

Keynote

Negotiating risk and hope in modern societies: Adult education as a democratic resource

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In a paper given some thirty years ago German sociologist and philosopher Oskar Negt posed the question: 'What does a worker need to know and understand in order live and act in a good way in the contemporary world?' (Negt, 1989). He raised this question especially in the context of his lifelong involvement with adult education. The contemporary world he referred to was the 1980ties with rising unemployment, but he saw signs of crisis at a more fundamental level, arguing that layers of motivation, social cohesion and belonging in people's everyday lives are steadily being eroded away by the pressure from modern capitalism with its markets and policies. 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 the capitalist work ethic, and when they find themselves workless, it has damaging consequences for their identity. Another example is the realization that the welfare of modern societies has often been produced at the expense of long-time damage to the natural environment. Negt proposed a number of key competencies that workers needed to handle this situation, among them the the ecological competence to handle people and things with care and the historical competence of remembering previous conditions and situations as well as imagining lives and communities different from the ones experienced today.

Negt's question, his analysis and proposals have not lost their relevance today. There are many different modern or modernizing societies, but imbalances and risks are found in all of them, confronting adults in their everyday lives. Establishing and upholding forms and institutions of adult education and learning that help adult citizens confronting these challenges is a key task for education policy, a task that also implies the promise of more just, democratic and sustainable societies.