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## Radical popular education today: Popular education in populist times

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### Abstract

*Popular education is more needed than ever. The Covid 19 pandemic has been highlighting the challenges of widening inequalities, increasing exploitation and oppression, along with persistent xenophobia and violence against women and minority communities. Yet popular education faces threats of its own, and resources have been on the decline, precisely when they have become so urgently required in the contemporary context. Whilst acknowledging these threats, the article goes on to focus on some of the ways in which popular education initiatives have continued to be promoted despite these wider challenges. 'The World Transformed' (TWT) has provided evidence of just such initiatives in Britain. The conclusions of TWT's research resonate with Paulo Freire's own reflections in the final section of 'The Pedagogy of Hope'. Despite the challenges he continued to look forward to the future with hope.*

**Keywords:** popular education, populism, Freire, The World Transformed

### Introduction

Popular education is more needed than ever. The Covid 19 pandemic has been exacerbating the challenges of widening inequalities, increasing exploitation and oppression, along with persistent xenophobia and violence against women and minority communities. Too many people have been coming to accept these growing inequalities, weighed down by feelings of hopelessness and fear - including fears of 'the other', the outsiders who are too often held to blame for the impacts of austerity (Bhattacharyya,

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2015). Populist politicians play on such fears, feelings that are too often exacerbated by the social media.

Popular education has the potential to engage people in processes of critical dialogue, exploring alternative understandings of the causes of their problems, building solidarity for more progressive futures. The writings of Paulo Freire have particular relevance here, exploring the possibilities of learning for liberation, 'educational dialogue and social action, or praxis, with the oppressed in order to understand and act upon the causes of their oppression' (Crowther & Martin, 2018, p. 11). Yet popular education faces threats of its own, and resources have been on the decline, precisely when they have become so urgently required.

Whilst acknowledging these threats, the article goes on to focus on some of the ways in which popular education initiatives have continued to be promoted *despite* these wider challenges. More specifically 'The World Transformed' (TWT) has provided evidence of the continuing relevance of just such approaches, carrying out original research to map a wide range of projects - with a view to promoting collaboration and mutual support for the future.

The conclusions of this research resonate with Paulo Freire's own reflections in the final section of 'The Pedagogy of Hope', spaces for the Left had been shrinking (Freire, 1996) and there were no guarantees for the future, in his view. But he remained committed to the significance of dialogical learning - and he continued to look forward to the future with hope.

## Challenges for popular education today

Despite being more necessary than ever in the contemporary context, popular education is facing existential challenges of its own. Popular education goes against the grain of mainstream discourses of adult education and learning today (Evans et al., 2022). All too often, Evans et al. (2022) argue, the emphasis has become education and skills for the labour market, at the expense of learning for emancipation and personal and social development, as developed by Paulo Freire as well as by Raymond Williams and others over the past century.

Education has been and continues to be a contested field, as Freire and others have so powerfully argued – education for domestication or education for transformation (Freire, 1972). These debates have long histories of their own. The point that is being suggested here is simply this, that the balance has been shifting in recent times, with greater emphasis upon learning for the former, leaving significantly less scope for learning for the latter.

This has clearly been the case in Britain, for example, where resources have been shifting across the spectrum of adult learning in parallel, in recent decades. University departments of extra-mural studies have been affected and so has the Workers Educational Association, for example. State funding for trade union courses has been similarly affected (Seal, 2017), focusing upon training to equip learners to perform specific functions such as health and safety functions, for example, rather than on using political education *per se* (Fisher, 2005). There has been less funding overall anyway, in recent times. The establishment of the Centenary Commission on Adult Education, with its call for a national strategy for adult education and lifelong learning, has emerged as the result of adult educators' concerns to address these yawning gaps. As the chair of that commission reflected in her foreword to the report:

[We] have been struck by the strength of feeling across the country, and from the full range of organisations, that it is now vital and urgent to invest in adult education and lifelong learning – for the good of our democracy, society, and economy, and for the wellbeing of our citizens (The Centenary Commission on Adult Education, 2019, p. 3).

## Building on the works of Paulo Freire: popular but not populist responses to contemporary challenges

The writings of Paulo Freire have particular resonance in this context (Lima, 2022; Lucio-Villegas, 2022) as it has already been suggested. Popular education initiatives based upon these principles promote ‘educational dialogue and social action, or praxis, with the oppressed in order to understand and act upon the causes of their oppression’ (Crowther & Martin, 2018, p. 11). This is about learning for liberation.

Addressing these contemporary challenges involves questioning some of the ways in which Freire’s writings have been (mis)interpreted, however, ‘the sanitisation and domestication of Freire’s pedagogy’ as Crowther and Martin have also pointed out (2018, p.12). Paulo Freire himself reflected on the differences between his approach and populist understandings, differences of theoretical underpinnings along with their pedagogical implications, in practice. Most significantly, Freire’s ‘eclectic and idiosyncratic brand of Marxism, Christianity and humanism’ (Crowther & Martin, 2018, p. 8) included recognition of the centrality of class and class struggle. Having experienced poverty and hunger during the depression years in Brazil, he was only too well aware of the links between poverty, social class and knowledge/ lack of knowledge and widespread illiteracy, structural factors that needed to be addressed. He was committed to ensuring that the oppressed developed critical consciousness to enable them to work towards social transformation, just as he was committed to enabling the oppressors to recover their lost humanity.

This stands in strong contrast with populist understandings, focusing on ‘the people’ as against the ‘elite’ (Lazaridis et al., 2016), frequently associated with emotional appeals to notions of identity, such as national, ethnic or religious identities (including white supremacist identities) – ‘us’ versus ‘the other’ (Panizza, 2005). Rather than promoting such unproblematised notions of ‘the people’ and popular cultures, Freire drew upon Gramscian understandings, including Gramscian understandings of the importance of challenging the ‘common sense’ of hegemonic ideas. Popular education needed to start from people’s own everyday experiences and understandings, for sure. Yet this was to be the start, not the end of the road. Popular education was to be about engaging people in processes of critical dialogue, based on relationships of trust. ‘I have never said, as it has sometimes been suggested that I have said, that we ought to flutter spellbound around the knowledge of the educands like moths around a lamp bulb’ he emphasised in his final book, the ‘Pedagogy of Hope’ (Freire, 1996).

In summary then, populism needs to be addressed by popular education whether this is populism from the Right or indeed from the Left of the political spectrum – via education that is popular but most definitely not populist in its turn. From a popular education perspective, the ‘people’ are not to be defined as some undifferentiated mass, faced with varying forms of oppression from ill-defined elites, let alone to be defined as being in need of a strong leader, to resolve their problems for them. There have been advocates for Left-wing versions of populism (Mouffe, 2018), as well as Right-wing versions of populism, with historical examples from a number of countries in Latin America for instance (Laclau, 2005). Whatever their political orientation, though, there are distinctions to be drawn between populist approaches and Freirean approaches. For

Freireans, popular education is about enabling people to develop their own critical analyses of their problems in contemporary contexts in order to work towards social transformation.

So, from a Freirean perspective, the sources of exploitation and oppression need to be understood in terms of conflicting class interests. And issues of identity need to be understood within the framework of the concept of intersectionality – the ways in which social class intersects with other forms of exploitation and oppression, including gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, disability and religious identity (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Rather than addressing any one of these potential sources of disadvantage on its own, possibly at the expense of the rights of others – or in the context of some hierarchy of oppression - this approach starts from an analysis of the links between social class, social status, knowledge, power and (relative) powerlessness (Fraser, 2008).

Such understandings enable communities to move forward ‘Beyond the fragments’ - to refer back to the title of an earlier – and widely influential - publication about the need to bring different sections of the Left together (Rowbottom et al., 1979). Inspired by the activism of the 1970s that surrounded the triumph of the Right under Margaret Thatcher in U.K., ‘Beyond the Fragments’ was written to create stronger bonds of solidarity in a New Left movement that incorporated feminist experiences and perspectives. Since then, updated versions return to the question of how to bring divergent strands of social and political action to build effective, open, democratic coalitions in the face of deepening recession, environmental pollution, falling wages and severe welfare cuts (Rowbottom et al., 2013). This requires popular education accompanied by deep organising, it has been argued, taking account of people’s varying needs in the community at the point of consumption as well as in the workplace, at the point of production (for those who still have regular workplaces, despite the prevalence of precarity in the gig economy) (Holgate, 2021).

Popular education initiatives can strengthen people’s agency, drawing on these traditions, enabling people to challenge the threats that Far Right populism, in particular, poses to the very basis of democracy itself. As Giroux has argued, Freire’s approach to critical pedagogy has continuing relevance here as a way of promoting effective citizen participation, active citizenship being essential to the very survival of democracy itself (Giroux, 2010).

Popular education initiatives have continued to contribute in such ways too, despite the contemporary challenges. These have included university-based projects to enable communities to explore their contested histories for example (Lucio-Villegas, 2022). Community-university partnerships have been developed across national boundaries, to support communities in undertaking their own research as the basis for developing their own strategies for change (Lepore et al., 2022). The arts have their own histories of adult education for social justice more generally too, histories of relevance for women and minority communities, in particular (English & Irving, 2015; Clover & Stalker, 2017), including the relevance of women’s and gender museums (Clover, 2022).

## **Popular political education in Britain: The World Transformed (TWT): communities and social movement activists doing it for themselves**

The growth of Right-wing populism in Britain has had some parallels with experiences elsewhere with politicians fanning xenophobic fears as part of their campaign to persuade British electors to vote to leave the Europe Union during the 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum. There here have been considerable differences too, however. It was the prospect of what have been described as ‘alternatives of hope’ that stimulated a number of responses

amongst popular educators from universities and colleges through to adult educators involved in social movements and political parties. The World Transformed (TWT) provides a particular example, developed by community and social movement activists to promote popular education initiatives, engaging with politics without being aligned with any particular political party.

TWT has explained this surge of interest in popular political education as follows;

there was a lot of hope that the unexpected rise of the left within the Labour Party (with the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader in 2015), spurred on by a new generation of socialist-minded activists accompanied by emboldened feminist, anti-racist, decolonial and environmental social movements presented a moment of possibility for the prising open of the neoliberal consensus (Ranford, forthcoming).

This could represent a radical rupture with the status quo, it was argued, presenting new opportunities for the development of progressive alternatives.

For some, ‘the purpose of political education in this context was to ensure that a left-wing Labour government could be elected, sustained and held to account’ (Ranford, forthcoming). There was energy and enthusiasm behind the campaigns that inspired tens of thousands to join the Labour Party, it has been argued, but these campaigns needed to come together, and they needed political education if they were to take the momentum forward. ‘The world cannot be transformed flying blind’ it has been argued by supporters of the Corbyn project (Murray, 2019). Critical understandings of economics and international relations were required along with ‘the dynamics of political and social change and so much more’ (Murray, 2019, p. 163). ‘No understanding of British politics can proceed without first making an assessment of the class and national struggles on the world level, looking at Britain’s place within these, and taking that as the political point of departure’ (Murray, 2019, p. 164). There needed to be critical reflections on Britain’s imperial history as well, exploring the links with British policies, both internationally and domestically, including racist immigration policies. This was about moving beyond populist understandings, whether these were populisms of the Right or indeed populisms of the Left, focussing on the leader and ‘The Many not the few’ (to use the terminology of the Labour Manifesto in 2017) without such wider understandings.

Although this was a period of considerable optimism on the Left then, there was also evidence of realism amongst those who saw the role of popular political education as being at the heart of a longer-term project, building critically informed support amongst social movements for change. This was a view that was confirmed with Labour’s electoral defeat in 2019. There were no quick fixes to be had, however charismatic the leader was – or was not. Since then, it has been argued, ‘a sobered Labour left has returned even more vociferously to the question of popular political education, which is now understood as an essential yet sorely neglected part of the socialist movement’ (Ranford, forthcoming) both within and outside the confines of the Labour Party. Given the policy directions of the Labour Party, the need for such popular political education would seem more relevant than ever.

TWT’s own initiatives began in 2016, launched as a festival of political discussions and cultural events, alongside the Labour Party’s annual conference. Jeremy Corbyn’s election as leader of the Labour Party, the previous year, had been attracting an influx of new members, young people becoming engaged for the first time, along with older people, previously politically disenchanted but hopeful that the Labour Party could become the vehicle for transformative social change. Labour Party membership surged towards just over half a million (523,332), the largest social democratic party in Europe at the time - although membership has fallen dramatically since then, as the result of

subsequent changes, following the Labour Party's electoral defeat in 2019, and the election of a new leader with different political priorities. (Figures for July 2022 show just a figure of just over 382,000 fully paid-up members).

TWT set out to support this upsurge through political education initiatives. These were organised around the Labour Party's annual conferences, as parallel events. The aim was to contribute to the construction of a broad movement, working 'for the Many not the Few', although TWT was definitely not a Labour Party organ *per se*, being committed to engaging people and groups across the spectrum of transformative politics.

TWT's festivals have attracted impressive numbers of participants. Over 5,000 attended the 2017 festival, with even higher numbers in subsequent years, over 6,000 in 2018 and over 7,000 in 2019. This was popular political education on a massive scale. The festivals included political discussions, debates, workshops, training sessions, exhibitions, performance, guided historic walks, music and sports, all spread over a number of days. There were sessions on capitalism and the economy and there were sessions on neo-colonialism and decolonisation, sessions on international movements and sessions on movements for equalities. There were sessions engaging with critical theories and there were sessions linking these with contemporary struggles, with a wide variety of speakers, including international speakers, sharing their theoretical analyses and their experiences in practice.

TWT festivals have been heterogenous and this has been a continuing feature of the organisers' ambitions for the coming period. This in no way to suggest that every session achieved its aims in uniquely successful ways. The offerings have been varied in every sense of the term, and these have included highly controversial topics, arousing strong feelings in the process. Popular political education can – and does – appeal to diverse audiences in different ways, starting from where they were at and what attracted their interest, taking account of people's feelings, although aiming to move audiences on from their starting points to engage them in processes of critical debate. There are resonances with Freirean principles of dialogical learning here, whether these principles were being explicitly acknowledged or even recognised – or not. There is evidence of such resonances from TWT's own research, as the following section goes on to demonstrate.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic impacted from 2020, TWT has still managed to organise festivals, along with other, more local, educational events. TWT has also been developing other initiatives too, beyond the annual festivals, including initiatives to support popular political education at more local levels. The 2018 festival had included a stream on popular political education *per se*, concluding with a session entitled 'Popular Education Forum: Let's Build a Network', a session that demonstrated the variety of ways in which educational initiatives were being developed. This session evidenced interest in developing collaborative networks, as an outcome, providing opportunities for sharing learning materials for example, along with sharing information about how to contact facilitators and speakers with expertise in particular subjects.

This was the background for TWT's own research, 'Towards an Understanding of Contemporary Practices of Transformative Political Education in UK' (Ranford, forthcoming), funded by the Barry Amiel and Norman Melburn Trust, a charity which had a track record of supporting progressive – although *not party political* - educational initiatives. This particular project set out to map the field as inclusively as possible, with a view to identifying opportunities for mutual support in order to strengthen the culture of transformative political education in the UK. The survey was followed up by case studies, including a case study of political economy education in Belfast.

## TWT's research: overview and methodology

This was effectively an action research project. The aim was to explore the extent and distribution of different forms of popular political education in UK and to identify ways in which such forms of political education might be supported for the future. The fieldwork began in 2019 with a survey designed to explore the following questions:

1. Who is organising political education in the UK, and where is it taking place?
2. What are the objectives of transformative political education projects in the UK, and to what extent are they meeting them? What are the obstacles they are facing?
3. What is the content/curricula of this education and what pedagogical approaches are they using?
4. What are their funding sources?
5. What do these projects want or need from organisations like TWT?

The research began by identifying lists of projects, including a list that had been compiled through a survey completed by 600 Momentum members in 2018. These lists were then broadened with additions from feminist movements, radical faith-based organisations and pedagogical arts projects, for example, as well as via informal consultations with educators and organisers across the UK. The survey questions were then developed from the research questions and piloted. The final version of the questionnaire was distributed in late December 2019.

Despite best efforts, the research still faced challenges in obtaining responses to the survey. There seemed to be some specific reasons for this, over and above the normal challenges involved in obtaining responses to surveys more generally. Some arts-based projects were reluctant to describe their work as educational, for instance, although there clearly were educational elements to their creative practices. And some organisations were reluctant to describe their work as popular 'political education', even in the broadest 'non-party political' sense of the term, having an eye to funders and possible funding opportunities for the future. Despite these challenges a broad range of initiatives were eventually included, all the same, drawing upon 105 responses from 87 organisations (some organisations providing responses about more than one project). NVivo software was then used to analyse responses to the open questions.

The survey was initially planned to be followed up with four case studies. These were to be selected to include different nations and regions as well as covering different audiences and varying pedagogical approaches. These were to include a project with young people in London, a trade union-based project in Northern Ireland, an arts-based project in Wales and a more directly party-political project in the Midlands. The intention was that each case study would include observations of sessions as well as semi-structured interviews, a focus group and a reflection session. In the event however, the Covid-19 pandemic intervened. Only two case studies could be completed, and the research methods had to be adapted as face-to-face events were cancelled. Although some information was gathered from the other case study areas, the research was more limited than originally planned, as a result, owing to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

## TWT's research findings

Whilst there was understandable variation in terms of these different projects' aims and objectives, common threads were also identified. There was widespread emphasis on the need for greater critical understanding the present moment, including the specifics of



neoliberal capitalism and austerity. And there was widespread emphasis on the need for greater understanding of the connections between specific issues and campaigns, building solidarity in the process. There were concerns about how to address particular injustices or claim rights, such as migrants' rights, for instance, in the context of Britain's hostile environment, with specific references to Brexit and the need to:

Increase an understanding of the role migration has played in the wealth and health of the city. It is as a reaction against the 2016 EU referendum result and some of the open xenophobia then displayed.

Projects also demonstrated their interest in enabling people to become more active in organisations, including becoming more effectively active in political organisations, trade unions and social movements, more generally. This needed to involve challenging exclusive cultures within progressive organisations themselves as well as within the wider society, including challenging racism and anti-Semitism, along with other forms of marginalisation for oppressed groups. And several respondents went on to explain that they aimed to build or articulate a socialist vision, with the election of Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party opening opportunities for political education around socialist ideals.

As to outcomes, projects were typically reluctant to make ambitious claims about the extent to which they could evidence their achievements. Some described the ways in which their initiatives had engaged participants though, enabling them to go on to organise their own events and campaigns. Organisations had been democratised and strengthened, with enhanced participation from their membership, in some cases. And safe spaces had been provided, facilitating difficult conversations (including difficult conversations about racism including Anti-Semitism, for example). These initiatives shared concerns with promoting critical consciousness in order to facilitate collective action more effectively, then – Freirean approaches in practice, in other words. 'Freirean' was not the term that projects necessarily used themselves to describe their underlying educational principles, however, although some did precisely this. There were references to the influences of Saul Alinsky as well as to Paulo Freire himself, along with references to Augusto Boal's Freirean based theatre of the oppressed.

Others made more general comments about their pedagogical approaches, starting with criticisms of lecture-based forms of learning rather than more learner-centred, discussion-based approaches. 'We try to maintain a pedagogically rigorous approach with minimal didactic "telling" and lots of learning through doing and discussion'. This was not about fetishizing any one particular method however, with recognition that participatory methods could be applied in non-transformative ways, without posing any fundamental challenges to the status quo, in other words. There was much evidence of reflective approaches and practices then.

The survey and the case studies did identify some significant obstacles too, though. A number referred to the challenges involved in reaching their target audiences, for instance, audiences such as: working class communities, people of colour, young people more generally and those not already actively engaged. A number raised questions about how to reach out beyond the usual (white middle class) audiences?

Lack of time, capacity and/ or resources emerged as significant challenges too. Very few projects benefited from any form of public funding. The most common sources of support were individual donations (cited by nearly a third of those who responded), contributions from members and fees from charging for courses/ events. Some 15% also benefited from funding via trade unions and six projects benefited from funding political parties (although there were accounts of bureaucratic blockages and inertia within these organisations, too). There were, in addition, instances of projects acquiring funding from

foundations and trusts, although grant funding posed its own challenges. Groups needed to be creative in the ways in which they presented - and re-presented - their projects in order to comply with funders' own priorities and constraints. The situation was typically precarious, then, living from hand to mouth within these wider limitations.

The most frequently mentioned challenge wasn't funding though; it was the need for opportunities to share information and ideas with others doing similar work. How to develop participatory pedagogies, for example, and how to reach target audiences most effectively? Such exchanges could open up possibilities for collaboration, in addition, pooling scarce resources to maximise projects' impacts. There was interest in getting support with identifying suitable speakers and facilitators for example, along with support in accessing – and creating – learning resources, including resources for online learning. These findings raise important questions for further consideration, identifying, as they do, the need for the development of mutual support systems and networks, moving beyond the fragments in other words.

From previous discussions within TWT, it had already become clear that there were significant geographical differences too. Cities and university towns were better provided in comparison with rural areas and small towns, in particular. Peer support networks could be especially beneficial for initiatives based in such areas, addressing feelings of isolation and fragmentation, more generally. TWT has been organising a number of responses to these challenges. But the overall situation has become increasingly problematic all the same.

In summary, popular political education has been alive then, if not entirely flourishing in Britain in recent years. The election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party led to an upsurge of activity, as organisations and groups set about exploring more hopeful alternatives to neoliberal austerity. Labour's electoral defeat in 2019 might have simply resulted in widespread demoralisation. Yet there has also been evidence of renewed interest in popular political education, widely understood as an essential yet sorely neglected prerequisite for building effective movements for social change for the longer term.

Universities and colleges played significant roles in some contexts in the past, providing anchors of support, through university-community and trade union partnerships. Some such partnerships survive, including participatory research partnerships, such as those supported by Unite the Union, for example (Davis & Foster, 2021). Unite the Union has also participated in the cross national 'Knowledge for Change' (K4C) programme to promote training in participatory community-based action research (Knowledge for Change, n.d.). There are some twenty-one hubs within this programme, bringing higher education organisations together with civil society organisations to provide accredited training in eleven countries across the globe. These represent such promising developments (Lepore et al., 2022).

Meanwhile TWT has continued to promote popular political education through its own initiatives. The research report will be launched at the 2022 TWT Festival in Liverpool. The research working group which was established to support the research has also continued, becoming a fully functioning working group. This is to take forward a series of projects, influenced by the research findings, including a project focussed on political education with young people including young trade unionists.

The overall trend has been in the opposite direction, however. Processes of marketisation continue apace, including marketisation within Higher Education, with diminishing support for adult education, let alone popular political education or participatory action research (Crowther & Martin, 2018). These processes have been particularly marked in but by no means confined to Britain (Evans et al., 2022). All too

often, the emphasis has become education and skills for the labour market, at the expense of learning for emancipation and personal and social development, as it has already been suggested. Nor are mainstream discourses providing adequate responses to the great problems of our time, according to Evans et al. (2022), ‘environmental issues, populism and the return of authoritarian practices, racism, gender inequality, xenophobia, precariousness and so on’ (Evans et al., 2022, p. 1), not to forget the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic or indeed the war in Ukraine.

Despite international and supranational organisations’ references to the connections between adult learning and human rights, democracy, citizenship and social inclusion, Lima (2022) reflects in similar vein, ‘business has increasingly encroached on the world of education, calling for “entrepreneurial spirit” and “managerialist approaches”, human resource management and policies that focus on the qualification of human capital’ (Lima, 2022, p. 20). In the European Union, he continues, competitiveness and rivalry between citizens become stressed rather than the values of social transformation, solidarity, dialogue and cooperation, values that underpin Freirean approaches to adult learning. These are precisely the values that are needed, if citizens are to participate in processes of cultural and educational transformation, to coexist peacefully in diverse and pluralistic communities, in his view.

## **Ways forward for popular education: the continuing relevance of Paulo Freire’s thought**

This takes the discussion back to the continuing relevance of Paulo Freire’s vital contributions. This is not to suggest that his work is beyond criticism, of course, on the contrary. His work has been criticised from a number of perspectives, including feminist perspectives (Tett, 2018) and there has been the development of feminist popular education (Walters & Manicom, 1996). Rather, the point to be made here is that aspects of his writings have particular relevance in the contemporary context.

Paulo Freire’s writings were not explicitly referenced by many of the initiatives that responded to the TWT study, although some projects did make such references. There were more general resonances with his approach though, along with some evidence of influences from Boal and others, within a Freirean framework. The projects typically started from people’s own concerns, for example, drawing on a wide repertoire of methodologies. Most importantly, in addition, the survey identified projects’ commitments to processes of critical dialogue, developing critical understanding, learning from each other in pursuit of agendas for social transformation. The emphasis was also non-sectarian, as illustrated by TWT’s interest in promoting mutual support across diverse social and political movements.

Popular political education can benefit by starting from Paulo Freire’s own eclectic blend of Marxism, humanism and Christianity then, approaches that are popular but most definitely not populist, in other words. The underlying causes of exploitation and oppression need to be understood in terms of the different class interests involved, just as they need to take account of the accompanying social, political and cultural contexts and constraints. Most importantly, in addition, class needs to be understood in relation to the ways in which class intersects with race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, age and faith.

As Paulo Freire’s last writings also emphasise, popular educators need to go beyond starting from where people are at, crucial though this most certainly is. Rather than fluttering around learners, like moths around a candle, they need to be actively engaging learners in processes of dialogue, firmly rooted in relationships of trust. Previous

‘common sense’ understandings needed to be questioned in the process, along with previous stereotypes about ‘the other’, similarly disadvantaged and oppressed groups, too often misrepresented as being, themselves, the source of contemporary social ills. Lived experience is most certainly central to the processes of popular education – but this represents no more than the starting point. It takes critical conversations to identify ways of moving forwards, beyond the fragments, mapping common interests as the basis for developing strategic alliances for transformative change.

These are particularly challenging times, as the previous section has already illustrated. Resources to support popular – but NOT populist – political education have been on the decline precisely when they have become so urgently required. As Paulo Freire reflected in the final section of ‘The Pedagogy of Hope’, spaces for the Left had shrunk, at least for the short term (Freire, 1996). And there were no guarantees for the future. Yet he remained committed to the significance of dialogical learning and he continued to look forward with hope – the ‘hope with which I bring to conclusion this *Pedagogy of Hope*’ (Freire, 1996, p. 188).

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