

Licínio C. Lima*

DEMOCRATIC ADULT EDUCATION AS A RESEARCH PROBLEM IN THE CONTEXT OF POST-DEMOCRACY¹

ABSTRACT: Adult learning and education (ALE) policies are studied in this essay in relation to various conceptions of democracy, and of post-democracy. The author observes that the dominant political discourses, notably in the European Union, have been influenced by technocratic conceptions of ALE. In this context, and invoking the imperatives of the knowledge society, ALE for cognitive democracy and for participatory forms of deliberative democracy tends to be diminished by elitist theories. This results in the subordination of ALE to formal democracy and proceduralism, as well as to hetero government carried out by specialists.

The post-democratic dimensions in ALE policies have weakened the potential for promoting an educated democracy and the development of a knowledge democracy capable of recognising different educational epistemologies and various forms of knowledge. Understanding the processes that have led to an erosion of democracy in ALE public policies requires the study of the impacts produced by new meritocratic ideologies and expertocracy, induced by discourses around the global race for talent.

It is concluded that more than a century of democratic educational thinking, of various shades, have been overtaken by the impacts of new managerialism on education, under the rigours of meritocracy, efficiency, and competitive performativity. These and other elements of the global education reform constitute research problems confronting educational communities and academic researchers. They are required to understand the *politicity* in their research agendas and to democratise it, seeking to strengthen their relative autonomy for critical inquiry.

KEYWORDS: adult learning and education policies, democracy, post-democracy, meritocracy, research agenda.

Introduction: adult education, democracy, and post-democracy

In the very first pages of the book entitled *The Tyranny of Merit*, Michael J. Sandel (Sandel, 2020: 17) wrote: “These are dangerous times for democracy”. In fact, the ideal of the common good has been devitalised, xenophobia and racism are growing phenomena, nationalist populism and extreme right-wing political parties are triumphing in various contexts, social inequalities increase, war returns to Europe, climate crises and pandemic clearly show how the impacts are global, affecting all citizens, but in radically unequal ways. Faced with new threats to democracy, the old democratic and participatory optimism based on the mobilisation of active citizenship seems to be

* **Licínio C. Lima** – University of Minho Institute of Education and CIEd-Research Centre on Education, Campus de Gualtar, Braga, Portugal; e-mail: llima@ie.uminho.pt; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0899-7987>.

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partially replaced by consensual technocratic discourses. These discourses are based on the logic of economic competitiveness, entrepreneurial leadership, individualism, instrumental learning against the other, in the production of winners and losers justified by a meritocratic system that is presented as fair. Public discourse is marked by *topoi* of private and business origin, by rivalry and by a kind of war of skills, influencing political and pedagogical discourses on education and, particularly, on adult learning and education (ALE).

The connections between democracy and education, seminally presented by John Dewey (Dewey, 1916), are now controversial and have been replaced by privileged connections between education and economic competitiveness, resulting in what the American philosopher called education as an instrument. According to him, a democratic education can only occur in a democratic society. And democratic education is as much a pedagogical experience as democracy is an educational experience, something that needs to be learned and deepened, discovered, and rediscovered. Democratic education requires actions oriented towards the transformation of public education and not towards the reproduction of social inequalities; it requires both democratic forms of government and democratic structures and content, processes, and methods. That is why democratic education is life and has its own educational objectives; it is not a mere preparation for life nor for a remote future. Democratic education does not function to perpetuate injustices through an adaptive vocational education which is subjugated to effectiveness and efficiency, competitiveness, and unlimited economic growth, and which works against cooperation and solidarity between human beings, as well as against the planet we inhabit.

All this has been ignored by the hegemony of formal rationality in the new capitalism, in the more general context of a contemporary education that is widely instrumentalised by an obsessive search for the optimal choice, whether in strictly didactic and evaluative terms, or in terms of production of new skills and talents for *human capital*, employability and competitiveness. These are crucial elements of the current entrepreneurial pedagogy that abdicated its commitment to the democratic strength of education, tending to underestimate the latter's contributions to the deepening of political, social and cultural democracy (Lima, 2018; 2021).

Today, the project of democratic ALE, including the right to permanent education, the democratisation of content and pedagogical processes, forms of evaluation, government and management of educational organisations in the direction of self-government, is not just a crucial objective of a democratic educational policy. It is also a project in crisis in the unfolding practice of a number of international and supranational organisations, secondary to economic objectives for which ALE represents a merely instrumental feature. The hegemonic discourses on the skills and competence deficits

of large sectors of the adult population not only disqualify adults, their knowledge, cultures and life experiences, but also adopt modernising perspectives of an “extensionist” nature (Freire, 1975). Adults are conceived as objects of training and learning of a pragmatic type, according to the high goals of the bodies that know the future, that have the knowledge and the power to define the social problems and the solutions that will be supposedly demanded. Cognitive democracy is contradicted by elitist theories that are satisfied with formal and procedural democracy, giving prominence to experts and to expertocracy (Lafont, 2020).

The erosion of democracy in ALE’s discourses does not mean that democratic elements have already given way to autocratic dimensions, much less without resisting them. But it does mean that the classical relations between democracy and education have been changed and that the ideal cherished by classical authors, since Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and well summarised by Carole Pateman (1970), of reaching the maximum participation of the people in the government of the *res publica*, has been abandoned. Now, in the context of an emerging post-democracy, according to Colin Crouch’s definition, the solution “is to find means of encouraging the maximum level of minimal participation” (Crouch, 2004: 112). Post-democracy constitutes a political, economic and cultural context that adopts the firm as an institutional archetype and the corporate culture of business as an example to be followed in the management of education. Ignoring the so-called “entrepreneurial revolution” proposed in recent decades by new managerialism and its impacts on education would be tantamount to not understanding some of the most striking features of the global education reform and, in particular, how the demands of social and educational movements for more democracy are often associated by its critics with the risks of *too much* democracy.

In that context, it is not surprising that ALE has been progressively depoliticised, nor that the connections between skills deficits and social exclusion – through a theoretical analysis that assumes an absolute absence of social classes – are adopted as a central topic by several international agencies. These global actors tend to generalise functionalist conceptions of social inclusion, promoting as a resource the educational acquisition of competences that should equip learners to compete more ably. In this way, they seek to resolve social imbalances, which are seen as merely circumstantial, and prevent situations of anomie through training processes, with the aim of obtaining consensus and a form of subordinated inclusion that tends, in fact, to increase social inequalities. Social inequalities are exacerbated either by promoting competition and excellence among *the best*, or even, at other times, by declaring war on deficits in adults considered less qualified and less competent. In both cases, there is the risk of devitalisation of the processes of democratisation of education and society, creating space for segmented and culturally hierarchical offers within public education policies.

ALE's contributions to an educated democracy, to a "knowledge democracy" that, according to Budd L. Hall (2016: 17-18), will have to be able to recognise multiple epistemologies and multiple paths of representing knowledge, revisiting the democratic and critical potential of multiple traditions of popular and community adult education, are today devalued by mainstream discourses on ALE (Lima, 2022). This certainly represents a problem of social policy as well as an educational problem. But above all, it is necessary to transform this social problem into a sociological problem, according to the distinction proposed by Charles Wright Mills (Mills, 1959), who was also an advocate of education for democratic citizenship (Rasmussen, 2021) and a critic of an undermined democracy. In the terms proposed by Peter L. Berger (Berger, 1963), it is crucial to make sure that research problems do not simply reproduce the current definition of a social problem as something that goes against social norms, discourses and dominant interpretations. And to avoid, too, that, in the case of research in ALE, the research is limited to reproducing the operative concepts and definitions incorporated in the policy documents by the most influential international and supranational organisations. These documents are neither theoretical sources nor conceptual devices that can legitimately be taken as references to build research agendas, to formulate research problems and questions. They are, on the contrary, themselves by right objects of study and of critical analysis.

Understanding why the historically privileged relations between ALE and the promotion of education for and by democracy have been the object of a process of erasure, often referring to the defence of democratic minimums, constitutes a problem of research that deserves continued attention. For this, however, it is important to know how to construct problems, since, as Gaston Bachelard (Bachelard, 1938) observed, research problems do not arise by themselves.

The erosion of democracy in adult education policy discourses

The idea of promoting and deepening democratic life in all political and social spheres, namely using the potential of ALE, hardly finds any prominence at all in the current political discourses of international and supranational organisations, including the European Union (EU). Democracy and the active participation of citizens appear in policy documents as more implicit than explicit assumptions, as a result of democratic political regimes that are a well-known, albeit variable, requirement for access to the EU. The European social model is a relevant reference, referring to social rights typical of liberal democracies with marked variations among member states as to the greater or lesser influences of the different types of welfare state. This means that in recent decades

there has been a growing influence of neoliberal policies in the reconfiguration of the role of the state, adopting reforms towards the *managerial state* (Clarke & Newman, 1997).

Managerialism in education adopted business management as a model to be followed in public management, public-private partnerships and principal-agent contractualism, evaluation as an instrument of regulation, mechanisms of competition and emulation, benchmarking and best practices. Evidence-based policies attributed prominence to expert knowledge, to techno-structures and leaders, to the detriment of the action of democratic collegiate bodies, now represented as remnants of bureaucracy and as enemies of organisational efficiency.

The assumptions of New Public Management (Lane, 2000), with its triad composed of deregulation, privatisation, commodification, adopted market mechanisms as the best way to increase its economic efficiency and to reform the public sector, but contributed to the erosion of democratic practices. The political discourse on democracy, namely in its relations with ALE, has suffered an erosion process, to the point of being naturalised not only by educational organisations and actors, but also by ALE researchers. When political processes lead to the overdetermination of management elements in ALE to the detriment of participatory democracy, the results are often characterised by too much management for very little democracy, legitimating:

- democratic minimums rather than democratic self-government; generic appeals to social inclusion and citizenship, albeit of a consensual and adaptive character in the face of challenges expressed by technocratic elites and not by social movements;
- calls for participation as involvement in ALE offers considered a priority by public authorities, think tanks and business organisations, but reduced participation of adult learners in decisions about forms and modalities, contents and processes, organisation and evaluation of educational processes.

However, such educational contexts could, according to a democratic agenda, be considered privileged *loci* of education and learning of democracy through the exercise of democratic practices. In this way, it would be possible to counteract the technocratic and “banking” elements (Freire, 1970) of ALE, as well as to reject the status of object, target group or client of training courses within a competitive, unfair, and possibly alienating learning market. But this democratic agenda of ALE will only be possible if the government bodies are open to democratic negotiation with educational organisations representing adults involved in ALE processes, participatory research work with production of new knowledge, greater autonomy for the educational field, and participation in the decision-making processes.

It is about adopting a different political and epistemological perspective, one capable of opening itself to processes of democratic participation in decision-making and, simultaneously, of accepting emancipatory and critical epistemologies, against the

epistemic colonisation by the Global North, proposing an epistemology of the South (Santos, 2014). Conflict will then be admitted as crucial to the exercise of democratic citizenship. The so-called knowledge society will become more connoted with debates about the various types of knowledge and the plurality of epistemologies, than with the imposition of an epistemology with a technocratic root and a vocation for colonial domination. This requires accepting, with Paulo Freire (1993), that all human beings are intellectuals endowed with epistemological curiosity, beings who know themselves to be incomplete and who therefore seek to be and to know more, in a process of permanent education that is also necessarily a process of humanisation, of freedom, and de-alienation. But that democratic project is particularly difficult in a post-democratic context, even without considering other forms of illiberal democracy.

Democratic disaffection has been culturally disseminated and, according to Crouch (Crouch, 2004: 19-28), its symptoms include disbelief, boredom, passivity, manipulation, the centrality of elites and charismatic leaders, less redistributive fiscal policies, lack of dialogue. Some of the institutional responses, however, insist on highlighting as a solution the skills of adults for the job market, the promises of the digital revolution and e-governance, flexible capitalism and deregulation of salaried work.

The fight against egalitarian policies is led by global companies and business elites, based on a meritocratic ideology that is presented as fair and consensual (Radnor, Koshy & Taylor, 2007; Brown & Tannack, 2009). The entrepreneurial impregnation of education is not surprising in this context, being correlated with the dissemination of the theory of *democratic minimums*. This theory is not about rejecting democracy and openly advocating in favour of non-democracy, but rather of putting a stop to democratic impulses and to the classic idea of power of the people, for the people, and by the people, thus guaranteeing the minimums for democratic legitimation through elections of a representative type and with seasonal occurrence. The power of technocracy disbelieves in the possibility of a definition of the common good, as it considers that the masses tend to be incompetent, unqualified, reluctant and mediocre (Michels, 1968).

In the midst of the entrepreneurial revolution (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992), there is nothing more important than leadership and management skills, the only elements that can generate consensus and overcome the bureaucratic state (Massenet, 1975) and the law of mediocrity of the masses, the classic argument of elitist theories of democracy (Schumpeter, 2010). It is, in its own way, a revolutionary process, initiated in the 1970s and 1980s in political, economic and management terms. That new paradigm, which is based on beliefs in the *government by the market*, public choice and neo-classic economics (Self, 1993) impacted on education, with the clear aim of transforming educators into managers and entrepreneurs, and social researchers into entrepreneurial researchers in the general framework of academic capitalism.

The examples mentioned are compatible with the concept of “democratic shortcuts” studied by Cristina Lafont (2020), as we see a movement away from the theory of deliberative democracy and the notion of participation in decision-making, a cessation of the fight against oligarchies, an increase in democratic deficits, and an avoidance of debate and dialogue. To which one could add ALE’s distance from its ability to promote civic education and solidarity, dialogue, advocacy for democratic values, mutual empathy and the conviviality once defended by Ivan Illich (Illich, 1973).

Understanding the processes that have been leading ALE to a democratic asthenia, to an instrumental and technocratic orientation based on an alleged cognitive, scientific or expert consensus, transforming it into a social engineering tool oriented towards crisis management, is essential in terms of research agenda. It is essential, that is, unless one insists on domesticating, as Freire (Freire, 1970) would say, the tradition and current critical potential of ALE under a post-democracy that Jacques Rancière (1996: 104) long ago defined as “the consensual practice of erasing the forms of democratic act”, or as simply a consensual democracy in an “idyllic state” and with “evanescent content” (Rancière, 1996: 99, 102).

Research problems, meritocratic rivalry and the entrepreneurial researcher

In order to understand the relations between ALE and the deepening of deliberative democracy, the processes of reinventing democracy in education and learning contexts, as well as the political dynamics that have led to the devaluation of democratic policies of ALE, any research agenda will have to admit axiological options as a starting point. Education is not neutral (Freire, 1996), just as knowledge is not independent from human interests (Habermas, 1987). A research problem only exists in the context of certain epistemological, axiological and theoretical frameworks. Knowing that there are “competing educational epistemologies” (Bagnall & Hodge, 2018: 14), means that it is always up to researchers to take a stand, make use of their relative autonomy, express their citizenship also in terms of choosing agendas and research problems.

According to whom, to what values, and for what worldviews can a specific educational issue be constructed as a research problem? Why do different researchers choose different theoretical rationales to study the same theme or subject? Why do so many researchers insist on separating matter and method, an option that was criticised by Theodor Adorno (Adorno, 2000) for leading to situations in which one tends to depend above all on instrumental rationality and to fall into the dangers of the fetishism of methods and techniques of investigation? To what extent has the aforementioned managerialism in education also guided the work of researchers (Teichler, 2021) and

reduced their autonomy, leading them to functional and heteronomous ways of defining research problems, overdetermined by dominant political agendas? Could it be that, in these cases, the scientific field proves to be incapable of producing a “translation” process, or a “refraction effect” (Bourdieu, 1997), in the face of the influences of the political field?

Today, there is a technocratic, elitist, and unequal drift, affecting not only the policies and practices of ALE but also the scientific field and the status of researchers. This trend articulates post-democracy and meritocracy, referring to an ideology of governance for and by inequalities, allegedly legitimised by the promised access for all to education and learning, although differentiated by the unequal effort and talent of each one. Against the old birth-based aristocracy, meritocracy re-emerges as an aristocracy of talent, as defined by Michael Young (Young, 1958) in his classic dystopia entitled *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. The existence of both winners and losers is then justified because there is no merit without demerit. As Michael Sandel (Sandel, 2020: 13) observes, “In a meritocratic society [...] the winners must believe they have earned their success through their own talent and hard work”. In the context of the announced global race for talent and economically valuable skills, meritocracy does not aim at a more democratic and fairer society, nor at the reduction of social inequalities, but rather at broadening the recruitment base of elites and future leaders and justifying the failures of a majority of people that simply did not try hard enough. A certain technical and instrumental conception of ALE has been politically presented at least since the *Memorandum on lifelong learning* (European Union, 2000) as the best solution to achieve success, personal optimisation, and a good job in the global knowledge economy, based on the motto “learning for earning”. It claims to guarantee employability and inclusion of all individuals capable of managing their individual learning and strengthening their skills as “a core strategic asset for growth” (European Union, 2012: 2). For the technocratic educational discourse, the problem does not lie in the lack of democracy and social justice, but rather in the lack of “key competences” (European Union, 2006a) and “skills for better socio-economic outcomes” (European Union, 2012), as well as of specialists and senior management, of innovation and knowledge-based economy (OECD, 1996). It can be concluded that democracy is not a social or research problem, likewise it is not a scientific, technical or professional issue. And so, it is from individual rivalry and competition, based on a “skilled, trained and adaptable workforce” (European Union, 2001: 6) that virtue, morality, individual responsibility, adaptability, resilience, and the fair reward will result (European Union, 2006b). That will be the outcome of investing in “human capital”, transforming knowledge and skills into a “powerful engine for economic growth” (European Union, 2001: 6).

However, no meritocratic regime is fair because perfect competition, with equal starting conditions, is not possible. And as for *talents*, they are not deserved in the sense that the persons who hold them were not responsible for them, besides the fact that there are *talents* that in a given context are not the object of any social appreciation, are considered worthless, are *talents* not economically valued, for example.

A similar distinction is made between different forms of knowledge and scientific investigation, in the context of the managerial university, in search of the *world-class university*. Human and social sciences, education and, particularly, research in ALE, enjoy low academic and competitive status. This does not mean, however, that the profile of the entrepreneurial and competitive researcher does not already manifest itself in this academic field and does not bring with it new requirements.

The analysis of scientific policy documents from the EU (e.g., CEE, 2000; 2011) as well as from governments and national research bodies, reveals utilitarian and instrumental conceptions regarding the production of scientific knowledge and also regarding the status of academic researchers (Lima, 2015). There is a corporate impregnation of the dominant orientations on the production, circulation and impact of scientific knowledge which, from a discursive point of view, refers to typical universes of economic competitiveness, innovation and commercialisation and, in certain cases, even to processes close to marketing and advertising. In the context of what is now called Research & Innovation, economic and technical-instrumental rationality legitimises the attribution of a central role to scientific and technical knowledge in the construction of the knowledge economy and in the achievement of competitive advantages in the global market. In line with the Lisbon Strategy, the creation of a European Research Area (CEE, 2000) assumes that research and technology are the main drivers of economic growth and competitiveness, seeking a common market for knowledge, providing high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion. In the *Innovation Union Competitiveness Report* (CEE, 2011), the European Commission goes so far as to state that Europe is in a “state of emergency” in terms of innovation, which is why it is urgent to create “a common market for knowledge” (CEE, 2011: 10), taking into account the main competitors in Research & Innovation, that is, on the one hand the United States of America and Japan and, on the other hand, new competitors such as China and South Korea.

From the democratic governance of European institutions to the divergence between member states and European citizens in terms of the realisation of social rights, access to employment, health, justice and education, for example, countless challenges are silenced, or subsumed, in a context defined as the pursuit of excellence, growth and competitiveness, but where social differences have increased considerably in recent

years and the crisis of democracy manifests itself in various ways (unequal access to health services during the pandemic, youth unemployment, global climate impacts, refugee crisis, manifestations of racism and xenophobia, threats to liberal democracy and to human rights, impacts of the war in Ukraine, *etc.*).

European universities, under the managerial canon (Lima, 2012), saw their social function profoundly changed, namely through the action of the EU and other institutions, in favour of an economic concept, and of the *value for money* priority, providing services with high economic value, through the action of entrepreneurial researchers. Understood as creative companies, universities would export knowledge, patents and innovative products, importing corporate culture and market rules for their operation. That innovation became an institutional requirement and, at the same time, an attribute of the new academic entrepreneur, so that a useful and marketable science can be produced and applied knowledge can be commodified.

Education as a public good, for and by democratic citizenship, for autonomy and solidarity, for creativity and the transformation of the economy and the society, finds itself subordinated to rivalry and functional adaptation. The subordination of education as a public good is presented as an absolute imperative, given the needs of the knowledge economy and the production of *human capital*.

Final remark

A century of democratic educational thinking, of various shades, seems to have been overtaken by the impacts of the new managerialism, under the rigours of meritocracy, efficiency and competitive performativity. Educational discourses have changed a lot in contexts where post-democracy is being established in political and cultural terms. Controversies between authors and educational theories, debates about pedagogues and pedagogical ideas are rarer today. The educational theoretical concepts were being pushed aside, submerged by political and legal categories originating in many cases in the fields of economics and management.

In political discourses about ALE, as in some academic discourses, a new language emerged globally, in an apparently consensual and naturalised way: educational quality and excellence, best practices, evidence, employability and entrepreneurship, merit, skills and qualifications, leadership, human capital, competitiveness and productivity, *etc.* In general, these are concepts which have little theoretical density and are external to the field of ALE, configuring the hegemony of a post-pedagogical, technocratic and entrepreneurial ideology that tends to break with the very broad and diverse concept of education. Educational dynamics typical of popular and community education, liberal adult education, social movement learning, participatory research and learning

processes through activism (Walters, 2022) tend to be silenced in the policy documents of major global actors.

These and other elements that characterise the global education reform constitute research problems that confront educational communities as well as academic researchers. They are required to understand the “politicity” (Freire, 1996) of their research agendas, the construction of problems, the formulation of questions.

Investigating the erosion of democracy in many institutional policies and in mainstream discourses about ALE, as well as the corresponding rise of a new meritocracy, is simultaneously a political and a research decision, an epistemological and a pedagogical statement. To democratise the construction of research agendas and to seek to strengthen the relative, inquiring and critical autonomy of researchers is today an urgent *démarche*, also as part of the process of the democratisation of political, economic, and social democracy. In this context, it will not be enough to put ALE as research, policy and educational practices functionally at the service of adaptation to the social world and to the so-called imperatives of the knowledge economy and the digital revolution. We are facing times of illiberal democracy, climate crisis, pandemic, war, that are not compatible with strategies of adjustment as has been contradictorily defended in the past by the European Union and other international organisations. Adjusting “to the demands of social and economic change” and, at the same time, participating “actively in the shaping of Europe’s future (European Union, 2000: 3) has proved until now to result most of the time in a process of economic and technocratic over-determination of possible democratic, and sustainable futures. And that demands from researchers critical analysis and social inquiry, especially in times of post-democracy.

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