

## Public reason, adult education and social imagination

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### Abstract

*Communities of publics where citizens together develop informed opinion as basis for political decisions is crucial to democracy; and adult education can contribute vitally to such communities. This was argued by two critical social scientists, Charles Wright Mills and Oskar Negt. Researching and writing in different situations and drawing on different traditions, they voiced many of the same concerns about the inequalities and contradictions of modern capitalist societies. Mills and Negt argued that citizens and publics need to grasp the interrelations between society at large and individual lives and troubles. It is also necessary to transgress the immediate reality and its options, to imagine how societies and lives could take different turns, both in negative and positive directions. This article makes a case that imaginative fiction literature can help critical social science and adult education in promoting such social imagination.*

**Keywords:** Adult education, democracy, liberal education, science fiction, sociological imagination, trade union

### Introduction

Crises are an endemic feature of the economic and social system of capitalism, reflecting fundamental shortcomings and contradictions of this system. The current economic crisis, provoked by the COVID-19 epidemic, is still unfolding. Governments over the world have tried to combat the epidemic by closing down public institutions and placing restrictions on citizens' behaviour, with the result that public spaces have been emptied and service industries have suffered. Although economic support from governments has delayed and partly reduced the impact, the crisis is still deep. The previous economic crisis, the financial crisis of 2008–2009, was provoked by excessive loans for private housing in the United States; and when this 'housing bubble' burst, many banks and



financial institutions broke down, and many people lost both jobs and savings. In the present COVID-19 crisis, however, the main impact of the crisis is not on financial institutions and real estate, but on people with precarious work and life situations, for instance in the private services sector. Such crisis situations inevitably raise fears, hopes and debates about what will happen after the crisis, if there will be long-term changes and if critics of capitalism may influence changes.

Capitalism exists in many forms. There are basic elements, such as production for profits and accumulation, circulation and exchange of commodities in markets, private ownership of the means of production, value produced by waged labour but mainly claimed by others; but there are differences in the quality and combination of the elements and in the way they interact with other forces and levels in societies. Ownership today has more complex forms than the family-based capitalist firms discussed by Adam Smith and Karl Marx. Most states intervene in markets, but the extent and purposes of state intervention can be very different. The dominant trend in recent decades, often called neo-liberalism, emphasises de-regulation of markets and introduction of market logics in the public sector.

Adult education is intimately involved in structures and everyday life of societies, probably more so than other types of education. Most adult education is part-time; students have jobs and other activities alongside education. They often have much experience from the spheres and obligations of adult life, and in contrast to school students, adult students are citizens with political rights. This character of adult education means that even though governments and policy actors talk and write much more about school education and higher education, adult education has an important role to play in social and political changes and strategies.

In this article, I will discuss how the tasks of adult education in modern capitalist societies have been analysed and discussed by two social scientists, Charles Wright Mills and Oskar Negt. Although researching and writing in different situations and drawing on different traditions, they have voiced many of the same concerns. Both Mills and Negt have based their work on a broad sociological approach, involving a commitment to observing and interpreting the general structures and processes of societies as a whole as well as the situation of groups and individuals. In other words, they have pursued analysis of macro and micro phenomena and the interrelations between them. Their approach also implies that understanding society must be based on a combination of conceptual and empirical work. Further, Mills and Negt have shared a concern for the full realisation of democracy and an awareness of the tensions between this and the social structures of capitalism, calling for more or less radical reforms. They argued that adult education has a key role in enabling adult citizens to think and communicate about social issues and change (Mills, 1959, 1963; Negt, 1968, 2010). To do that, adult education must draw on the experience of adults but also engage them in imagining how lives and societies could be different. Following this line of thought, I discuss how science fiction literature can contribute to such powers of imagination. Science fiction opens the possibility of thinking through developments and situations that may result from historical or current conditions but have not occurred – and the possibility to present such developments and situations in ways that highlight human needs, potentials and dilemmas.

### **Between mass society and the community of publics**

In 1954, Charles Wright Mills wrote an essay on adult education published as a pamphlet by the Centre for the Study of Liberal Adult Education. This centre had been established

a few years earlier, and it worked with universities that were seeking to run adult education programmes based on open and undogmatic knowledge on societal issues. In the essay, entitled ‘Mass society and liberal education’ (Mills, 1963, p. 353–373), Mills discussed the development and the problem of society in the United States and the tasks facing adult education in this situation.

Charles Wright Mills was an American sociologist active in the 1940s and 1950s. Starting in philosophy, he moved into the sociology of knowledge. After the Second World War Mills became a professor at Columbia University and affiliated with the Bureau for Applied Social Research, where he contributed to a series of empirical investigations on social problems and change. Mills drew on this empirical work in books such as *White Collar* (Mills, 1951) and *The Power Elite* (Mills, 1956), where he analysed social and political issues in the United States, often focusing on the social classes and using a broad historical and theoretical approach (Aronowitz, 2012). Mills developed a critical view of power relations and politics in the US society, arguing that powerful groups in business, public administration and the military were undermining democracy, and he called for a type of social science that could uncover such developments and contribute to public democratic debate. In his opinion the predominant types of sociology and political science did not live up to this, and in the book *The Sociological Imagination* (Mills, 1959) he criticized both the ‘grand theories’ and the ‘abstracted empiricism’ of Talcott Parsons and other mainstream sociologists, calling instead for a historically aware sociology that could investigate and demonstrate the mutual links between societal structures and individual experience. Mills was a controversial scholar and person, who stated the conclusions of his research strongly, sometimes in ‘either-or’ terms (Gillam, 1975, p. 466), and often in polemic conflict with mainstream social science. His works have sometimes been criticised by mainstream social science for not being sufficiently worked through and lacking rigour in arguments, but he emphasized the importance of confronting real-life issues and arguing from an empirical basis.

The essay on adult education draws on Mills’ studies of American society as well as on his ideas about social science. He discusses the role and tasks of liberal adult education in the context of an ongoing general transformation of American society, a transformation from a community of publics to a mass society. In characterizing this transformation, Mills points to four crucial elements or dimensions: In the community of publics, as many people express opinions as receive them; it is possible immediately and effectively to answer back without internal or external reprisals; opinion finds an outlet in effective action with powerful consequences and publics have a high degree of autonomy from instituted authorities. In the mass society, on the other hand, far fewer people express opinions than receive them; it is difficult or impossible for individuals to answer back to opinion givers; realization of opinion in action is controlled by authorities, and agents of instituted authorities interpenetrate the mass, undermining the autonomy of publics. Mills expanded this argument in the conclusion of his book on the power elite, published two years after the essay on adult education (Mills, 1956).

To Mills, a key difference between a community of publics and a mass society is the way that they use mass media:

In a community of publics, discussion is the ascendant mode of communication, and the mass media, if they exist, simply enlarge and animate discussion, linking one *primary public* with the discussions of another. In a mass society, the dominant type of communication is by the formal media and the publics become *media markets*, by which I mean all those exposed to the contents of given mass media (Mills, 1963, p. 355).

Mills emphasizes that 'community of public' and 'mass society' are extreme types, constructions that serve to highlight certain features of reality and of ongoing changes. The US is not altogether a mass society, but it is developing in that direction.

The idea of the public is a key element in classic democratic theory (Held, 2006). Democracy is based on free flow of discussion among people organized in autonomous fora, and discussions result in decisive public opinions that are implemented in public action through decisions in parliaments. Mills (1963, p. 356 f.) points out that this idea of public opinion parallels the idea of a free market economy, composed of freely competing entrepreneurs. The market price is the result of anonymous individuals bargaining on equal terms, while public opinion is the result of each person having thought things out for himself, discussing them in small circles and contributing his weight to the formation of opinion. The process from discussion circles to decisions partly goes through political organizations trying to acquire places in parliament, but the autonomy of the discussion circles is important to democracy.

After presenting the classic idea of the public, Mills states that while this idea is still often used in describing democracy in American society, it is in fact like images out of a fairy tale, misleading as description of how American society works. The situation of the community of publics indicates that the US has moved a considerable way along the road to a mass society, a road that can lead to totalitarianism.

## Structural trends

Mills describes four structural trends that he sees as explanations for the ongoing transformation towards a mass society. These are (1) the rise of bureaucratic structures of executive power; (2) the growing range and efficiency of institutionalised opinion making, especially the mass media; (3) the decline of the old middle class of independent entrepreneurs and the rise of the new middle class of white-collar workers; (4) the rise of the metropolis, the big city.

The rise of bureaucratic structures means that the institutions of power have become large-scale, centralized and hard to access; and that they have become less political and more administrative. This is the case not only for government and the military, but also for voluntary organizations such as political parties. They have become larger and more centralised in order to become effective, and because of that, they have become inaccessible to individuals who would participate in their politics through debate. Elections in the US have become a contest between 'two giant and unwieldy parties' (Mills, 1963, p. 361); and elections are increasingly decided not by clear statements on genuine issues, but by silly appeals. Along with the bureaucratisation of public and voluntary organizations, the means of opinion making, especially the mass media, have also grown in range and efficiency. Some social scientists have earlier thought that mass media would enlarge and animate the public, but in fact, the media, especially television, have encroached upon the small-scale discussion among people, undermining the public:

These media do not connect the information on issues that they do provide with the troubles felt by the individual. They do not increase rational insight into the tensions, neither those of the individual nor those of the society which are reflected in the individual. On the contrary, they distract attention from such tension (...). As they now generally prevail, the media not only fail as an educational force, they are a malign force – in that they do not reveal to the viewer the sources of his tension and anxiety, his inarticulate resentments and half-formed hopes (Mills, 1963, p. 362).

A further cause of the development towards a mass society is changes in the class and occupation structure, especially in the middle class. The old middle class of independent entrepreneurs had an independent base of power for political freedom and economic security. These people represented the balance between free markets and representative democracy. The white-collar workers constituting the new middle class do not have such a base; they are property-less wage workers and in contrast to the blue-collar workers, they are not organized. Mills argues that the old middle class has been important for what he calls the civic spirit, the identification between interests of ordinary people and interests pursued by people at top levels in a city or a nation. The situation and work of the independent entrepreneurs gave them experience and initiative to engage in civic affairs. The white-collar workers, in contrast, depend on the corporations that employ them, and the result is that loyalty is shifting from the city to the corporation.

The growth of big cities and their subordinate surroundings, establishing in effect a metropolitan society, is the fourth structural trend. Mills argues that the social structures of big cities segregate people into narrow routines and settings and lead to a constant loss of community structure. In this kind of society, most people know each other only fractionally, as the man who fixes your car or the girl who serves your lunch.

The city is a structure composed of *milieux*; the people in the *milieux* tend to be rather detached from each other; being more or less confined to their own narrow ranges, they do not understand the structure of their society. As they reach for each other, they do so by stereotype and through prejudiced images of the creatures of other *milieux*. Each is trapped in his confining circle; each is split from easily identifiable groups. It is in such narrow *milieux* that the mass media can create a pseudoworld beyond, and a pseudoworld within, themselves as well (Mills, 1963, p. 365).

In his diagnosis of the transformation towards a mass society, Mills clearly assigns much importance to the mass media: especially television appears as a powerful force killing off the community of publics. But what drives the media in this direction is not indicated, except for the fact that media organizations have grown in parallel with the bureaucratic organizations. Mills' description can be compared to an analysis of the same phenomena published a few years later, Jürgen Habermas' 'The structural transformation of the public sphere' (Habermas, 1989). Habermas identifies some of the same developments in the character of the public and the role of the mass media but, in his view, this is not only caused by the size and the bureaucratisation of the media; it is also a result of the fact that media organisations increasingly pursue profits by giving priority to stereotypical 'human interest' content and by making papers and channels attractive to advertisers.

It is noticeable that Mills gives little attention here to the role of private business. To be sure, it is not absent in his argument, as he sees the uncontrolled growth of business organizations and their drive towards monopoly as a development upsetting the economic order of the market and making classical democratic theory seem like a fairy tale. But in his description of the four structural trends towards mass society, the special power of private business is not discussed, and in fact he presents an idyllic picture of small-scale business. This illustrates the comment made by Theodor Adorno, who said that that Mills' critique of power remains within the horizon of mainstream sociology because he has used 'such concepts as power and elite primarily in terms of personal control over the production apparatus, without engaging or seriously engaging with the analysis of the economic processes themselves' (Adorno, 1993, p. 237–238).

## Mills and the tasks of adult education

On the background of his diagnosis of the ongoing transformation of American society, Mills discusses the tasks of the liberal college for adults. The basic task he sees is that adult education should protect people from being overwhelmed by the burdens of modern life that he has outlined. He is aware that this must be pursued in specific ways in a college for adults. The knowledge and teaching must be made directly relevant to the human needs and social practices of adults troubled by the changes and tensions in society.

What the college ought to for the individual is to turn personal troubles and concerns into social issues and rationally open problems (...). What the evening college ought to do for the community is to fight all those forces which are destroying genuine publics and creating an urban mass; or stated positively, to help build and to strengthen the self-cultivating liberal public (Mills, 1963, p. 367–68).

Mills expressly does not discuss the training of skills for vocational life. He argues that the political function of education, making knowledgeable citizens, was originally the most important one, but that attention has gradually shifted to the economic function of training people for better paying jobs. The political element in adult education has more or less been reduced to inculcation of nationalist loyalties. Instead, adult education institutions should take on the task of helping reinvigorate substantial public discussion.

In the absence of deep and wide political debate that is really open and free within the framework of a metropolitan community, the adult school could and should become a hospitable framework for just such a debate. Only if such procedures are built into the college for adults will that college be liberal, that is liberating, and at the same time real; encouraging people to get in touch with the realities of themselves and of their world (Mills, 1963, p. 370).

In his later book on 'The sociological imagination', Mills discussed the educational role of social scientists along the same lines as in the paper on adult education. He described the core concept in this way: 'The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise' (Mills, 1959, p. 6). Mills offered informed and penetrating critical analysis of society in the leading capitalist power, the United States. He was very much aware of the structures and interests of capitalist business, and he knew Marxist theory; but in analysis, he mainly used more general theoretical categories such as power, elite and inequality. As the paper on adult education shows, had a strong identification with the American democratic culture of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, where he saw a sensible balance both in economic markets and in public communication and debate; but he was acutely aware that this culture was gone. He argued that the two major orientations of modernity, liberalism and socialism, which both assumed an inherent relation between reason and freedom, had '... virtually collapsed as adequate explanations of the world and ourselves' (Mills, 1959, p. 166). In response to this Mills did not present an alternative model of society; he looked for and studied situations with liberating potential, such as the Cuban revolution (Mills, 1960) and he tried to promote a social science with the potential to intervene critically and positively in public affairs; '... social science as a sort of public intelligence apparatus, concerned with public issues and private troubles, and with the structural trends of our time underlying them both' (Mills, 1959, p. 181).

## Capitalism and self-regulation

The concept of the sociological imagination outlined by Mills was an inspiration for many young European social scientists. One of them was Oskar Negt, who in his early work on worker and trade union education (Negt, 1968) combined the concept with elements from other contemporary social research and pedagogy.

Oskar Negt is a German sociologist and philosopher. He studied in Göttingen and Frankfurt am Main, where he worked as a research assistant for Jürgen Habermas. From 1970 until his retirement in 2002, he was professor of sociology at the Leibniz University of Hannover. Since the start of his career, Negt has studied, theorized and commented on the trends and contradictions of modern society, and the problems confronting individuals in this society. Among his theoretical inspirations, the two main ones are Marxism (not in the versions developed in the former Soviet Union, but rather the original work of Marx and Engels) and the Frankfurt school of critical theory, as developed by Horkheimer, Adorno and others (Jay, 1996). The form of Negt's work is different from mainstream social and educational research. His long series of publications are mainly theoretical, but not in an axiomatic or formal way. Although seldom based directly on systematic empirical investigations, his work reflects the sociological commitment to confronting empirical phenomena and focuses on important social and cultural issues, such as unemployment, labour market flexibility and European integration. He explores the perspectives, the paradoxes and conflicts of such issues in theoretically informed discussions. While his writings are full of important insights, theoretical consistency as well as the empirical anchoring are sometimes left behind in the eagerness to present critical conclusions.

Education and learning have been important themes for Negt, and apart from his university teaching, he has worked with two different types of education. One is childhood and alternative school pedagogy (Negt, 1997), inspired by his involvement in an alternative school project in Hannover; the other is adult education, especially in the context of work and the tasks of trade unions. This is the part of Negt's work that I shall discuss here.

Negt's understanding of work and its role in society is partly inspired by classical Marxism, which pictured work as a potentially positive force providing societies with wealth and individuals with welfare and dignity; but Negt is also aware that work can be a strong force of instrumental rationality and alienation, as argued not least by early critical theory. His fundamental assumption is that all work builds on the basic human skill of self-regulation, and that work is continually reshaping this skill. Work processes produce not only goods or services, but also needs and experiences. Within the context of wage labour only some of these needs and experiences may find legitimate expression, others remain unexpressed and homeless.

Together with the author and filmmaker Alexander Kluge, Negt has explored the concept of work in a broad historical context (Kluge & Negt, 2014). They see their analysis as a continuation of Marx's investigations of work under capitalism. Where Marx developed a theory of the political economy of capital, they contribute to a necessary counterpart of that: a theory of the political economy of labour power, about the human work potential, the constitution and possible emancipation of work. Kluge and Negt link the human work potential to the capacity for self-regulation and discuss this both as physical activity, the handling of objects and tools, and as the ability to maintain relevant actions and natural relationships in complex worlds of objects and men.

In later works, Negt has related this line of argument to contemporary issues. An important example is his analysis of the question of a general shortening of work hours,

which was a key demand of the German trade unions in the 1980's (Negt, 1984). In his broad argument supporting the demand, Negt confronts Max Weber's classical analysis of work and rationality. He argues that because Weber saw the development and social character of work as dominated by the 'iron cage' of instrumental rationality, he came to wonder whether the human spirit could survive at all in this environment. But this is not how mature capitalism has turned out to be. When living labour tends to be completely consumed by dead labour through processes of mechanization and automation, the iron cage loses its character of fate, and it becomes possible to react towards it. Work has not lost its place in the culture and values of modern society, on the contrary vocational activity is 'a central medium of social recognition, of social contacts and the development of individual identity' (Negt 1984, p. 46).

### **Adult education and experience**

Experience is a core concept in Negt's work. The world of work is a predominant framework for experience in modern societies, and the opportunity for active experience is a criterion for judging the quality of work. To Negt, experience is not just a question of sensory cognition, it is a comprehensive process of cognition, acquisition and transformation, through which humans relate to the reality surrounding them (Negt & Kluge, 1993). If the human senses are to remain alive, persons need to recognize themselves in the surrounding world of objects, which we deal with in everyday life. But in the modern world, the senses are too often overwhelmed by masses of unconnected impressions through the mass media and in other contexts. To clarify his argument, Negt (1989) refers to the dramatist Bertolt Brecht and his concept of estrangement (Brecht, 1992). Brecht understood that culture builds on a dialectical relationship between senses and thinking, between empathy and rationality. In his plays he used estrangement effects to invite the audience to use their conscious judgement, to engage in 'reflection on the characters portrayed, not superficial identification with them' (Negt 1989, p. 169).

Trade union education was another prominent theme in Negt's early work. During the first half of the 1960's, he worked as an assistant in the educational division of the German metalworkers union; and as described by Zeuner (2013) and in a recent autobiographical work (Negt, 2018), this led him to critically consider and try to restate the principles of trade union education, drawing on Mills' concept of sociological imagination. In the book that came out of this (Negt, 1968), he criticised the existing educational programmes for trade union officials and activists, arguing that they that separate theory and practise. On one hand, instrumental knowledge is taught in subjects like labour law, drawing on mainstream social science. On the other hand, the programmes offer general political knowledge, for instance about the history of the labour movement, with little consequence for practical trade union work. One consequence of this problematic division of knowledge is learning and motivation difficulties in many of the courses.

Negt argues that the learning processes in trade union education must connect with workers' and activists' experience from everyday life at work or in other spaces and integrate this experience with more general concepts of society. Everyday experience will be ripe with the contradictions of capitalist societies, in the economy as well as in other areas of life. In characterizing the ability to structure and generalize collective experience, Negt draws on Mills' concept of sociological imagination. The curriculum should not be based on transmitting a certain "sum" of knowledge, but on choosing topics and problems

suited for linking of collective experience with systematic knowledge about modern capitalist society.

Negt developed the concept of experience-based exemplary adult education (Zeuner, 2013) early in his career, before his major works on experience, public spaces, work and culture. In subsequent contributions to educational theory, he has maintained the basic principles, but gradually integrated them with his general work in social theory.

### Key competences for modern life

In more recent contributions to the theory of adult education, Negt (1989, 2010) has restated his ideas. The core argument remains that learning has to build on people's experience of contradictions in work organisations, labour markets and other contexts and develop the links between this experience and systematic knowledge about present-day society. But in these later contribution Negt also discusses the competencies to be taught and learned. In a lecture given at a university extension college, he poses the question: "What does a worker need to know, if he is to know what is happening in the current situation of crisis, and what possibilities does he have to improve his life conditions in solidarity and cooperation with others?" (Negt, 1989, p. 262). Negt does not recommend a curriculum in the form of given disciplines or theories; this would also be in discord with his view of knowledge as dynamic and responsive to social change. Instead, he indicates a number of important societal competencies, argued from his diagnosis of contemporary western societies. He finds signs of a fundamental crisis in these societies, not in the ordinary form of an economic or even political crisis, but at a deeper level. Layers of motivation, social cohesion and belonging in people's everyday lives are being stripped away by the increased pressure from modern capitalism and conservative social policies. To characterise this situation, Negt uses the term 'erosion crisis' (Negt, 1984, p. 55 f.). A key example of this is the imbalance in the labour market; after centuries of training most citizens of modern western societies have finally internalised a strong work ethic, and when they then find themselves workless, it has very damaging consequences for their self-esteem, their sense of time and whole personality.

Negt proposes the following six key competencies (Negt, 2010, pp. 218–234):

- Identity competence, also called a competence of self-perception and perception of others
- Historical Competence, the capacity of remembering the past and imagining the future
- Awareness of expropriation – the loss of individual and societal rights - and competence in perceiving right and justice
- Technological Competence, not only as individual technical capacity but also understanding societal consequences of technological developments
- Ecological Competence, recognising and caring for the natural basis of human existence and the existence of other living beings

This is the most recent version of the competencies, adjusted in some ways from the original presentation. The origin and logic of social competencies in Negt's thought has been discussed by Christine Zeuner, who has also led a project in developing the competencies as guidelines for adult education programmes (Zeuner, 2013).

What Negt calls the historical competence, the ability of remembering and of utopian imagination, is crucial to comprehensive understanding. Negt emphasizes the historical

aspect because he sees the ability to remember previous historical situations and conditions as an important precondition for the ability to imagine lives and communities different from the ones experienced today. ‘Who cannot mourn the losses of the past has no power for utopian imagination’ (Negt, 1989, p. 267). This competence is clearly linked to his earlier use of the concept of sociological imagination.

Although presented in the context of trade union education, the social competences and Negt’s arguments for them clearly represent a general diagnosis of the situation and needs of ordinary people in the world of erosion crisis. His concept of competence draws on the sociology of work, where the concept is used in analysis of the changing demands for skills; but as pointed out by Salling Olesen (2013) it is also an attempt to intervene in current educational discourse, where narrow economic concepts of competence have proliferated. The competences that Negt outline are at a more general level and bear some resemblance to the educational objectives developed in the German tradition of ‘Bildung’.

Negt has used and developed Marx’s critique of political economy in his own way, focusing on the human potential. Politically he has roots in the socialist tradition of European social democracies and the new left. He would not agree with Mills’ argument that socialism has collapsed as a model for the world and for humanity, but like many in the new left, he has strongly rejected the versions of socialism that were instituted in the Soviet Union and in China. His concept of socialism is not a finished model, but a vision of a society where full democracy is realized, and the potentials of human work, culture and experience can be richly unfolded. This is also reflected in the title of one of his papers, ‘No democracy without socialism, no socialism without democracy’ (Negt, 1976). Like Mills, he thinks that democracy must be kept alive from below, through public spheres where experience can find expression in debate, commitment and action. In contrast to Mills, who tended to see workers as conforming with corporations, Negt regards workplaces as important settings for public debate and learning, alongside such setting as educational institutions and local communities. During the seventies he was actively engaged in the so-called ‘Socialist Bureau’, a grassroots organization that attempted to develop a non-party framework for socialist activities. Negt’s contributions to the theory of adult education, as well as to social science in general, represent a modern and politically aware development of German critical theory. He addresses urgent social and political issues, and he has involved himself with interests and actors confronting these issues.

### **Social science and imaginative fiction literature**

Mills and Negt both emphasize the need for sociological imagination in social science as well as among citizens, and they call for adult education to help developing this competence. Nonetheless social science, even the type pursued by Mills and Negt, finds it difficult to produce knowledge which engages the imagination deeply. Social science developed with the aim of producing conceptually consistent and empirically based knowledge of the present and its historical origins, and even though social scientists uncover tensions and trends pointing beyond the present, they are most often unwilling to engage in describing future social orders and communities. The opposition of utopian and scientific socialism, as described by Engels, is an early example of this (Engels, 1970). Some types of social science do try to forecast future development, and there is even a specialized branch called futures research (Bell, 2003), but this work tends either to focus on macro indicators such as economic growth and the development of populations or to identify lifestyle trends in a relatively superficial way. Both approaches

lack the ability to describe imagined real-life situations in a way that highlights connections between present and future as well as between general societal and technological developments and people's lives and concerns.

Here fiction literature can serve as an important supplement to, and inspiration, for social science. In introducing the concept of sociological imagination, Mills wrote: 'In the absence of an adequate social science, critics and novelists, dramatists and poets have been the major, and often the only, formulators of private troubles and even of public issues' (Mills, 1959, p. 18). He saw the ability of art to express the feelings of troubled men and women, but he also realized that artistic representations lacked the intellectual clarity necessary to look for solutions. He hoped that a social science informed by sociological imagination could incorporate some of the qualities of artistic work, but as argued above, this development has been limited by the barriers of the institutionalised concept of social science. Social science still needs to be inspired and supplemented by artistic work – and vice versa.

For imagining future situations, the genre of science fiction holds relevant resources. Much science fiction writing has focused on more or less fanciful technological imaginaries and the perspective of space exploration, while it has reproduced well-known stereotypes in describing human behaviour and social organization. However, there are also science fiction authors who have tried to think through and present human life and society under the conditions of the close or the more distant future, and who have presented this in vivid and compelling narratives (Baron, Halvorsen, & Cornea, 2017; Thomas, 2013).

### Imagining the future

The novel 'New York 2140' (Robinson, 2017) is an example of this kind of science fiction, exploring possible developments of humans and societies in new – often radically different – situations. The author, Kim Stanley Robinson, is a well-known and recognized science fiction writer who has been publishing since the 1980es. His novels, often having ecological, cultural, and political themes, have won the highest awards in the genre, the Hugo Award and the Nebula Award (Dalgaard, 2017).

As the title indicates, the novel presents a story about persons, events and locations in New York 120 years in the future. The narrative follows some ten different persons living in the same high-rise building, the Met-Life building, over a year and a half. They have different personalities, life histories and jobs, but gradually they come to know each other and collaborate. However, the main theme is not the persons and their stories, but the environmental, social and political challenges of life in the future metropolis.

By 2040, melting of icecaps in Antarctica and Greenland have gradually raised the level of the world's oceans by fifteen meters, partly or fully submerging coastal areas and cities around the world. In New York, the lower end of Manhattan is under water, while the higher northern end remains dry. This has meant that that the wealthier people cluster in the north end, and enormous skyscrapers of new composite materials have been built there. But people still inhabit lower Manhattan and other partly submerged areas. Many buildings have collapsed during the pulses of flooding, but a good deal of the skyscrapers are inhabited, having had their lower floors, now beneath the waterline, reinforced and made watertight. Local travel takes place in boats or by footbridges built between many buildings. In the building where the main characters of the novel live, one of the lower floors has been transformed into a boathouse, dining halls for the inhabitants have been constructed and some upper floors have been made into gardens in order not to

depend too much on the availability of foodstuffs from elsewhere. The building is owned collectively and managed by a board. Many from other flooded areas want to move to New York, because there is still business and abandoned buildings that may be restored. This is a hot issue in local politics, where the mayor wants strict limits on immigration to the city, while others defend the constitutional rights of citizens to move. In Robinson's description, the everyday life of lower Manhattan is in many ways familiar in spite of the drastically changed conditions. People go to work, to meetings and to bars, although they move by water or on foot. In the background of the narrative there is also information about other changes, such as long-distance travel, which has largely changed from airplanes to airships and sailing ships in order to limit emission of greenhouse gases. We learn the polar bears in the North are almost extinct and follow an attempt to re-locate some of the last bears to Antarctica.

One of the persons living in the Met-Life building, Franklin, is a financial manager working in a Hedge Fund specializing in real-estate business in the half-submerged areas of the world. This is complex business, because the values of real estate in these areas depend on many factors, such as water levels, population movement, wear on buildings, tides and risks of further flooding. Franklin is successful in his job; he has constructed an Intertidal Property Pricing Index, which integrates and constantly updates information about relevant sites. His work is financial capitalism, earning money by moving money. But through his contacts with the other persons of the story, including two homeless boys and the woman who heads the board of the Met-Life building, he gradually becomes interested in developing new sustainable housing for the half-submerged areas.

Through the daily life of Vlade, the building supervisor of the Met-Life building, we follow the work of keeping a half-submerged skyscraper safe. He helps inhabitants with practical problems, such as the docking of boats, but his main task is to check and secure the integrity of the building. Amid other events, he detects unexpected seeping of water in the submerged floors and finds out that this is in fact the result of sabotage from the outside, done by remotely controlled drilling robots. The building has received a bid from a fund who wants to buy it, and both Vlade and the head of the building board suspect that the sabotage is connected to that.

The head of the board, Charlotte, was earlier a city official but now works in a non-governmental organisation helping immigrants who are trying to find a place to live in New York. In her job, she is often involved with city administration and local politicians, trying to secure rights and housing for people immigrating to the city. She resents the way that the mayor's office act to protect the wealthy citizens of higher Manhattan and their interests. As head of the board of the Met-Life building, she tries to make the inhabitants turn down the offer to buy the building, although many of them are tempted. In her conversations with Franklin and with her former husband, who is head of the Federal Reserve Bank, she learns that the offer is part of a bigger move to take over housing in the half-submerged area, and she considers ways of raising funds to prevent the takeover.

Towards the end of the story, a violent storm hits New York, driving waters high and making many older buildings collapse, but not the Met-Life building. The head characters of the story participate in different ways in rescue operations. After the storm subsides, Central Park fills with homeless and starving people. The city provides help, but does not acknowledge how desperate the situation is, and in the end, an angry crowd moves from the park to seek refuge in upper Manhattan, where there is in fact much empty room in the new skyscrapers. Private security forces protect the buildings, but a police inspector (who also lives in the Met-Life Building) helps avoid a violent confrontation, and the people are temporarily housed in the new buildings. In the aftermath of the storm and the riot, important economic and political changes take place. Strategies for hostile take-over

of housing is uncovered and countered; a householders' strike, where tenants refuse to pay rent, is initiated and joined by many; Charlotte runs for and is elected to Congress on a programme of protecting citizens against the strategies of financial capital.

There is little mention of education in the novel, but it tells stories of learning through involvement and collaboration for all the head characters. They increasingly use their different expertise and networks in protecting the Met-Life building and helping others, and in the process of this, they sort out some of their personal troubles.

Robinson's novel is long and complex, and I cannot do it justice in this short summary. But the novel shows the power of quality science fiction in imagining social change and its consequences for humans. It describes the kind of conditions that may follow from current trends, both in the natural environment and in capitalism, and it describes how solidarity may emerge and provoke social change. Robinson provides convincing projections of climate change, technological development, financial dealings and other issues, and he combines this with vivid narratives about persons and events. In analysing and discussing prospects and strategies for social change, this kind of knowledge is an important addition to critical social science.

## Conclusion

The work of Charles Wright Mills and Oskar Negt explore the connection between critical approaches in social science and in adult education. Researching and writing in different socio-political contexts and drawing on different theoretical traditions, Mills and Negt have both developed penetrating analysis of the contradictions and injustices of modern capitalist societies, and they have suggested how adult education can contribute to better and more humane social conditions.

Mills and Negt discuss how the kinds of adult education that focus on general knowledge is relevant to life and citizenship in the modern world. Mills explicitly argues that the political element of adult education is being pushed aside by vocational training and should be restored; Negt writes about education and key competences in a general way but has mainly discussed the institutional context of trade union education. However, vocational education and training constitute most adult education provision and activity today and is an indispensable element in lifelong learning because people need to adjust changes in work and the labour market. The critical potential of adult education cannot be pursued only in separate institutional contexts; it needs to enter in combination and dialogue with the vocational contents and objectives (Lundvall & Rasmussen, 2016).

Sociological imagination was the concept proposed by Mills and adopted by Negt for trade union education. Mills did not want to reserve the concept for the discipline of sociology; he understood it as referring to many types of social science knowledge. In fact, he was not comfortable with the term 'social science', because he thought the word science has acquired much prestige without a precise meaning (Mills, 1959, p. 18). But he wanted to avoid confusion with high school civics education, and he thought sociology was the broadest social science field, so in the end he chose to talk about sociological imagination. This is a fruitful concept, because it refers the imagination to the field of social life and also to showing the logics involved. However, it does involve the risk of an exclusive link to the discipline of sociology, and for that reason I also use the less specific term 'social imagination'.

Realising democracy fully is the fundamental concern of both Mills and Negt, and this concern also underlies Robinson's exploration of possible future life in New York. In a key paper on democracy and socialism, Negt quotes the social scientist Wolfgang

Abendroth saying that ‘Socialism is nothing else than the versatile realization of the thought of democracy, which will be transformed from a system of political ground rules to the substantial principle for society as a whole, to a social democracy’ (Negt, 1976, p. 461). Mills would probably have agreed on the need for such versatile democracy, but maybe not on calling it socialism. And it is true that the types of regimes that have called themselves socialist have tended to halt the process of democratizing the different sectors of society, leaving centralized control in the hands of a more or less closed elite. This partly reflects the historical conditions under which different socialist regimes have emerged but it also demonstrates some fundamental problems in the original concept of socialism, which needs to be rethought (Honneth, 2017). This is of course a question far beyond the scope of this article. The arguments and the perspectives from Mills, Negt and Robinson may not point to the abolition of capitalism, but they do point to a type of capitalism that combines with versatile democracy (also in the economic sphere) and strong social responsibility. This is in fact a very ambitious goal, which has not yet been realized anywhere. The COVID-19 crisis has reopened discussions on such issues, as demonstrated for instance by a manifesto published in newspapers all over the world and signed by several thousands of academics and intellectuals (Ferrerias, Battilana, Méda et al., 2020). The authors call for democratization of firms through employee representation in management and de-commodification of work through job guarantees. It is difficult to predict whether the crisis will in fact lead to steps in this direction or capitalist socio-political ‘normality’ will just be restored, but at least the perspectives and proposals have been voiced.

As emphasized by Mills, versatile democracy must include communities of publics where citizens together can develop informed opinions as basis for political decisions. It is a core task for adult education to support the establishment and maintenance of such publics in all spheres of society, and to help citizens acquire the competences needed. In forming opinions, citizens and publics need to be able to grasp the interrelations between structures and processes in society as a whole on one hand, individual life courses and troubles on the other. They also need to be able to transgress the immediate reality and its options, to imagine how societies and lives could take different turns, both in negative and positive directions. Imaginative fiction literature can help critical social science and adult education in promoting such social imagination.

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