

Book review: Popular education, power and democracy—Swedish experiences and contributions

By Ann-Marie Laginder, Henrik Nordvall and Jim Crowther (Eds.). (Leicester, UK: NIACE, 2013). 288 pp., ISBN 978-1-86201-579-1

Popular education—a common enough term but often misunderstood or misapplied—takes a variety of forms and is a familiar strand in many countries' approaches to non-formal adult education. With its roots lying variously in the social movements of Nineteenth Century British and Nordic countries and, more latterly, in Latin American and several Third World countries, it generally refers to the educational tradition based upon and arising from ordinary peoples' aspirations and struggles for greater democracy and freedom from exploitation and oppression. As such it is avowedly political, seeking transformation rather than acceptance of or accommodation to, the status quo. Although manifesting differently in different parts of the world, its process tends to follow several general characteristics:

- Its curriculum comes out of the concrete experience and material interests of people in communities of resistance and struggle.
- Its pedagogy is collective, focused primarily on group as distinct from individual learning and development.
- It attempts, wherever possible, to forge a direct link between education and social action. (Crowther, Martin & Shaw, 1999)

Yet, despite the general familiarity with popular education approaches, both in concept and in practice, what's less well known or understood is their derivation—in particular the tradition developed in Scandinavia and especially that arising from Sweden. Indeed, what's most notable about what we might regard as a Swedish approach is the way it has developed into a significant part of that country's mainstream and publicly-funded provision of adult education that includes, but is not restricted to, folk high-schools, study associations and study circles. In fact, Swedish popular education is uniquely characterized by its comparatively extensive nature, its dependence upon public institutions, its relatively stable state funding and its broad popular support—from both the general public, and political parties of various ideological stripes.

This book attempts to redress that imbalance by providing an accurate and empirically grounded picture of modern Swedish popular education and various international perspectives on and comparisons with it. It consists of four parts with two, three or four chapters in each. In Part 1, "Setting the Scene", the editors provide an overall introduction to the historical background and current issues and perspectives of popular education in Sweden. Then Kjell Rubenson examines the Swedish tradition in the broader context of the European Union's discourses of adult education and lifelong learning for all. Part 2 goes into greater depth in exploring the historical perspectives of this tradition: Bernt Gustavsson first examines the transformation of the German concept of "*Bildung*"; then Kerstin Rydbeck explores why popular education's organisational structure has often ignored women's organisations in the past and, even

now, still tends to ignore or neglect a gender perspective; finally, Staffan Larsson illuminates the history of folk high-schools by relating it to more general social and educational developments in Swedish society.

Part 3 examines the relationships between Swedish popular education and various manifestations of power. First, Eva Andersson and Ann-Marie Laginder discuss how the educational practices of study circles and the motivation, interests and experiences of those who participate in them can be understood in relation to issues of power. Then, adopting a neo-Gramscian theoretical framework, Henrik Nordvall presents an in-depth study of the interactions between activists in the global justice movement and the Swedish popular education sector. Next, applying post-colonial and anti-racist theories, Ali Osman explores how Swedish popular education conceptualizes its role in facilitating the social inclusion of immigrants. Finally, Berit Larsson reflects on her role and experience as a teacher in Sweden's only folk high-school exclusively for women and the transgendered. Resisting a narrowly defined and overtly feminist approach, she argues for a more "agonistic dialogue" that draws upon a variety of theoretical insights and can be reconciled with an overtly radical concept of popular education in order to better challenge oppressive social structures.

Part 4 turns away from the Swedish focus to examine more international contexts. Sylvia Bagley and Val Rust investigate how the Scandinavian model of folk high-schools spread to and developed in the USA. In describing the origins and current missions of the existing few that remain, they situate folk high-schools in the broader spectrum of US adult education provision and argue that the Swedish popular education tradition still represents an under-utilised inspiration for American adult education. The next two chapters explore parallel developments in two other countries. First, Alan Rogers discusses the history and modern developments of folk development colleges in Tanzania—which were explicitly based on Swedish approaches. Then Yukiko Sawano reviews research on Swedish popular education in Japan and discusses how the concept has influenced the local practice of non-formal education. In the concluding chapter, Jim Crowther addresses the relationships between popular education and the state, specifically relating Swedish experiences to current developments in the UK. He argues that the state is both an important instrument for providing the resources, rights and opportunities, which individuals and communities need but that it also reproduces social relationships of dominance and control, which need to be identified and challenged. Popular educators therefore, regardless of where they are based, 'need to help communities of struggle and endurance to make connections and act globally as well as nationally and locally' (p. 12).

In sum, this book provides a wonderful introduction to the historical development and some of the current aspects and examples of Swedish popular education, both in Sweden and beyond. Its various chapters show the continued relevance of popular education approaches to addressing major educational and social issues and their diversity and rich theoretical grounding provide enough stimuli to engage educators and practitioners alike. It would be unfair to single out individual chapters for special mention; each provides a fascinating window on a specific aspect of popular education and they all inform and are informed by the others. Taken together, they show the continued vitality and significance of popular education and how social concerns, social movements, and community developments have provided and still provide rich and sustained environments for adult learning, knowledge production, and educational engagement.

Regarding education as a way to build peoples' capacities to create democratic social change lies at the very heart of popular education. This book amply demonstrates

how Swedish approaches to popular education are fundamentally based on the struggles for a more just and egalitarian social order. Such an approach is also informed by an equally clear political purpose that has nothing to do with helping the disadvantaged or the management or negotiation of poverty and domination but everything to do with deliberate analyses of, and resistance to, the nature of inequality, exploitation and oppression. Overwhelmingly, this book provides a compelling series of examples that show that no matter how bad things might get, people can always intervene, usually collectively, to better understand and improve their situation. Throughout history, the key lesson of popular education has remained the same: the best education comes through action...and the best action lies in the struggles for social justice. Ultimately, this book can serve as a key resource in the worldwide struggles for social justice by demonstrating how education can be both (a) a tool for social change as well as for personal transformation and (b) how insights gained from others' actions and struggles can be used by people the world over. *La lotta continua*.

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Reference

Crowther, J., Martin, I., & Shaw, M. (Eds.). (1999). *Popular education and social movements in Scotland today*. Leicester: NIACE.