**Democracy and Transformative Learning in Turbulent Times:**

**Street Protests, Crises and Disorienting Dilemmas[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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What’s gone is rooting here, at the same place, doleful, unvoiced

Like a large heirloom vase that was once sold

At times of hardship;

And in the room’s corner, where the vase once stood,

A void still remains, concentrated in the very same shape, irremovable,

Shining transparent in the sun-glare, when now and then windows are opened;

And inside the same vase, that has swapped its essence

with a substance identical and equivalent to the crystal of the empty one,

There still remains the very same cavity, just a little painfully more resonant.

Through the vase the wall’s color can be seen,

Darker, deeper, dreamier,

As if the vase’s shadow still remains shaped in a sarcophagus –

And someday, at night on a silent hour,

Or at daytime amidst voices,

You hear from deep inside of you a piercing sound, bitter and multitoned,

As if an invisible finger has tapped

On that absent, delicate, crystal vessel.

Yannis Ritsos, *The figure of absence[[2]](#footnote-2)*

**Introduction**

On each visit to Larissa since 2016 I have travelled by train from Athens or Thessaloniki and back. The impact and shock of the rail disaster at Tempi, in which so many were killed, has led to rallies and protests. Individual human errors distract from errors in the system. It is the current protests that I want to focus on in these opening moments (Bubola, & Giannakopoulos, 2023).

I have been at previous protests in Syntagma Square in June 2011 and in Plaza de Catalunya in Barcelona in 2011 that expressed the indignation of citizens against austerity. While looking in some detail at these protests it is clear that the groups around the squares engage through new social media with many more people than are there at any one time. Instant increases in numbers can be arranged, information exchanged, democratic decisions made, and leadership dispersed among a wide group. It is a public sphere.

The core idea I want to highlight here and present for your consideration is this: Public protests are profound democratic events in which the public make their voices heard and fill the public square and the public sphere with their experience. The intention is to make political and/or policy changes. A vibrant public is essential for democracy.

Such political struggles for change tend to create a crisis (look at how the police act) and promote a tension (look at how politicians act) that may force society to confront a problem, an issue, an injustice or some corruption that have not been confronted previously.

In general, street protests are a form of politics from below in which the experience of workers, or students, or other citizens is expressed in the form of critique. Their experiences and insights and understandings are a counter epistemology and the protest of a counter public. The epistemologically marginalized attempt to trigger a crisis in the knowledge of the powerful in society who are part of the economic and social system of capitalism (Rasmussen, 2021). All of us who are familiar with the theory of transformative learning will identify such crises as examples of disorienting dilemmas for society - the first step in the learning process that is transformative. Incidentally, crisis and critique seem to have the same root - at least in the Greek language (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020, 2021). Usually, TL refers to a crisis or dilemmas as being within the individual but in these public moments of protest, the dilemma is a social one: Whether the old frame of reference will remain in command or will a new one emerge based on the critique and experience of protesting citizens.

Migrants too challenge the dominant self-understanding of individuals, groups and indeed entire nations - including the EU (see Fassin & Honneth, 2022). The system tries to solve these problems by deflecting, and investigating and hoping that very soon everyone and everything will return to normal. The investigations are a kind of learning that focusses on avoiding accountability or responsibility by the system, and the focus is never to blame politicians who at best 'learn from these mistakes.' This learning is rarely transformative because it leaves the previous epistemological position in command as true, authentic and normal, though it is maybe dysfunctional.

Climate change is a similar contest between those who know about an approaching crisis on the one hand, and those who wish to move on, or at least return to business as usual. In a world where workers unions have been marginalized or have to a large extent lost their ability to engage effectively in triggering such transformative moments we now look to new sources of leverage. Matching the decline of unions is the increased threat and rise of Far-Right political movements and leadership that embraces fascism, racism, conspiracy theories and uncomplicated perspectives that often identify the main social problems as located in the other - Jews, People of Color, Muslims, women, LGBTQ+. In a world of conspiracy theories we can assert that these are deviant forms of critique – and that involve suspicions and rejections of authority - they need to be understood as having complex meanings that give ambiguous signals (Fasssin & Honneth, 2022).

Let me stop here for a moment to re-group and identify the following concepts as the ones from which I want to weave a critical theory informed understanding of the task and an educational response at a Conference on *Lifelong Learning and Adult Education in Uncertain Times*.

First I will outline the task ahead and

then a critical educational response.

These are our raw materials in the task:

The experience of citizens;

The public sphere and democracy;

Crisis and critique;

Fascism and other barriers to democracy and

Transformative learning.

I am suggesting that adult education as an approach to reflexive democratic citizenship might be a useful way of developing an understanding of the sources of contemporary crises and identifying where there are, or might be, emancipatory countertendencies (see Finnegan& Fleming, in press 2023). To do this I will turn to the work of contemporary adult educator and critical theorist Oskar Negt (1971, 2008; Negt & Kluge, 1993, 1972/2016) and his collaborating co-author Alexander Kluge (2017, 2020; Kluge & Negt 2014). But first a note that we also live in the age of experience. Never before, I think, has human experience been so central to how we operate in society (Fleming, 2020b).

**The Age of Experience**

I am suggesting that John Dewey might be our first ally as educators as we approach experience. Two ideas are especially important in Dewey’s epistemology: the centrality of experience and his ideas about reflective inquiry. He critiqued the gap between the problems faced by the broader community and the learning offered by education. He advocated that schools provide age-appropriate practice of democracy as part of the school curriculum, and these experiences should refer to activities of interest both in the school and beyond (Dewey, 1933, p. 55). A democratic society has the responsibility to improve, through education, the ‘methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion and that is the problem of the public’ (1927, p. 208).

TL takes on board most of Dewey’s insights on experience, on critique, on reflection and forefronts the experience of adults as the trigger for learning. In the Dewey tradition the role of education and educators is to teach people to think in response to 'perplexity' (Dewey, 1933, p.22). Perplexity, like the problem posing of Freire, is the beginning of learning and Greek philosophy students will point to wonder (curiosity) being the beginning of wisdom (Plato) – wonder is the ‘mother of all sciences’ (Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155c-d). This very Socratic idea of the teacher (or indeed life experience) producing perplexity, inculcating a psychological restlessness (curiosity) is in keeping with an interest in asking questions as against providing students with a world of answers. The 'demand for the solution of a perplexity is the steadying and guiding factor in the entire process of reflection' (Dewey, 1933, p. 24). When a 'perplexity lays hold of a mind ... that mind is alert and enquiring because [it is] stimulated from within' (Dewey, 1933, p. 207). The critical mind always remains uncertain, able to doubt and embraces partial solutions that may or must suffice for now - even if the mind experiences an 'emotional disturbance' (Dewey, 1933, p. 24).

The language we speak, the world view we acquire in school, at home and from our culture provides answers, values, attitudes, all inherited, handed on, assumed and powerful. The process of re-thinking everything we inherit, defines adult learning, or more accurately adult transformative learning. Thinking in this way, critical thinking, involves engaging with our experience of the inherited world view, or lifeworld. The educational task for each individual or learning society is to engage in problematizing (Freire) what we have until that moment taken for granted. Teachers are facilitators of this process. This is what I mean when I contrast this to the knowledge offered by the Far Right who provide answers to questions rather than questions that need study in order to be answered. We also know that the fundamentalism of the Far Right ultimately leads to prohibiting public expressions of the experiences of citizens - look at Russia. The work of artists and poets is particularly threatening. To allow the expression of experience is the first step towards, a vibrant public sphere, democracy, and transformative learning. To prohibit the expression of experience is an early stage in the move toward the Far Right.

Experience, Freire argues (1972, 1978), is not just social and personal but also historical and deeply riven by conflicts of interest. Deep critical reflection requires that we learn to read the world in order to understand how personal and community experiences have been shaped by power and to perceive that internal oppressions and external injustices operate dialectically (Freire, 1972). Democratic citizenship involves critically understanding the causes of inequality and engaging in small - and large-scale actions that change the way power in society is exercised and thus reduce unnecessary suffering and enhance the possibilities of becoming more human. This is a critical ‘reconstruction of the experience’ of oppression, inequality, exclusion, and misrecognitions that all need to be transformed.

I am also relying on Oskar Negt and Mezirow’s transformative learning for this brief highlighting of experience. What is new in our present understanding of experience is the aspect ignored by Dewey (mostly) and by TL is the dialectical nature of experience.

Dewey (1966) defines education as "that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (p. 76) and includes "organizing, restructuring and transforming" experience (p. 50). For Dewey experience has two dimensions. First, experience is in continuity with previous experience. In pursuing meaning we modify or integrate new experience with previous experiences. For Mezirow (1978) "a meaning perspective refers to the structure of cultural assumptions within which one's new experience is assimilated to - and transformed by - one's past experience" (p. 101). Second, experience is in interaction with one's broader environment. Experience is created by interacting with the environment (Dewey, 1963, p. 43). Learning involves becoming aware of these interactions and continuities (Dewey, 1966, pp. 76- 77) and how they too are themselves distorted processes open to misinterpretation. Frames of reference help interpret experience and dysfunctional frames of reference distort our experience.

Mezirow and most adult education theory has probably allowed the dialectical understanding of experience escape their grasp. Experience is dialectical. This may have been a missed opportunity for Mezirow (and transformative learning theory) to grasp the full contextualized understanding of experience as outlined by both Hegel, Paulo Freire and Oskar Negt.

**Experience and the Public sphere**

Just as experience is of interest to adult educators so too is the public sphere and here we make the connection explicit between democracy and, the public sphere, and experience. More than or rather in a different way to the school system, adult education is a player in the everyday life of society. Adult students are political beings, active in the economy and in public opinion formation and expression. Taking on this role and interpreting it as learning and educational experience is an important part of citizenship education (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2022; Fleming, in press, 2023; Finnegan & Fleming, in press 2023).

For most people new social media act as the public sphere in the world today. Negt and Kluge (1972/2016) argue that the concentrated ownership of mass media, the manipulation by state and corporate actors of media, and the products of the culture industry based on consumption and entertainment undermine the public sphere as a space of critical dialogue. To a striking degree this involves the commodification, individualization, and trivialization of social experience. I want to suggest that uncritical immersion in these commodified media may be leading to new forms of subjectivity, [leeched of the characteristic of obstinacy (Fleming, 2022c)].

A vibrant public sphere is the bedrock of an active democratic society and adult education has a powerful role in developing the 'communities of publics' that engage in the public opinion forming processes (Rasmussen, 2021, p. 15). While not ignoring the essential work of Habermas (1974) on *The structural transformation of the public sphere,* we can clearly see it has changed significantly in the intervening 50 years. It is digital, commodified and globalized (Habermas, 2022). Democracy cannot survive in the current digital world without an inclusive public sphere and a deliberative process for the formation of public opinion.

**Transformative learning - transforming experience**

Critical reflection is the way to engage transformatively with experiences (Mezirow, 1990). Critical reflection is defined by Dewey as 'active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends' (Dewey, cited in Mezirow & Associates, 1990, p. 5). Reflection also involves 'turning on some unconscious assumption and making it explicit' (Dewey, 1933, p. 281) and making a conscious and voluntary effort to establish beliefs upon a 'firm basis of evidence and rationality' (Dewey, 1933, p. 6; see also Dewey, 1937).

Mezirow (1985) defines transformative learning as; ...

the process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of our psychocultural assumptions has come to constrain the way in which we perceive our world, of reconstituting that structure in a way that allows us to be more inclusive and discriminating in our integrating of experience and to act on these new understandings ... (p. 22).

The kinds of discussions and conversations that lead to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1996, p. 115) are open, free, egalitarian, inclusive and participatory and exactly the kinds of discourses that Habermas (1987) describes as communicative action.. Discourse is a form of specialized dialogue that is involved in searching for a common understanding. In order to be understood, there must be intelligible talk, it must be true, justified, sincere and without the intention to deceive (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 65). Rationality for Habermas means that there is a testing of these validity claims. For Mezirow an adult is one who is able to participate in discourse. This critical reflection demands a great deal from participants. It requires emotional maturity, empathy, awareness, an ability not to be adversarial in discussions and to think and hold different and contradictory thoughts at the same time. It does not involve winning or losing but instead emphasizes consensus building - even if that is not always possible (Mezirow, 2000, p. 11). These requirements give transformation theory a solid theoretical grounding, and at a practical level for learners, a difficult target to achieve. This requires being up early in the cool of the day rather than in the heat of battle, so to speak.

These kinds of discussions are exactly the kinds of conversions that are demanded by a functioning democracy of active citizens. And this is the way I connect transformative learning, democracy, public sphere, critique and crises (Fleming, 2022a).

Currently, adult education has been (and continues to be) largely focused on how to facilitate instrumental learning – now disguised as lifelong learning. The critique of instrumental reason or learning should not be mistaken as a diminution of its importance, complexity or usefulness. The most persuasive distortion in education results, in Mezirow’s view, from our ‘assumption that all adult learning proceeds exactly as instrumental learning does’ (Mezirow, 1985, p. 18). In previous publications I have mined the considerable works of Axel Honneth in order toinform a development of these ideas (Fleming, 2022a; Fleming, Kokkos, & Finnegan, 2019).

**Oskar Negt**

One more iteration of critical theory awaits our attention in this reconstruction of experience. Oskar Negt's (Negt & Kluge, 1993) version of critical theory identifies the adult education of workers as a way to eliminate injustices in the sphere of work. The injustices/humiliations that workers experience, he says, involve the absence of material resources (redistributive justice) and the denial of recognition. According to Negt (Kluge & Negt, 2014) the experience of workers gives an insight into and starting point for learning, teaching and social theory. The experiences of learners (Kluge & Negt, 2014) are infused with the contradictions of capitalist society and he sees experience as a source of 'resistance to capitalism' (p. 31). His concept of exemplary learning sets out to analyse the experiences of workers, and by exercising their sociological imaginations, they come to understand these issues and take social action to alter the condition of workers (and learners). I would like to call the latter recognitive justice - asserting the rights of workers to be recognised. Misrecognitions damage and imprison someone in a 'false, distorted, and reduced mode of being' (Taylor, 1992, p. 25).

Finally, as our interdisciplinary reworking of experience unfolds, the next iteration may involve taking seriously an old idea from Hegel and giving it a new iteration by Negt. This refers to the connection between current experiences and past experiences as dialectical. The connections between experiences and broader social and cultural context are also dialectical.

Use an example from sport and not the Goffman example from Alheit

This is not to say that Dewey, Habermas and Honneth are unaware of this. But as transformation theory evolves and revisits past ideas and current contexts we are constantly challenged to renew our familiarity with experience and its importance in learning. This takes us beyond Honneth (Fleming, 2014, 2016, 2021a, 2022a, 2022c).

**Negt and experience**

So Negt reframes experience and says that the continuities and interactions are dialectical. This has implications for transformative learning. Mezirow {1978, p. 101) hardly hints that this interaction between one's current experience and one's previous experience is dialectical. The internal process of the individual and the environment is also dialectical. This fundamentally alters our understanding of transformative learning theory. The familiar phases of transformative learning must now be reinterpreted (Fleming 2022d).

The well-known stages of transformative learning also involve connecting one's individual experience with broader social issues and this connection is also dialectical. Critiques of transformation theory focus on the way the social dimension of learning is misconstrued or that lifelong learning misses the social dimension. We can now define this problem differently. Individual problems are connected dialectically with broader social issues. The political is personal - dialectically. This makes understanding one's problems or dilemmas and the search for solutions more complex than previously understood and these problems are not properly understood unless they are seen as dialectical. Connecting with broader social issues is not just an interesting add-on, but an essential dimension of understanding one's experiences. Indeed, without this dialectical dimension the connections are mis-construed. The action one takes as the essential final phase of transformative learning I now propose as a dialectically interconnected set of actions at personal and social levels. Praxis is dialectical (Fleming, 2022a).

These are not entirely new ideas in European education studies. Salling Olesen is credited by Knud Illeris (2002) with borrowing these ideas from Negt in 1989. Negt, more than any other critical theorist associated with the Frankfurt School, builds an education theory around these ideas. Even if learners are not aware of these connections, real understandings are only fully revealed when they are interpreted as dialectic (Fleming, 2022d, 2022e).

In concluding this part, we can reframe Mezirow's transformation of frames of reference as a 'pedagogy of transforming experience'.

**Toward a Pedagogy of Social Imagination: Asking the education questions**

I have been speaking this evening mostly through the vision of a sociological imagination and the educator in me, and I hope in you, wants to ask what I call the educational question. How can we teach with this sociological imagination. I am not going to repeat the insights most often associated with C Wright Mills (1959) or Negt and Kluge (Fleming, 2022d). My response is to commence or outline a number of borrowed ingredients for a *Pedagogy of Social Imagination*.

In everything I have said so far, I have been already attempting to exercise a sociological imagination. It involves being wide awake. This is not just a song by Katy Perry or a set of songs by U2!

By the term "wide-awakeness" we want to denote a plane of consciousness of highest

tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements. Only the performing and especially the working self is fully interested in life and, hence, wide-awake….This attention is an active, not a passive one. Passive attention is the opposite to full awareness.

(Schutz, 1967, p. 213)

It involves being wide awake and paying attention to life and what is going on around one and in particular being able to exercise one’s imagination.

Imagination is the key ingredient in what I am proposing as an educational response to the issues raised in this paper and in the conference theme. It involves being wide awake and in empathy with others. Imagination makes empathy possible and we teach students to resist thinking that lacks empathy, and feelings and teach to resist the monopoly of technical thinking.

Democratic educators must care about the lived experience of learners and their world view.

Help imagine moving beyond what are familiar ways of understanding the world.

To look at art (Kokkos, 2021) and for instance look at Picasso’s Guernica and see the broken weeping women with dead babies and become aware of the tragic experiences of yesterday’s mothers and the mothers of today. If we can imagine this with Picasso we can also imagine Ukraine today or the boat people. We can then increase the ability to imagine a better world – in which they will be no more wars that make women scream and weep like that – no bombs, no dead children. To open eyes and ears and imagination to art will enable us to pick up the signals deep within us as individuals and a community that knows that a better world is possible (Greene, 1995).

There is no critical reflection without imagination.

Distinguish the dark imagination that imagines that Auschwitz or war or racism are solutions from the imagination that sees the possibility of peace – as Kathy Kolwitz did in her art in the Berlin during the WW2. A dark imagination leads to radicalizations.

There is a crisis of imagination in the educational system with its preoccupations with instrumental learning and economically useful learning and managerialism agendas. As a result we can see the limits imposed by that systems (Aronowitz & Bratsis, 2005).

Imagination is needed to break from what we take for granted – the project of TL. In contrast to most of the literature on TL with its much-criticized focus on critical reflection, it is imagination that is the grounds for transformation.

Arendt is useful here: Train your mind to visit the imaginations of others (Arendt, 1978, p. 2).

Imagination allows people stand on the edge of society and to think beyond the ways that power is exercised now and to at least begin to experience ourselves and “know ourselves as more, much more that pawns in a game where the rules are already set” (Freire, 2004, p. 109).

This requires, we think, an integrated theory of critical reflection on experience and democracy that seeks to tackle inequality, exclusions, and misrecognition, being mindful of the dynamics of capitalism and alert to the extraordinary nature of human capacities—including, of course, obstinacy. I suggest that Dewey, Freire, Mezirow, Negt, and Kluge offer useful coordinates for such a theory – a theory that will introduce and induce perplexity, curiosity, thinking, critical reflection and lead to students who are wide-awake and active agents of social and personal transformation.

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1. Invited keynote at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, March 30, 2023 in the Great Hall of the University. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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