue in a hostile public space. These local scales of intervention are important because the provision of alternative vocabularies for reframing social problems can help people to map their emotions onto a critical analyses rather than directing their emotional energy against a 'folk devil'.

Vignette one: Public activism and a sex offender: Addressing the real concerns

One of the main links between right-wing populism and politics is a redrawing of boundaries that are exclusive rather than inclusive, demonising particular groups in the process. Therefore, it is unsurprising that educators tend to recoil from the regressive aspect of 'populist' activities and may line up with the chorus of despair that it has generated. This kind of anger can generate what Freire (1972) would term 'horizontal violence', wherein one vulnerable social group attacks another, despite both groups being victims of structural inequalities. The challenge is to turn this towards purposeful hope. We use a vignette here to illuminate our argument that both reactionary and progressive community activism can create an opportunity for democratic debate through adult education.

This example based on 'insider' research from one author's practice experience uses data from interviews carried out in 2012 with two key community activists, two local authority managers, two voluntary sector managers, a review of press coverage and the author's participant observations. Many theorists have contested the myth of researcher as objective, neutral observer (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005). The account presented here then does not aspire to value-free objectivity but rather offers an illustration of how applying critical theoretical perspectives to engagement practice with community activists might create space for dialogue, critical thinking and learning (King and Learmonth, 2014).

As we have highlighted, populist protest can reflect an affective need to express dissent. Unmet democratic demands at the local level can join together in a chain of equivalence through directing feelings of hostility towards a common adversary. This was illustrated in 2012, when a small Scottish ex-mining community rapidly organised mass demonstrations of around 1700 people, protesting against the relocation of a high profile sex offender to their (and his) home area. The predominantly working-class protests were organised by three disparate local women using a Facebook page that, at its height, attracted twelve thousand subscribers. A panic ensued amongst local government service providers about how to deal with the situation. At the time, the author (in her capacity as a local government Equalities Engagement Officer) was requested to work with Lily, one of the key organisers of the protests, and her fellow community activists.

As has often been the case, the tabloid media played a key role in stirring up the protest (Thompson, 2000). The offender's media profile was maintained at the time of his violent rape of a foreign student, when he was dubbed a 'monster' during his prison sentence, and after his release, by following him from prison and making his new home address public. News media has a long history of portraying violence against women as an issue primarily attributable to mad, bad or sad deviants (Cowburn 2010; Pain & Scottish Women's Aid 2012). The implicit message conveyed is that violence against women is primarily an issue of concern for the individual women who have the misfortune to encounter (or are stupid enough to put themselves in the path of) the occasional random stranger who is so monstrous as to do them harm. The focus of action for women to protect themselves, then, is in changing their own behavior to keep themselves safe or locking up individual men who have demonstrated their capacity for violence.

Of course, the reality of violence against women is that women have most to fear from men that they know as Femicide census statistics (www.womensaid.org.uk) and the recent #MeToo campaign have illustrated (Burke & Milano 2017). The reality of socially embedded gender inequality and associated abuse of male power over women is concealed by a media which itself engages in practices serving to promote and indeed normalise gender inequality such as the ongoing sexual objectification of women and the refusal to positively represent, or indeed make visible, the full range of female identities and achievements. The media's culpability, in contributing to the tolerance of male abuse of power over women that sets the stage for violence, is obscured by constructing the problem as one of individual deviance in the form of a 'folk devil.'

It was important then for the worker in this situation to critically consider the local expressions of dissent in relation to this more complex reality. It was important to carefully consider the question of who was protesting in this particular location and why. The particular reasons why people came together were varied and only found common expression against their 'adversary'. In reality, they had different roots and implications. There was a high incidence of domestic violence in the area where the demonstrations took place and both victims and perpetrators were visible on demonstrations as the following quotes from individuals interviewed at the time make clear:

> [W]e knew that there were registered sex offenders taking part in the demonstrations apparently deflecting attention from their own behavior.
>
> (Local Authority Senior Manager)
>
> The return of this man to the community touched a nerve for women who had experienced abuse and many became involved in the campaign. I know this because they have been in touch with our service and disclosed at events.
>
> (Women's Aid Manager)

It is also important to note that the offender, on whom the protests were focused, was well known in the local area and came from a family with some notoriety for the violence and intimidation of other local people. So while some people on the demonstrations may have had old scores to settle with this specific individual, for women who had experienced domestic violence, the demonstrations could be understood as fulfilling a need to (safely) express anger and opposition to male violence against women. A focus on this individual offender also apparently gave perpetrators of domestic violence an opportunity to construct their own behavior as essentially different, or less monstrous than the crime perpetrated by him.

The extreme right-wing British National Party (BNP) attempted to capitalise on the demonstrations handing out "Pro-Fam - Protect the Family" placards, initially accepted by protesters before they realised these were BNP sponsored. Nick Griffin (the former BNP leader) and some of his supporters also turned up to 'lend support' to the campaign to get the sex offender out of the community, but the BNP presence was generally rebuffed.

We were donated these placards and accepted them in good faith. These guys just turned up at the protest and began handing them out. They just read 'Pro Fam: Protect the Family', nobody had a clue as to their political connotations.

(Protest leader online deadline news agency 2012)

Attempts by the above political groups to make their demands part of the common cause were rejected. As highlighted earlier, the constituents of civic protest are by no means homogeneous and there were clearly a range of reasons people participated, even though the stated focus of this demonstration was keeping local women safe. As local providers indicated, there was considerable justification for concern that women were not being adequately protected from male violence in this community. The housing of this highly visible violent man had given some women an opportunity for agency, to make their anger and fear clear. This is significant when we consider that domestic violence, in the nature of the coercive control or abuse of power employed, is often very effectively hidden (Stark, 2007).

What is important here is how the problem is understood. A key issue for the local government staff was essentially how to manage the people involved in these protests, to minimise the disruption created by the protests outside the offender's new home. Alongside police and social work services they had a legal responsibility to manage his release from prison. For the Equalities Officer, the primary issue of concern was neither the perceived danger represented by this offender, or managing the community protests, but rather addressing the underlying issue of male violence against women in the context of socially embedded gender inequality.

In the first instance, this involved discussing the issue with one of the key protest organisers and then a group of both male and female protesters with whom she was aligned. It was important to listen to their concerns but also to challenge the perception that the rehoused offender was the biggest threat to local women's safety. The author did not come to this dialogue value free but from a critical educational perspective, which acknowledged gender and class inequality as shaping local social relations. The process of being involved in activism offered not only an opportunity to experience solidarity with others but a chance to critically reflect on an issue of concern and consider causes and solutions. It was, from the Equalities Officer's point of view, an opportunity to listen to, value and respect activists' concerns but also to engage in critical dialogue about the issue of violence against women, to consider who has power and why.

The role of the author in this case was to negotiate educational input from Rape Crisis and Women's Aid for this group of activists. These sessions enabled the protesters to gain access to a feminist perspective on violence against women and to critically reflect on the issue. Some of the activists (mainly men) disengaged at this point, but for some, their involvement in the local campaign, and the alarming number of disclosures of domestic violence and sexual abuse they were confronting on their Facebook page, motivated them to learn more through critical engagement with the issue. A positive outcome of these sessions was some activists' decision to shift their focus from the campaign against the single offender to posting links to Women's Aid and Rape Crisis where a wide constituency of women could get more information and help. They wanted to raise awareness and educate others about the issues and how they might be supported if affected by them.

> We see ourselves as about educating people and changing attitudes. A lot of abusers are not visible – we want to give information so that people recognise abuse and don't feel they have to put up with it.

> (Community Activist)

In the end a relatively small number of community activists participated, but supporting these women to find successful strategies to address their concerns was crucial in terms of building a sense of personal and political efficacy potentially motivating future civic activism (Barrett and Brunton-Smith, 2014). Having the space to critically consider the 'what', 'who' and 'how' of the issue about which they were most concerned created the opportunity to reflect on how they could most usefully focus their effort to promote change. Such spontaneous and reactive community activism can disappear as quickly as it started, as was the case in this instance. However, knowledge gained during the process cannot be so quickly unlearned. Local people's community activism, in this case initially framed in narrow populist terms, opened up a space to engage in critical education, learning and debate on dominant ideas and normative cultural practices in relation to gender and the prevention of violence against women.

Vignette two: Ways of doing politics: The Scottish Referendum experience in 2014

In our next example we discuss populism in the context of nationalism, a political narrative often associated with a regressive, nativist politics, aiming to duck the realities of a globalised world by appealing to national and ethnic chauvinism to tame events out of control; receding backwards to national frontiers, singling out those who

really belong and 'the other' who does not belong. Trump in the US and various right-wing political leaders across Europe have capitalised on the political promise of this version of security in an unsecure world. But the ideological elasticity of nationalism (Hall, 1993) needs to be factored into the analysis, and how 'the people' of the nation are constructed and what they are against can be more complex than the depiction above presents. Moreover, radical social and political ferment is often the motivation for serious educational activity of a formal and informal type. In this light we want to address the Scottish referendum for independence in 2014.

The evidence for this vignette is drawn from a number of sources: the engagement of one author as a participant in a number of hustings and public events about the implications of the referendum, as a facilitator in five participatory seminars held in Edinburgh to engage the public in the analysis of referendum issues, in the organisation of three national workshops (Edinburgh, Glasgow and Dundee) for community educators working in communities, after the referendum, to examine their role in political education and how it might be developed, and through a small number of selective interviews with community practitioners in Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Glasgow, on the work they were (and were not) engaged in and, finally, from an online survey of experiences of the referendum (for further details see Crowther, 2018, 2015; Crowther, Boeren, and Mackie 2018; Crowther et al., 2017).

The Scottish referendum involved a yes/no decision on independence from the UK, which was reflected in two campaign groups supported by different political parties. On the one hand there were the mainstream political parties (the Conservatives, the Scottish Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats), who supported the politics of the union with the UK. On the other, two political parties (the Scottish National Party and the Green Party), which supported independence from the UK.

What was noted by a number of political commentators in Scotland was the remarkable surge of unexpected and unofficial campaign groups, along with the spontaneous popular interest in the issues that involved self-education of hundreds and thousands of Scottish people (see Hassan, 2014; Mitchell, 2014). Community groups, organisations and movements across the length and breadth of the country were intent on self-educational activities aimed at promoting or rejecting the cause of independence and what it might mean. Unofficial campaigns also ignited in the digital sphere with over 700 blog sites and social media groups providing a vibrant, humorous, critical, opinionated and flourishing online opportunity for people to engage in politics in their own way, circumventing the restrictions of the mass media, formal political structures, parties and processes. People engaged, individually or collectively, through the activities of campaign groups, social media sites, friendship

networks, online and offline, and locally-organised community provision, in discussion and debate about the issues that mattered to them. It was at the community level that a wide range of grassroots initiatives canvassed for voter registration, raised awareness, stimulated debate and, in the main, promoted independence. There were pro-union groups but these were much less visible and less active at a community level.

All this official and unofficial 'political education' had an impact on political thinking. Around 95% of the electorate registered to vote and over 85% voted on the day, which was in remarkable contrast to the typical electoral turnout in UK and Scottish Parliamentary elections. People also learned to change their views. In 2013 support for independence was around 25% but this increased significantly to almost 45% at the time of the vote in September 2014.

According to Laclau (2005), how the 'people' are constructed is critical to the nature of the conflicts generated and the ideological possibilities for change. When cracks appear in the dominant consensus of politics these are opportunities to create linkages between different groups, through a populist identity, that can lead to alliances and the mobilisation of change efforts. What is interesting about the Scottish experience is that the referendum on independence reflected the mobilisation of conventional political subjects (i.e. voters in the classical sense of liberal democracy who were to choose a political preference) along with new political subjects who were self-organised and began to fill independence with new political demands. This is outlined below in terms of two distinct political frontiers being established (which overlapped in reality).

Nationalism as a political frontier

In the official campaign there were two distinct forms of nationalism which aimed to mobilise support for and against independence. Firstly, the case for independence was presented as a form of civic nationalism which was open to migrants and people who wanted to live and commit to Scotland. Independence was essential to achieve the level of political agency in Scotland that was being held back by the UK Parliament. On the fringes of this was also a form of identity nationalism, of being Scots first and foremost and, on the extreme edge of identity politics, was a darker anti-English nationalism. Secondly, there was British nationalism although it was never framed as such. From this perspective, Scottish separatism would undermine the role of the UK in the wider world, which it had benefited from. The British nationalist case was partly based on identity (with some extreme Union Jack, flag waving, supporters) but also on the economic benefits of union to Scots – the benefits which derived from

empire – as well as the social union and trade relations between England and Scotland which might be threatened by independence. The latter was raised in terms of the potential need to establish a border (build a wall in some accounts) between England and Scotland if independence happened.

Inequality and marginalisation as the political frontier

Overlapping with the official independence campaign was another, more radical form of populist politics, focused on the poorer areas of Scotland and less powerful communities. Independence was linked to diverse struggles to address inequalities of wealth and power linked primarily to social class, gender, 'race' and sexuality. The ideological content was disseminated in community-based campaign groups such as the Radical Independence Campaign, Women for Independence, Scots Asians for Yes, LGBTi for Independence, Commonweal and so on. These groups reflected different democratic demands which were unmet by the limitations on the Scottish parliament, or the politics of the UK parliament, and were able, in Laclau's terms, to form a chain of equivalence linked to the cause of independence. What these various groups shared was the need to fundamentally change politics by ensuring different voices, experiences and interests would be part of what independence would mean. The frontier was between the powerful and powerless, not simply British nationalism or Scottish nationalism, which independence could address.

These different constructions of 'the people' represent very different ways of doing politics, by bringing together new political subjects in some cases, but also based on a spectrum of ideological perspectives on the need for consensus or change to the status quo. What the article now focuses on is the potential of these constructions, particularly the frontier of marginalisation, because of its recognition of political inequality and unfulfilled democratic demands.

Democratic innovation: 'from above' and 'from below'

Democratic innovations 'from above' refer to the creation of spaces somewhere between deliberative democratic practices such as citizen juries, mini-publics and more direct democratic procedures such as participatory budgeting (Elstub and Escobar 2017). What is characteristic of these types of democratic innovation is that they are designed to address the perceived limitations of the failings of liberal democracy and, in this sense, are policy measures 'from above' which seek to legitimate and shape new forms of democratic life by renovating or reforming what exists already.

Democratic innovation 'from below' seeks to radically transform the kinds of inequality which liberal democracy is based on and which it reinforces by creating new structures for excluded voices and experiences to be heard. From the perspective of liberal democracy, this might be framed as generating 'too much' participation. This kind of populist politics has the advantage of working in the idiom and culture of socially excluded groups in order to provide a voice and channel for addressing the anger and resentment which inequality produces and sustains. Democratic innovation, in this agonistic sense, includes new and inclusive structures of participation, along with the generation of a culture and idiom of active political engagement rooted in lived experience. It is what della Porta (2017) refers to as social movement politics.

In the context of the referendum, this culture of political participation loosened the vice-like grip of formal politics on political debate. It generated more inclusive and open spaces for participation in grassroots movements, aided by social media, which motivated widespread political debate in diverse spaces, in the home and in friendship networks. The inclusive nature of these democratic innovations 'from below' is that they provided a space which engaged people in politics in an unanticipated way.

In addition to the above, adult education had a role to play in this process no matter how patchy and uneven it was in reality (see Crowther, 2015, 2018). From registration campaigns to small-scale classes on nationalism, to organised hustings and large public debates on the contentious issues involved, into dreaming activities to think about the kind of future people wanted for Scotland. As such, the referendum created opportunities for adult education to connect with the ferment of political excitement that had spread organically and enthusiastically 'from below'. In the context of formal education there is a connection between being more educated and being less able to be manipulated. The same might be said about the impact of widespread participation in informal political education and thinking.

In summary, the referendum led to a widening and deepening of politicisation in Scottish communities through formal political processes but, more significantly, through the emergence of a deliberative and participatory form of populist political engagement. The democratic innovations 'from below' enabled people to learn, discuss and argue the merits of a variety of issues and not merely those issues which dominated the agenda of the official campaigns. A pluralistic political culture, which had vibrancy and energy, emerged that filled independence with democratic demands for addressing social and political inequality. This popular participation in political thinking and argument had a number of consequences not least being the emergence of an independence of mind that is an essential ingredient of a democratic culture and polity. Adult educators, positioned to respond to innovations from 'below' have the

opportunity to generate curriculum from local concerns so that dissent and affective energy is less likely to be misdirected towards right-wing populist nationalism, and more likely to be mapped onto cogent and critical analyses of public issues.

Conclusion

Popular dissent and anger at being ignored, denigrated or blamed (by political elites or agents of patriarchy) for circumstances beyond individual control is, as we have shown, an opportunity for critical education. Popular feelings of neglect can be seen as legitimate expressions of rage as well as powerful forms of motivation which can be channeled into progressive or regressive activities depending on the outlets available. Adult education in communities can provide the space for people to think critically about their choices, in order to marry reason and affect in new and productive ways. It can never offer this space if, from the outset, adult educators dismiss populist reactions as indicative of irrationality, ignorance or blind rage.

Adult education can enrich democratic spaces 'from below' to test out the ideas and experiences which inform action. In such spaces the grip of the political elite, demagogic politics, or mediatised accounts of social problems, can be resources for decoding populism and the factors that shape and motivate it. It is unlikely to engage hardcore racists (and others) but such groups can only thrive in the discontent which they seek to align to their own right-wing populist agendas. As our vignettes demonstrate, the relationship between 'leaders' and 'followers' is not straightforward. In creating spaces for listening, discussion (re)framing problems, new possibilities emerge for tacking the 'private troubles', which are often neglected as 'public issues' or, when they are recognised, simply end up 'blaming the victim'.

Contrary to the view that populism is part of a democratic deficit we argue it may instead be used as a critical resource for developing a culture and process of democracy that transcends the limitations of liberal democracy. Adult education in these terms provides the *agora* for an agonistic democracy. However, we have also surfaced a discussion about the dangers of conflating agonistic democracy with left populism on the grounds of ideological difference, organisational form and political strategy. The kind of education we have advocated is an important part of this conversation, since actually existing 'left populism', if we can call it that, is grounded in the rich informal learning occurring through participatory democracy, which is anathema to right-wing authoritarian populism. This point is politically significant because the general label 'populism' may simply be too alienating to those who have been excluded by racist and xenophobic discourse.

As we have argued above, representations of populism and populist representations offer points of intervention, when and where possible, to further the spaces for democratic life and to nurture the values of equality and social justice which go with it. The future is uncertain, so that is cause for hope.

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[1] A notable exception is Latin America where populism, as a longstanding feature of politics, doesn't carry the same pejorative baggage (Kane, 1999).

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