

## *Book Review*

# From Humanity to Knowledge Society: The Journey of the Adult Education Paradigm in: *Global and European Adult Education Policy: Paradigms, Concepts, and Approaches*, by Katarina Popović<sup>1</sup>

In her latest book, Katarina Popović, Professor of Andragogy at the University of Belgrade, and Secretary General of the International Council for Adult Education, gives herself an colossal, and very timely task of analysing the historical developments and contemporary trends in global adult education policy, and their implications for the regional and local contexts, and the academic field of adult education research alike. She completes this task with much gusto. With her feet planted both in academia and policy circles, Popović has a unique vantage point from which to analyse the changing world of adult education, and she is using it to her best advantage, painting the global policy landscape in great detail, and with great verve. This results in eight ingeniously titled chapters in which the author maps the contextual development of the concept through its various iterations.

The analysis takes major global policy actors (UNESCO, World Bank, OECD, EU, and the international third sector) as a point of departure, competently weaving together detailed explanations of the actors' preferred styles of governance – including policy creation, diffusion, homogenisation, monitoring, and support – in the individual, national, and global struggle to secure the knowledge in the fight against postmodern uncertainty (pp. 30–34). Importantly, the author reflects in particular on the historical positioning, influence, and the power play between these actors, and its effect in creating connections and antagonisms between different concepts launched throughout the past six decades or so: adult education, continuous education, recurrent education, lifelong education, and its

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<sup>1</sup> Popović, K. (2014). *Globalna i evropska politika obrazovanja odraslih: koncepti, paradigme i pristupi*. Beograd: Institut za pedagogiju i andragogiju, Društvo za obrazovanje odraslih.

contemporary iteration in *lifelong learning*, and in thus transforming the field of (adult) education and reshaping the ways of the learning self.

Distinguished from its conceptual predecessors the current, seemingly minor alteration with the focus on learning, creates, in one of the book's main arguments, a new vehicle for the neo-liberal development agenda, in which knowledge is highly functional, montesiable, and most importantly, the responsibility of the individual with the notion of the greater (economic) good for themselves and the society, as the chief motivator of (primarily) individual development. Such changes, the author argues, have led to the post-structuralist, seemingly post-institutionalist (at least in the way of execution) approach to education, with the sites of learning becoming diffused, and the learning activity self-directed and self regulated (p. 122). Alongside this argument, Popović also reflects on the effects of the diffusion of sites of learning, and responsabilitisation of the individual, on the science of adult education, potentially rendering it redundant altogether. In this way, the book never veers from one of its proclaimed aims, which is considering the implication of the concept development not just for the global learning community, but for the educational paradigm and the adult education discipline as well.

The rich contextual, historical, and institutional analysis enables the author to provide strong support to her reservations towards the adult education discourse change; she certainly is not lonely in providing a critical view of these trends, but the way in which she does it is thorough, innovative, and pertinent. One of its greatest contributions lies in a nuanced approach to adult education policy development through a prism of intersecting analyses of the adult education research conceptualisation and methodology (with a strong focus on the distinction, or indeed lack thereof, between policy and politics) and the ongoing changes in education policymaking that come as a result of a post-structural diffusion of power and governance between the state, the private sector, and the supranational entities. Another is in the author's inter-national positioning, which enables her to dissect the topic using multiple linguistic, cultural, and academic tools. This results in a comprehensive and well-balanced overview of the topic's treatment from diverse cultural and academic – including, without wanting to sound atomistic, non-Western – perspectives.

From re-building the world post-WWI to looking beyond the Millennium Development Goals, from UNESCO's 'softer' and more inclusive approach, reflected in the early postulate of 'education in the service of peace and humanity' (p. 38), to the rising influence of the World Bank and its effect on the neoliberalisation of educational discourse, we are given a somewhat discomfoting portrayal, as if in a room of distorting mirrors, of what it means to be a learner, to

learn, what knowledge is, and what its purpose is supposed to be; we are shown how this is influenced by the economic and geo-political trends and decided on a global scale, but on a very uneven playing field, with different rules for different players.

Beyond criticism of the WB's neoliberal, unidirectional, and almost neo-colonial (as the author notes on p. 253) ways, which is truthfully not entirely unusual in educational research, particular attention seems to be given to the elite club that is OECD and its enthusiasm for comparisons and rankings, its technocratic approach instrumentalising education into a way of providing the individual with a set of tools and competencies, and producing very specific – and potentially most widely internalised (hence the concern) governance mechanisms that measure, but at the same time (re)create the goals of education. Of PISA, applicable to its adult education counterpart PIAAC discussed later in the text, the author says: 'PISA diagnoses, but it also creates, it studies, but it also carries with it a cultural dictum; in this way, it confidently redefines basic concepts – of how we see learners, learning, knowledge, curriculum... With very concrete consequences, for example in curriculum restructuring' (p. 134). This is an observation that could easily be extended to any and all of the players described in this book, but relevant to OECD due to its rising influence (see, e.g. pp. 140–1 for the comparison of the extent of participation and influence of OECD-produced PIAAC with that of UNESCO-produced GRALE, and UNESCO's recent acceptance of some of the efficacy and efficiency narratives and advocacy of a stronger cooperation with OECD and the WB).

In the meantime, EU, with its overt focus on unity, cooperation, and stability, is seen to have embraced what the author recognises as a neoliberal form of the concept of lifelong learning, possibly due to the fears surrounding Europe's competitiveness alongside the US and the Asian tiger economies. Although Popović is not neglecting the more humanist discourse constructed in the, for example, Lisbon strategy, she wryly asks whether 'this new, upgraded, upskilled, trained, and reskilled [*Homo Economicus*] would also manage to be innovative, proactive, creative, and critical [...]' (p. 176).

In the final chapters, Popović turns to INGOs in all their diversity and lobbying power, noting in particular their power of creating a forum for other, supra- and inter-governmental actors to meet with the bottom-up demands, contributing thus to the 'democratisation of global governance' (p. 228), offering a diversification of approaches to the question of adult education, and some alternatives (including feminist, postcolonial, environmental) to the dominant discourses constructed by the actors discussed earlier in the text.

A prospective reader would be incorrect in assuming that the volume before them is a cynical, defeatist cry of the academic left. In her concluding remarks, Popović very soberly, and quite pragmatically, asks about the purpose and the future of adult education, both as a concept and as a discipline, in the world portrayed in the previous 300-strong pages. Reflecting on the current economic, environmental, security and geopolitical crises faced by us all, she invites a more constructive grappling with challenging issues, a more productive dialogue, and a more proactive, engaged attitude from the academic community, in a plea not to let the beautifully coined ‘unbearable lightness of indifference’ (p. 306) leave the future of adult education in the hands of others.

In spite of its sardonic veneer, this review of contemporary policy developments does not leave behind a barren wasteland depiction of the adult education’s multifarious potential – on the contrary, at its best, it gives both the scholars and the bureaucrats sharp tools to continue carving it out. Thorough in its background research and confident in handling the different iterations of the concept, but relentless in its cool assessment of the current trading in the term and its many uses and users, this book is a necessary read both for those wading through the murky waters of adult education, and those only beginning to dip their toes. Perhaps the best way to describe the author’s cautious, yet hopeful attitude is in its nurturing, what a young andragogy student recently described as healthy pessimism. In these days of seeking easy fixes and quick solutions to deep-rooted problems of inequality, insecurity, and power imbalance, or indeed, resorting to giving them an ivory tower treatment, everyone who is a part of the adult education discourse – and we all are – could do with a healthy dose of it.

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