

From workers education to societal competencies: Approaches to a critical, emancipatory education for democracy

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Abstract

This article presents two conceptions concerning critical political education for workers, developed in Germany in the 1960s and the 1990s respectively. First, the conception of “Sociological Imagination and Exemplary Learning” published in 1968 by the German philosopher and sociologist Oskar Negt (1975). Further the elaboration of this conception, which since the 1980s is known as “Societal Competencies“ (Negt, 1986). These competencies concern fundamental knowledge, which enables people to make political judgments, and act politically in democratic societies in an enlightened and reflected way. This conception deliberately distinguishes itself from the economic, instrumentalist notions of key qualifications and key competencies, which at least since the 1970s have been discussed with the aim of maintaining individual employability and competitiveness. ‘Societal competencies’ aim for individual and collective emancipation, the development of the capability to make judgments, and autonomy in the sense of the enlightened political agency and participation in democratization processes.

Keywords: workers education; societal competencies; enlightenment; emancipation; education for democracy

Introduction

The question, of which qualifications and competencies people need in work life for their profession, and for social life in democratic societies, has been discussed at length. It has been triggered and framed by political and economic goals, which were consequences of modernisation processes. Modernisation requires people to adapt to developments, as well as to participate in creating them. Modernisation was and is, accompanied by changes in the world of work. Today’s, structures, work organisations,

and requirements for workers, are quite different from those in previous industrial, service, and knowledge-based societies. The outcomes of economic and societal changes due to modernisation processes, and how people should react to them, or to which extent they should anticipate them, has been discussed since the industrialisation process in the 19th century. These debates have taken place across a spectrum between the poles of adaptation, and resistance.

On the one hand, there have been arguments for individual adaptation, so as to secure individual competitiveness, and employability. On the other hand it was asked, how societies could maintain the idea of a humane society in which solidarity among workers is possible—despite increased expectations for individual self-responsibility, which is based on appropriate knowledge and social competence. The discourse of key qualifications and competencies is situated in this context. The changes in the world of work and increasingly fast changing qualification demands, led to the development of concepts which aimed at long-term skills, applicable in and transferable to different situations. These so called, key qualifications are based on economic rationales and relate to professional activity and agency. At the same time however, a different discussion developed on critical competency, also related to professional agency (Geissler, 1974).

Ten years later Oskar Negt presented his concept of ‘societal competencies’ (Negt, 1986). Through the acquisition of societal competencies, educational processes within the framework of enlightenment are expected to take place. Through engagement with the societal competencies people acquire knowledge and will reflect on their positions. This can lead to judgmental and critical skills necessary for political agency and individual and collective emancipation. Johanno Strasser engages critically with both poles of the competence discussion. For him the central theme is the (contradictory) relation between human development in the sense of enlightenment and the neoliberal view of exploiting and instrumentalising human labour, which many consciously or unconsciously accept.

Employability as a goal for an independent personal development is an abuse of the emancipation pathos of modernity as a name for the most radical alienation. Kant’s famous expression ‘exit from it’s self-incurred immaturity’, the activist concept of individual self determination, is here reinterpreted in a passive key, so that the universal exploitability emerges as the peak of human development. Life’s ideal is no more that of the autonomous individual actively shaping his own life, but the comprehensive self-instrumentalisation for heteronomous purposes, the usability, a life in the passive mode. (Strasser, 2001, pp. 36-37)

It is the aim of this contribution to present through examples, *one* strand in this competence discussion, which goes back to the German sociologist and philosopher Oskar Negt. He launched this in the 1980s, strictly reframing from the key qualification debate based on economic arguments. For him, competence means stimulating societal, political, economical and philosophical thinking, enabling people to understand societal relations, to critically assess and evaluate social developments, and to enable political action.

This is an elaboration of a conception for critical workers education, which Negt developed together with others in the 1960s. For a better understanding, I will first present his conception of ‘Sociological Imagination and Exemplary Learning’, which he wrote as a theoretical foundation, and at the same time as a didactic-methodical guideline for a critical workers and trade union education. In a second step, I will present the conception of ‘societal competencies’, which is meant as a basic, critical

political education for all interested people. Finally, I will discuss the particular nature of these conceptions in relation to that of key qualifications and competence, based on economic rationales.

‘Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen’ as a conception for critical workers education in the 1960s and 1970s

The social changes in the 1960s weaknesses in economic development, and the first signs of restructuring West-Germany from an industrial, into a service society, led the German trade unions to a discussion about how to influence the political and economic structure of the Federal Republic. Especially in the metal workers union IGMetall (IGM), there were discussions between trade unionists, social scientists and adult educators who were engaged in critical workers and trade union education. The discussions raised questions about the social development and considered how trade unions and the working class could influence the emergent social structure. The participants were convinced that a societal transition into a humane, just and practised democracy was necessary. In this sense the discussion was normative—an essential aspect of the conception.

Content argument and objectives of the conception

The book *Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen* by Oskar Negt (1968) was written in the context of a long reflection process from end of the 1950s by the IGM about the relations between the organisational, political and bargaining work of the unions. It was triggered among other things by the Godesberger Program of the Social Democrat Party (SPD, 1959), in which the party ceased to define itself primarily as the representative of workers‘ interests, but opened up for the middle class. Consequently, the trade unions not only defended their right to negotiate collective bargaining agreements, but also saw themselves as the main representatives of the political and social interests of the workers. The IGM developed ‘workplace based education activity’ (betriebsnahe Bildungsarbeit), by which it was hoped that not only trade union officers, but all members could be educated in political and trade union matters. In this way the idea of a mass education of workers from the time of the Weimar republic (1919-1933) was revived.

At a conference in Lambrecht (Pfalz) in 1966, the first draft of the book, *Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen* was discussed. At the same time, ARBEIT UND LEBEN Niedersachsen, Niedersachsen (an association of folk high schools and trade unions), the IGM and another big trade union, the IG-Chemie, decided to implement new forms of workers education. ARBEIT UND LEBEN Niedersachsen was asked to organize the new courses. Since there was no theoretical conception nor teaching materials for this new format of workers education, the participants of the Lambrecht meeting were commissioned to write a manual concerning workplace based education. In 1968, Oskar Negt published the book *Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen*, as a theoretical foundation for an emancipatory workers education (Negt, 1975). Negt understood his conception as a response to the theoretical decline in the labour movement in general, and of the workers education in particular. In his view, trade union education work was characterized by, ‘a deep division between the economic struggle in the unions and the political struggle of the

labour parties' (Negt, 1975, p. 17). In this phase workers education related theoretically to a Marxist point of view, which predominated the educational debates in the 1960s. This was, however, no more the case for workers in general, as Negt stated:

An immediate, self-evident connection between the emancipative objectives of the labour movement and a theory that would underpin it scientifically cannot any more be assumed in the traditional way. Nowadays, the information delivered by empirical knowledge must be subject to a sociological and political interpretation, in order to become usable for the emancipatory struggle of the working class and for a reasonable organisation of the society as a whole. The breakdown of the socialist theory cannot be restored at once. The conception that is presented here gives a response to this theoretical breakdown and characterizes an experimental level, which seems meaningful today for a reconstitution of the theory in connection with practical interests. (Negt, 1975, p. 18)

Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen was a first proposal for a theory of emancipatory workers education and at the same time a critique, 'If and when the workers education in terms of content and method take an independent position against the bourgeois educational institutions it will at the same time assume an eminently enlightening political function' (Negt, 1975, p. 20). At the same time as the conception was provided, didactic principles for critical workers education, were developed and practised in trade union education (Brock, 1999; Negt, 2010). Basic objectives were:

- The political enlightening of the working class in order to give them, 'the possibility to democratically control administrative and bureaucratic decisions' (Negt, 1975, p. 29).
- To define education as the development of class-consciousness, in critical opposition to the bourgeois notion of education, 'it must include the whole content of the trade union education in the strategy of politicisation for the working class, in which education unambiguously is defined as the building of class consciousness' (Negt, 1975, p. 30).

The objective of critical workers education is not the, 'acquisition of information for organisational practice' (Negt, 1975, p. 23), as usually is the case in the trade union education. Rather, 'the worker's existence as a whole social phenomenon ... is central to a trade union education, which is aware of the risks, as well as the increased chances of changes of attitude in unstructured situations' (Negt, 1975, p. 34). In modern terms, Negt aims at a holistic concept of education, which positions the learning subject in the focus of attention. It aims not only at the acquisition of knowledge, but the point is to address the human being, in his or her, cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions, by means of a holistic thinking, derived from subjective and collective experiences. Negt understands political enlightenment as the ability of the worker to analyse societal conditions in context, to interpret them, to explain the causes of human misery, and to develop strategies against them.

Following the so called, "exemplary principle" learners should be enabled to translate, analytical-scientific information into concrete and intelligible, non-scientific forms of language and thought, which in terms of their political and sociological substance can motivate for social action. This is the "cardinal problem" of an exemplary consciousness-building of workers. (Negt, 1975, p. 29)

Methodical-didactic approach and implementation of the conception

Negt's conception 'Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen' was developed independently, but the concept of 'exemplary learning in school didactics' was developed at the same time. In Negt's conception, the purpose is not only to generate general insights from specific cases, or to reduce a crowded curriculum. Rather, he aimed at a holistic view of societal phenomena. He wanted to put them in their sociological context and thereby develop sociological thinking, 'sociological imagination':

The whole, in this sense, is the totality of the societal production, and reproduction processes, in a historical dimension and across divisions of labour. The specific, is the sociological fact, which is significant for social life, for social classes, and for individuals. (Negt, 1975, p. 29)

'The exemplary' is gained from the experience of the learners and is therefore the inescapable connecting point for learning:

The exemplary educational value of a particular topic is determined by three factors: Its proximity to individual interests, its elements of workers' consciousness which points beyond immediate interests and deals with general societal relations, and finally the importance of the contents for the emancipation of workers. (Negt, 1975, p.97)

The second part of the conception relates to the development of 'sociological imagination' by learning processes. There, Negt refers to the idea of 'sociological imagination' as developed by American sociologist, Mills, C. Wright (1963). The particular nature of the conception 'Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen' is not to see learning primarily as individual acquisition of knowledge (emphasizing an instrumental understanding), but to conceive learning as a way to individual, and collective self determination, and emancipation (emphasizing the political nature of learning). Learning as a social process, depends on communication, exchange, and reciprocal understanding. Learners are not objects and targets for teaching, but subjects in their own learning process, while they define their own learning interests, acquire necessary knowledge that they reflect on and apply in practice. The learner autonomously decides in the learning process whether he or she needs guidance. Critics interpreted this dimension, included in the method, as paternalistic or dominating. In response to these criticisms, Negt said:

(...) Fundamentally it [exemplary learning] just systematizes the real learning behaviour of workers, and attempts to drive this already on-going process further in a conscious and planned way, to make its political content visible. (Negt, 1978, p. 82).

The end of the 1960s restructured the trade union education activities of IGMetall. Based on Negt's conception, a series of work materials were produced in the form of booklets, the so called, "Topics of the Workplace" (Themenkreis Betrieb). Each of them dealt within one theme with basic problems derived from workers' everyday existence and took forward exemplary problems and conflicts so as to unfold them in learning processes. Themes were:

- Industrial work and power
- The conflict about wages and performance
- The representation of employees' interests on plant or company level
- The value of people in the workplace. (cf. Brock, et al. 1969; 1975a; 1975b).

When in the 1970s the IGM discontinued using the workplace booklets, this conception of learning was used and discussed in other contexts.

Societal competencies as a conception for critical political education from the 1980s

At the occasion of a 20-years anniversary conference on 'Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen', Negt discussed the contemporary relevance of 'societal competence', and presented a new elaboration of the conception, taking into consideration some of the new social and political developments, which were emerging in the 1980s. The point of departure for his argument was the observation of a social crisis that he evidenced by the strengthening of conservatism in politics and society. He characterized this crisis as the 'de-collectivisation of the interests of workers, by microscopic attacks on the welfare state, and by loss or transformation of established rights' (Negt, 1986, p. 34). This had led to uncertainty and loss of orientation, which in his opinion could only be overcome through critical learning processes.

It is a crisis that you might name an erosion of the culturally given. A crisis situation that people cannot meet in habitual ways, i.e. on the basis of what they have learned, and further do not know exactly what stable orientations are. (Negt, 1986, p. 33)

That old orientation lose their validity, while new ones are yet not available, is by the subjects experienced as a crisis, and as threatening. Already in 1960s, Negt had been speaking of this as an, 'ambivalence in the consciousness and emotional state of the worker' (Negt, 2010, p. 270), which he also related to the disintegration of the working class in modern societies. The 'basic ambivalence, which lies in the objective condition of existence' (op. cit.), results according to Negt in a dilemma, 'He does not any more want to be a worker, but cannot get rid of the feeling that he must remain a worker for ever' (op. cit.). In a way, people 20 years later also lived with ambivalence and uncertainty, even if they did not any more consciously relate this to their class position. In developing the concept of 'societal competencies', Negt introduced a new approach for trade union and political education. His starting-point is the following question:

What must a worker, and not only a worker, but any human being know today in order to feel at ease in the world, so that his dependencies are not increasing, but that his autonomy grows? (Negt, 1986, p. 35)

Genesis and implications of 'Societal competencies'

The conception that Negt presented in its first version in this lecture can be connected with different educational discourses and debates.

1. It integrates humanistic, critical and emancipatory positions of (adult) education, which are committed to enlightenment and personal development for autonomy, judgement and agency.
2. It connects to a discourse about the integration of general, vocational and political education, which has a long tradition in the German education and adult

education discussion, mostly in the form of a dualism. This dualism has not been bridged completely up to today.

3. The conception is a proposal for a political adult education as an absolute necessity as a foundation for democratic structures and a lived, practiced and developing democracy
4. The conception can also be seen as a humanistic justification for lifelong learning, in the sense it was already developed in the 1960s by UNESCO, focussing on personal development and skills for social participation
5. Finally, the conception stands up against the functionalistic and instrumental discourse of key qualifications and competencies, which has dominated in Germany since the 1970s. (Negt, 2010, pp. 209; 218ff)

The diagnosis of crisis as the starting-point for the formulation of the competencies accompanies the development of this conception, together with the ambition to form the foundation for a critical and emancipatory political and trade union education. The changes in the welfare state which, Negt characterized in 1986 as microscopic (the reduction in the rights of employees and the changes in the world of work) are more serious today after 20 years of neoliberal economic, financial, and labour market policy, and their visible economic and social consequences. Experiences of crisis, as immensity and lack of orientation, uncertainty and so forth, are increasing rather than decreasing. Even more than before, people need to develop societal competencies such as political utopian imagination and action skills, if they want to influence their living conditions.

The genesis of the conception was not immediate. First in between the years of 1986 and 1988, Negt talked about 'alternative key qualifications', in opposition to the instrumental idea of key qualifications in vocational education (Mertens, 1974; Zeuner, 2009). By broadening the debate from the key qualification to competence, Negt introduced the conception of 'societal competencies' (*gesellschaftliche kompetenzen*) in the 1980s. Since its first launch, to its present versions (e.g. Negt, 2010), this notion of competence has undergone several amendments and changes. Today it includes the following competencies (Negt, 2010, pp. 218-234):

- Identity competence
- Historical competence
- Awareness of, and competence in, social justice
- Technological competency
- Ecological competency
- Economical competency

Contents of the 'societal competencies'

The acquisition of the societal competencies aims at supporting the personal development of people, so that beside the necessary vocational, social and practical skills they also have competencies that expand their personal, social and political space of action. The acquisition of the competencies will help them 'to understand existing relations in the contemporary world and to relate critically to the existing reality in order to initiate necessary reframing processes' (Negt, 1993, p. 662). Societal competencies should be seen as a goal of political education rather than as a didactic or methodological principle. Negt defines a particular idea of learning for the societal competencies, which is not based on the accumulation of knowledge

Education, self-education, personal development, learning to learn, balance between learning of cognitive, social and emotional competencies, emancipation through education – these are keywords which refer to individual orientation, to individual self-understanding. (Negt, 1998, p. 58)

As in the conception, ‘Soziologische Phantasie und Exemplarisches Lernen’, the experiences of the learner as subject, play a decisive role in the unfolding of ‘societal competencies’. They are the starting-point for individual and collective learning. For Negt, the recurrent return to subjective experience is a necessary condition for learning and understanding. The goal is then to think beyond experiences, which are reflected upon, to draw conclusions, gain knowledge and to formulate alternative visions. A precondition is to acquire knowledge:

A person who exclusively relies on his own experiences does not know about the conditions on which these experiences are supported, and also does not know how these conditions might be changed, enabling new experiences. He needs knowledge, which is independent of the situation, which does not fit entirely in his situation. However, he also needs knowledge that can be translated into his situation. Knowledge, which does not reach into one’s own life-situation, does not work. It leads to abstract knowledge about a societal event that is of no use to him. (Negt, 1986, p. 35)

The goal of learning is to discover relationships between societal conditions, developments and processes, considering their mutual interdependencies, as well as their contradictory and sometime reciprocal relations. Only in this way can the learner obtain, ‘the conscious understanding of relations between the interests of the learning subject and the objective world’ (Negt, 2010, p. 215). The orientation, which is mediated in the development of ‘societal competencies’ should counteract the fragmentation of life contexts and individual knowledge, and thereby also support an engagement with societal questions of existence (Negt, 1993).

Negt interpreted these fragmentations as emerging from the conscious intervention of those with political interest, in school, in the workplace, in politics and media, which reduces the transparency and increases the uncertainty for the individual, while stabilising the social system. The development of ‘societal competencies’ aims at, orientational thinking, i.e. concrete thinking, and this means thinking considering underlying relations and coherences’ (Negt, 2010, p. 217). In view of changing political, social, and economic conditions in societies, promoted through the increasing modernisation accompanying globalisation, acceleration of development, the economisation of the life-world, and the individualisation, alienation of people, and decreasing transparency, it is hoped that the acquisition of the societal competencies will contribute to:

- A realization and explanation of social life conditions
- An understanding of the connections between personal experiences and political, societal and social events and developments
- A critical relation to these conditions on the basis of an ability of judgment
- The development of utopian ideas in order to restructure societies in the direction of further democratisation

The social competencies should not be understood as a transmitter of a predefined canon of knowledge. The learners should instead develop their competencies, reaching a stronger orientation, by uncovering the relations between ‘the interest of the learning

subjects and the objective world' (Negt, 2010, p. 215). The essential contents and perspectives of these competencies are briefly summarized in the following:

- Identity competence, also called a competence of self-perception and perception of others. It empowers the individual to understand fundamental changes of society that partly lead to dissolution of traditional structures in society, family, and working environment. Being obliged to cope with new realities, the individual need higher competence to face threatened or disrupt identity. The development of new, individual, and societal values is integrative part of a future-oriented learning.
- Historical Competence, the capacity of remembering of human beings and of society determines also their future. This competence comprehends the development of "competence for utopia" which enables the individual to think in alternatives, to develop imagination in order to aim at societal changes and to implement them.
- Awareness of- and Competence in Social Justice. In society, individuals are often faced with the loss of individual and societal rights. To make this "expropriation" visible and understandable and to strengthen the normal feeling for justice of the individual, they have to learn the competence to perceive right and injustice, equality and non-equality and the interests behind them.
- Technological Competence. This is not only individual application of technological development in the sense of capacity, but also the competence to understand societal consequences of technological – positive and negative – developments in order to understand technique as a "societal project".
- Ecological Competence, the natural basis of human existence and of existence of other living beings shall be recognised, taken care of and preserved. Not only understanding external destruction of environment and preventing this, but also recognising the "inner nature", the internal structures of subjects and their human design, and the careful treatment of human beings, non-human beings and nature.
- Economic Competence, the individual shall be able to recognise and to explain economic relationships, dependencies and development. This shall lead to the development of a well-defined point of view. This aims at making clear the relationship between subjective needs and interests, and the surrounding objective world economy. (Negt, 2010, pp. 218-234)

Competencies therefore relate to one's own personality (identity competence), in their relationship to socially defined culture and tradition (historical competence, awareness of and competence in, social justice), to their environment (ecological, and technological competence) and to societal and economic developments (economic competence). Thus, these six competencies cannot be separated from each other since they are parts of a unit, i.e. the life world and the environment in the largest sense of the meaning. Oskar Negt sees fact-based relations and connections between competences as specifically important:

General rules for "relationship" don't exist. The relationship as I understand it is not a formal technique of combining individual characteristics therefore this competence should rather be called a specific way of thinking, a clear theoretical *sensibility* based on the active development of the *competence of differentiating*. Not to separate what goes together, not to destroy the suggestive appearance of the directly visible and to call it

transferred or, in terms content-wise relations, to separate reason and justified – these would be concrete working rules to test the facts. This is nothing else than critique; the other side of this further-developed competence of differentiating would be a new definition of relationships ... If in learning this *theoretical sensibility for relationship* gets completely lost all remaining societal key qualifications are inevitably reduced to instrumental abstractions, that is, integrated and preserved for dominating use. (Negt, 1990, p. 19).

To create relationship and connections may thus be interpreted as a ‘meta competence’, which is important for the understanding and development of the other societal competencies. It comprehends knowledge that is independent of situations and it cannot be seen isolated. “If ‘relationship’ is the reason for learning, then *dialectical thinking*, i.e. the living development in contradictions that can neither be denied nor deviated, is of extreme actuality” (Negt, 1993, p. 661). The concept of the societal competencies requires on the one hand that politically interested people acquire knowledge. On the other hand should the engagement with these specific competencies strengthen judgmental ability, agency, and lead to the development of a political position.

Didactic-methodical realization of the conception

Negt worked out the above competencies in a number of articles and lectures, whereas their conversion into a curriculum for political and trade union education followed in a European project between 2003 and 2005¹. This project wanted to stand clear of any discussion of economic qualification and competencies, which had taken place mainly under keywords like ‘employability’ and ‘flexibility’. Nevertheless, participants were to be responsive to the on-going political, social and economic changes, including globalisation, and likewise changes in work life, the sectorial shifts and the changes in work life, and work organisation, were to be taken into consideration. It was also taken into consideration that more autonomy, decision making, and responsibility is required from the employees and greater cognitive abilities for the future. These more or less irreversible developments were integrated into the curriculum, to support learners in thinking independently, to develop and improve their abilities in critique, reflection and democratic participation, both in work life and a political, societal and European context (cf. Zeuner, et al. 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2005d; 2005e; 2005f; Zeuner 2009).

Didactically, the development of the curriculum first related to the 1960s conception, ‘Soziologischen Phantasie und des exemplarischen Lernens’. The focus was then the experience of the learning subject. Second, the curriculum was based on didactic analysis following, Wolfgang Klafki, who defines the following criteria for the selection of examples:

1. Actuality, the connection between the theme and the learners‘ recent experience?
2. Future significance, the relevance of the theme for the future of people?
3. Substance, in which greater context does the theme belong? Which sub-areas does it cover? What could make the theme less accessible to the participants?
4. Exemplarity, which more general substance or general problem can be understood through this theme?
5. Accessibility, which problems might emerge by the work with this theme? How might the theme become interesting for the participants? (Klafki, 1996, pp. 270-284).

Beside knowledge acquisition, the purpose was to stimulate active participation in society. For this reason the work booklets were also inspired by Paolo Freire’s method

principles, structured along the three steps, 'See, Assess, Act', in this case, 'Observe, Understand, Political practice' (Freire, 1978). These didactic-methodical pre-considerations were transformed into a shared scaffold for each of six study materials, covering each one of the social competencies, with background knowledge, cases and study guidance relating the particular competence to the environment in the participating countries (Zeuner, et al. 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2005d; 2005e; 2005f). The goal is to offer participants the opportunity to acquire knowledge about a particular theme and at the time stimulate the development of his/her own interest in the content by presenting the theme from different perspectives. Work with the study materials should make visible for the learner that the starting-point for the societal competencies is consideration of the unfolding of a democratic society. Historical and social contexts can be experienced collectively while relating to subjective experiences and biographical localisation. In establishing a public sphere or space, the learner should open themselves to opportunities to question social, political, and economic conditions, and, together with others, those to reflect on, test and implement ways to social change. The engagement with societal competence should lead to political practice. Therefore, the project members deliberately decided not to substitute the term 'competence' with terms like 'education' (bildung) or 'knowledge' (op. cit). The idea was to prevent the term competence from being instrumentalised in one direction, for example focussing on an economic understanding of competencies. This would lead to the effect, that different possible meanings of a term are being disguised.

Summary

The aim of this contribution, with reference to a concept of critical workers education by Oskar Negt, and the 'societal competencies' for critical workers and basic political education, that the concept of 'competence' can be justified and defined in different ways. In this case the concept does not refer to instrumental, economic approaches, as was the case with key qualifications or vocationally related notions of competence. Here the point is the unfolding of critical thinking and understanding, with the view to changing society in the direction of a deepened democracy. This does not mean that development of societal competencies is only based on the learning of a knowledge canon. In contrary, the acquisition of knowledge in regard to the societal competencies aims at the development of a person as a whole. Like his earlier conception, 'Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen' (Negt, 1978), aims at the ability of people to analyse their living and working conditions, to recognize interests and power relations and dominance as historically grown and founded, and to understand and critically question their own role in this context. At the same time, they should be enabled to see alternatives and act towards changing social conditions. In this sense, Negt developed with these competencies a more radical concept of education.

Education conceptions do not emerge in a societally neutralized, empty space. Generally they also do not emerge, if they are societally efficient, at the desk, but in the observations, assessments, tendencies, and not the least in the results obtained in a cooperative context. (Negt, 1986, p. 32)

In such a conception, the ambition, or pretention for societal changes is one related to wider political, economic, and global contexts. It has frequently been criticized that these social competencies, which are politically argued, and designed for utilisation as

political agency, are already surpassed in relation to their theoretical justification, based as it is in enlightenment thought, critical theory and political economy. This critique seems refuted when one looks at the causes, and consequences, of the contemporary economic and political crisis in Europe. Only the understanding of causes, relations, and consequences of this crisis, and the development of alternatives, may possibly resolve it. The political ideology of, ‘there is no alternative (TINA)’ seduces individuals to political abstinence, ignorance of societal circumstances, and loss of solidarity. The acquisition of societal competencies can, by involvement, and political engagement, lead to an improvement of the social and political circumstances in terms of democratisation:

If you do not understand democracy as simply a system of rules, which can be learned and followed once and forever, but as a form of life, then political education, and its different elements, like orientation, knowing, learning, experiencing and judgment connected with each other, is a substantial foundation for a civil organisation of society. It is obvious that in such a difficult process of understanding as the one in Europe, which affects the distinctive traditions and the sovereignty rights in very different nations, the development of political judgment must be an essential medium for a peaceful and solidary communication between people. (Negt, 2012, p. 61, underscored in the original text.)

In this sense, the concept of ‘societal competencies’ was developed in the tradition of the critical educational theory. It has as its aim: learning, education (bildung), and the enlightenment of humankind. It not only sees individual learning and forthcoming as the main objective, but the improvement of a humane, democratic society. This overall goal is deeply rooted in a humanistic point of view that is often overlooked or denied in today’s discourses on competences. In this sense, the conception of the ‘societal competencies’ coincides with the notion of the American adult educator, Stephen Brookfield, who claims that a critical approach of adult education should full fill certain learning tasks in order to:

Recognise and challenge ideology that attempts to portray the exploitation of the many by a few as a natural state of affairs, learning to pursue liberation, learning to reclaim reason, and learning to practise democracy (Brookfield, 2005, p. 39).

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Notes

¹ Translation, “political education“ refers to the German term, “politische bildung“. More common English terms, like “education for democracy“ or “citizenship education“, do not really coincide with Negt’s intentions of the conception.

² The project “Political Participation through societal competencies: Curriculum development for basic political education” was conducted as a Grundtvig Project within the Socrates Program of the European Union. In this project 20 scientists and educators from Denmark, Germany, Latvia, Austria and Poland from the following Institutions: Universität Flensburg, Institut für Allgemeine Pädagogik und Erwachsenenbildung/Weiterbildung (Project management, D); Roskilde Universitet, Institut for

Uddannelsesforskning (DK); Akademie für Arbeit und Politik an der Universität Bremen (D); Landesverband der Volkshochschulen Schleswig-Holstein (D); Oswald-von-Nell-Breuning-Haus Herzogenrath (D); Universität Klagenfurt (AT), Institut für Erziehungswissenschaft und Bildungsforschung, Abt. Erwachsenenbildung und Berufsbildung (AT); Universität Wien, Institut für Politikwissenschaft (AT); Bildungshaus des Landes Steiermark, Schloß Retzhof (AT); Latvijas Pieauguso izglitības apvienība (Verband der Erwachsenenbildungseinrichtungen in Lettland) (LV); Fundacja Krzyzowa' dla Porozumienia Europejskiego (Stiftung Kreisau für europäische Verständigung) (PL). Further participants in the cooperation were trade unions in the participating countries. (Project: 110622-CP1-2003-1-DE-Grundtvig-G1). (cf. Zeuner et al. 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2005d; 2005e; 2005f; Zeuner 2009).

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