This chapter addresses Theme 1 of the Hamburg Declaration: Adult learning and democracy: The challenges of the twenty-first century.

Subjects to Citizens: Adult Learning and the Challenges of Democracy in the Twenty-First Century

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Theme 1 of the Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning boldly proclaimed that active citizenship and full participation of all citizens was the necessary foundation for “the creation of a learning society committed to social justice and general well-being” (UNESCO, 1997, p. 4). The Declaration advocated that future societies create “greater community participation”; raise “awareness about prejudice and discrimination in society”; encourage “greater recognition, participation and accountability of non-government organizations and local community groups”; and promote “a culture of peace, intercultural dialogue and human rights” (pp. 11–13). The comparative document from the most recent CONFINTEA VI conference—the Belém Framework for Action (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2009)—while committing itself to creating mechanisms for civil society involvement in decision-making, has muted and toned down the boldness of the earlier Declaration. Indeed, one can detect considerable hesitancy regarding active, engaged citizenry in language such as “constructive and informed involvement” and engagement where “appropriate.”

This chapter will accent the Hamburg Declaration’s prominent emphasis on promoting active citizenship through a vitalized civil society and open public spheres through examining two recent examples. Both the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement provide a window to examine the state of participative democracy in 2012 and reveal a deep-seated aspiration to “become more involved in public decisions, through various practices and instruments that will make them more mature players, better able to cooperate with one
another” (Allegretti, 2012, p. iv). In the Middle East uprisings, one of the modes of participative democracy—“participation by storm” (protests and occupation) has taken precedence over “participation by invitation” (venues where citizens are “given the right” to express their views; Ibarra & Ahedo, 2007, p. iv). Challard (2011) observes pointedly that the flow of people pouring into the Middle Eastern streets was not influenced by a “single dime of aid earmarked for democracy” (p. 6). He maintains that Western aid is mostly for the military and that professionalized forms of activism reduced “civil society to the realm of bureaucratic NGOs and formalized ‘grassroots’ institutions” (p. 6). Thus, public spheres had to be created through civil disobedience. This latter form of learning and struggle is seldom mentioned in UNESCO policy documents. In fact, the gap between policy statements and decision-making processes ought to provoke adult educators to consider how they might nurture the moral and ethical motivation to act justly in an evil and degraded world.

The Hamburg Declaration centered around two key concepts: globalization and civil society. Prior to 1997, globalization had received little attention in UNESCO conferences. However, CONFINTEA V recognized that something new and disturbing was beginning to appear in the world’s economic order: “True economic globalisation invokes a qualitative shift toward a global economic system that is no longer based on autonomous national economies but on a consolidated global marketplace for production, distribution and consumption” (Korsgaard, 1997, p. 11). The second key concept introduced at the Hamburg conference was civil society. The term carried hopefulness: no matter how oppressive the state might appear, citizens could communicate their ideas of a different world through underground writings, clandestine meetings in living rooms, and coalesce into a disruptive force at the right moment. Those interested in social learning theory worked hard to understand the nature of a legally constituted civil society and the role of social movements, civil disobedience, and public spheres in enabling citizens to acquire voice to articulate their needs and press these demands through the gateway into state decision-making.

Adult educators discussing these concepts at CONFINTEA V could not have imagined what the following 15 years would be like for participative democracy. They probably expected the neoliberal global economy named in the 1990s to chug along with periodic awful crises. But no one expected the world to be teetering on the edge of the destruction of the “institutional framework of globalization and undermining of the post-1989 international order” (Davis, 2011, p. 6). Or imagine that the new century would begin with the crashing of hijacked jets into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania by terrorists acting in the name of Islam or that Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda would become familiar names throughout the world.

Then, quickly following the horrific events of 9/11, the United States and its allies invaded Iraq and Afghanistan. The invasion of two Islamic countries corroded the spirit of democracy: the U.S. government thought it could impose “democracy” on the countries they had invaded and forced a
national-security regime on their own citizens. Most significantly, 9/11 cast its very dark shadow over the entire decade. The “war on terror” shaped its mood—morose and melancholic. In academic circles, a veritable revolution occurred—suddenly the old secularization thesis of the 1980s and 1990s collapsed. Religion could hardly be understood to be a private affair anymore. Stunned academics shook off the dust and began to rethink revered assumptions about the role that religion was really playing in the entire world—Muslim worlds, Africa, Latin America, the United States, and not just “exceptional Europe” with its beautiful and empty churches. Those framing the Hamburg Declaration—calling for the building of cultures of peace and intercultural dialogue and respect—had their hopes dashed as religious intolerance intensified through the decade, culminating recently in September, 2012 in worldwide Islamic violent reaction to the crudely made anti-Islam video by American right-wing extremists. Today, a burgeoning literature (for example, Butler, Habermas, Taylor, & West, 2011; Habermas, 2002; Habermas, Brieskorn, Peder, Ricker, & Schmidt, 2010) argues that participative democracy (the form with greatest affinity to adult education thought) is inconceivable without religious and secular persons accepting each other as equals in public debate and consideration. A “culture of peace” requires that this happen. And adult educators everywhere must institute social practices and design pedagogical instruments to reconcile those engaged in sectarian conflict and violence.

For a society to be authentically democratic, its civil society and public spheres must be legally constituted. The rights of freedom of speech and assembly must be entitlements of the citizenry. Voluntary associations, social movements, and public spheres must be permitted, and the right to protest civilly against various government policies must be in place. The military must be under the rule of law. Those who govern must be accountable for their actions. If these roughly set out criteria are taken as benchmarks, then any scan of the world would reveal that very few societies are democracies. Even the liberal democratic countries now in the grip of neoliberal ideas and practices have made it extremely difficult for a normally functioning civil society to have much influence over government policies. The chasm between civil society and the state in liberal democratic countries has grown very wide between 1997 and 2012. The gateways or sluices from civil society to the state (or the reverse) have either collapsed or been left in tatters.

For Elizabeth Anderson (2011), “The attacks [on the World Trade Center and Pentagon] were used to rationalize a massive expansion of the national security state, an unwarranted war in in Iraq, a quagmire in Afghanistan, torture and abuse of prisoners, extraordinary rendition of terrorism suspects, indefinite detention of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, and the use of cluster bombs and drone attacks that has resulted in massive civil casualties” (p. 23). She thinks that the corrosion of democratic spirit has continued by the failure to close Guantanamo Bay, shift terrorism trials to civil courts or even prosecute government officials who ordered torture. The warfare state is growing, not receding. Habermas (2006) agrees: “In the United States itself, the
administration of a perpetual ‘wartime president’ is already undermining the foundations of the rule of law” (2006, p. 34). Like other American critical scholars, Anderson (2011) believes that

The central institutions Americans count on to check abuses of state power—laws promoting transparency in government, a vigorous, skeptical press; competitive press; competitive political parties; an independent judiciary empowered to enforce constitutional rights failed to check the political dynamics of fear-mongering. (p. 24)

The mighty republic has become the “Quiet Republic”—there is hardly any public deliberation on these serious matters.

**Arab Spring**

History is full of surprising moments when revolutionary possibility breaks through cement roadways and radical new directions (or political imaginaries) are opened up. Before animosity to political Islamists willing to harness terror to “religion” had died down, the unthinkable occurred in the Middle East. In early December 2010, Mohamed Bouazzi, a Tunisian university graduate who had failed to gain a permit to sell his vegetables and fruit, doused himself with fuel and set himself ablaze. This very ordinary moment of everyday life (facing the tangle of bureaucracy) transformed into something extraordinary. Bouazzi became a potent symbol of the humiliations, indignities, and oppression suffered by millions living in authoritarian dictatorships in the Middle East (and elsewhere, too). In January 2011, hundreds of thousands of protesters, mostly young, poured into the streets to attempt to topple their dictatorial regimes. Within months, Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt were gone. In the springtime euphoria, Mustafa Barghouti (2011), head of the Palestinian Medical Relief Committee, wrote that the “revolutionary tidal wave, which began in Tunisia and Algeria, reached its crest in Egypt and is currently sweeping other countries such as Libya and Bahrain” (p. 1). He thought that “great revolutions cannot be made. They erupt, like volcanos, atop of the mounting force of huge and long-suppressed social and political contradictions” (p. 1).

Those who study the Arab world know well the roots of Arab unrest and the various historic struggles for constitutional democracy in its past. The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) has published reports that document a litany of disturbing abuses that have characterized 12 countries in the Arab world (Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and the occupied Palestinian territories). Its most recent report (CIHRS, 2012b) cites the deteriorating state of human rights, the lack of political will to advance human rights, stagnant legislatures, perpetuation of authoritarian approaches to entrenching impunity
for gross violations, state of emergency used to justify serious crimes (such as extrajudicial killings, abductions, and involuntary disappearances), continuing policies that cement and perpetuate rule or hereditary succession, falsification of citizens’ will through rigged general elections, and the blocking of freedom of expression.

A revolutionary moment opens the world’s window, drawing people into a social learning process that can awaken them to see with new eyes. Arab people have been suffering, suffocating, and struggling under authoritarian rulers forever. For example, Palestinians continue to be the targets of egregious abuse by Israel, Yemenis were encountering social and political unrest before the people took to the streets and faced machine guns, Egypt has been in a “state of emergency” since the early 1990s, Syria has a nasty history of destroying any political opposition, Saudi Arabia represses religious freedoms and its Shiite minority faces systematic discrimination, and the Bashir regime in the Sudan commits war crimes in Darfur. Against this ghastly backdrop, the Arab Spring cracked through the fear in the name of human dignity and freedom and justice. It might be called the “dignity revolution”: millions of Arabs had experienced the indignities of neoliberalism and decades of repression (CIHRS, 2012b). Then the dam burst.

The revolution was, in fact, partly about bread (in Egypt the cost had risen astronomically) and partly about the arising of a “younger generation of activists, both in the West and in the Arab world, [who] was increasingly asserting itself and forging a more nuanced discourse” (LeVine, 2012, p. 2). The young activists whose faces were observed in Tahrir Square had moved beyond those old Nasserite, hard left, or Islamists who had focused their attention on the role of Western imperialism in the plight of the Arab world. They were right to do so: the West—as was revealed brazenly in the Arab Spring uprisings—supported the dictatorships because they preferred stability and not democracy. But by 2006, the young activists were calling for a new Arab movement for change (LeVine, 2012). They wanted to focus on protecting their own fragile civil societies against repressive governments. At this time, Internet-friendly grassroots movements such as Kefaya were a crucible for creating new forms of action and discourse that would help launch the January 25 revolution.

Egypt’s neoliberal policies had triggered revolts in industrial cities such as Mahallah in 2006 and 2008, as well as in Gafasa, Tunisia in 2008. Militant labor activists—who had a long history of anti-government resistance—joined with the “cyber-generation of civil society activists to form movements such as April 6, and together would provide the nucleus of the ‘movement of movements’ that would form the revolutionary coalition of late 2010 and 2011” (LeVine, 2012, p. 3). The financial crisis of 2008 legitimated anti-neoliberal movements in Europe and North America. The intensity and depth of the crisis in the Arab world, linked with its history of authoritarian regimes, sparked the revolt. Thus, we can understand the Arab revolution through
using creatively the two concepts of globalization and civil society apparent in the *Hamburg Declaration*.

Now, almost two years after the January revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia (with fighting and mayhem still continuing in Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere), the balloon full of revolutionary hopes and dreams has lost air and returned to Earth with questionable gains:

Over the past three years, the Arab and Muslim world—from Morocco to Iran, from Syria to Yemen—seems to have witnessed more mass demonstrations than in the entire history of all postcolonial nation-states combined. Where do Iranians and Arabs—and, by extension, the rest of the Muslim world—stand today after shedding their fear of brutality, risking everything for a better, yet uncertain, future for themselves and their children? (Dabashi, 2012, p. 1)

This question is stirring up a mighty storm of debate throughout the Middle East and beyond. The CIHRS fourth annual report (2012a), which analyzes the state of human rights in 2011 in the 12 previously named Arab countries, points out:

It is clear that the achievements of the Arab uprisings have not equaled the sacrifices made by the peoples who rebelled in search of freedom, social justice, and human dignity. With the exception of Tunisia, the choices facing these peoples seem limited to narrow reform of old regimes or the hegemony of Islamist factions over the institutions of governance and the erosion of the foundations of the civil state. (para. 1)

The people have removed the symbols of tyranny in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. That is only the initial “disclosing of a new sense of solidarity and a reinvigorated notion of citizenship” (Challard, 2011).

The Egyptian case illustrates some hard truths about making a revolution. Revolutions are not made on Facebook or in cyberspace but through hard and long organizing on the ground, face to face. Perhaps some of the youth and others who made the revolution, gathering repeatedly in Tahrir Square, were naïve to think that the old regime (led by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces [SCAF]) would just fade away. It didn’t: the revolutionaries could not agree on a new constitution. They thought they could remove Mubarak without changing the regime, they did not provide a “unified front” to the old regime (they fragmented and splintered into Islamists, nationalists, liberals, and leftists), and the Muslim Brotherhood got greedy and tried to dominate the legislature. This provided SCAF the opportunity to “recover its force, unify its assets and move centre-stage once again” (Bishara, 2012, p. 1). These events happened through the summer and early fall.

As I write this chapter in mid-December 2012, Morsi has trumped SCAF and declared himself above the law and offered a contentious draft
constitution to the Egyptian people for voting. Egypt is undergoing a trying and difficult post-revolutionary learning process. Once again Tahrir Square is filled with tumultuous and edgy demonstrations—roughly dividing into the Muslim Brotherhood supporters on one side and leftists, secularists, and liberals on the other. After 60 years of singular rule, Egyptians are learning to disagree. Larbi Sadiki (2012), professor of Middle East Studies at the University of Exeter, counsels us to see that the

cries of freedom and dignity should not be orientalised into inhospitality to democracy, as many argue today. Rather, every riot, every protest, and every demonstration manifests forms of horizontal politics without which resistance and interrogation of old hierarchies and attendant power relations cannot be enacted. (p. 1)

Many voices are crisscrossing in the public square as Egyptians learn how to dialogue and compromise without excluding the other. Egyptians are struggling over the appropriate constitutional form that recognizes historic traditions and caters to all in society. They are also battling over the role of the courts and their legal system. They are also grappling intensely with the role that religion should play in Egyptian society. As we glance backward to remember the violence and bloodshed attending the historic struggles for democracy in France and the United States, we are reminded that constructing the appropriate vertical and horizontal institutions and learning processes is extremely challenging (in the Middle East and everywhere else).

The Occupy Movement

2011 may go down in history as the “year of occupations.” In May, Spaniards filled the square at Puerto de Sol in Madrid. Initiated by the Real Democracy Now organization, the indignados protested against their inegalitarian economic system, a democracy that no longer represented them and the evident “financial coup” that simply placed unelected men from the financial sector into important positions. The occupation of the Puerto de Sol Square lasted a month. Adult education in the form of general assemblies, discussions, and working groups attracted thousands of people. After the initial gatherings, the movement named itself 15-M. A nonpartisan social movement, 15-M catalyzed significant public debate through setting up assemblies in various neighborhoods and presented a flood of proposals to engage the public in the Spanish election. Influenced by the Arab Spring (if they can do it, why not us?), the 15-M movement in turn inspired the Chilean students to take to the streets to protest their government’s neoliberal policies of privatized public education: one more expensive commodity. The Chilean student movement “staged some of the biggest popular demonstrations since Chile returned to democracy; it spread to families and high schools and raised questions about
inequalities and tax reform as well as representation in the political system” (Kempf, 2012, p. 14).

Kempf (2012) perceptively observes “that feeling of unease about a political system slipping from the control of citizens, and even more of wealth being monopolized by an oligarchy, provoked the launching of the Occupy Movement, with Occupy Wall Street (OWS) in New York on 17 September” (p. 14). Several hundred people gathered in Manhattan’s financial district and found themselves near Zuccotti Park, a small square surrounded by towering skyscrapers, close to Ground Zero. Someone suggested that a general assembly be held there—as in Greece and Spain. Rare for the United States, Americans began conversations about politics on the streets and in public spaces. The OWS movement grew—with more general assemblies and working groups—these ragged kinds of collective learning processes are difficult to assess. At the base of the occupation movements is the powerful idea that actually occupying public space is the fundamental way to be heard. That was enough for some; others were pressed to think of other forms of action (particularly when the police used violence to rid Zuccotti Park of its residents).

Kempf (2012) acknowledges the diversity of initiatives and ideas in OWS and documents other outcomes—such as “Occupy Our Homes,” a “US-wide event to reclaim empty houses that had been foreclosed by banks” (p. 14). But he correctly claims that “inequalities and the crisis of representation in the political system” lay beneath these protests and that OWS was a “movement of movements,” able to draw attention to other campaigns that would not have had as much impact without OWS support” (p. 15). The Occupy Movement spread to many cities in Canada, the United States, and Europe: Occupy London, camped around St. Paul’s Cathedral, targeted the London Stock Exchange. Now Egyptian activists could text their American, European, or Canadian comrades on their streets, developing new forms of cosmopolitan solidarity.

Conclusion

Since Hamburg 1997, we have witnessed startling, distressing, exhilarating, and modestly hopeful events. Globalization (in its neoliberal form) and the endless humiliations of tyrannical dictatorships intersected at (impossible to predict) “revolutionary moments” unleashing an intense social learning process that manifested in collective action in the massive gatherings in various public squares in the Middle East. These public spaces precipitated complex forms of consciousness-raising and steeled the courage of those facing armies, thugs, and police. The reaction of the regimes to the collective protests led, in turn, to deepened understandings of the nature of the regime and what they had to take into account to change the regimes. As the Egyptian case illustrates, the question of how the transition to authentic, constitutionally grounded new societies occurs has not yet crystallized.
This brief analysis of the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement indicates that we are living in a time of disorder, mayhem, and instability. The regimes in the Middle East are still in a process of becoming, and it is not clear whether they will take on a participative shape. The United States does not have control over what is happening. It prefers stable dictatorships and not authentic democracies. The U.S.–Israeli threat to bomb Iran’s alleged nuclear bomb–producing facilities shadows the Middle East as does the sectarian war in Syria (with the great powers divided over support for the present regime). And the role of Islamist political movements in the uprisings (and non-Islamic forms of extremism in other settings) threatens orderly unfolding to a secular state respecting all religious and secular orientations. But there will be no return to the status quo ante: a new imaginary has broken into the Middle East and, we dare think, into the rest of the world as well. Canadian scholars Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor (2011) argue that we must “learn to coexist and, ideally, to establish bonds of solidarity. We believe in an ethics of dialogue respectful of the different moral and spiritual options.” This disposition is “best able to promote that learning process” (p. 110).

References


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