

**“ADULT LEARNING & COMMUNITIES IN A WORLD ON THE MOVE: BETWEEN NATIONAL TENSIONS AND TRANSNATIONAL CHALLENGES”**

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**The contradictions of populism: reasserting adult education for democracy**

The context for this paper is the rise of populism across the UK, Europe and the US, a trend which is sweeping western liberal capitalist democracies in particular but also beyond in countries such as Turkey. Populism is used primarily as a derogatory label to demean the poor, working class groups and people with low educational attainment, as not having the experience or capacity to make wise decisions. In the UK this has led to demands for a second referendum on leaving Europe because the 'will of the people' was manipulated. It is also claimed that Parliament is sovereign so the decision to exit Europe should be made by its members who are better informed and can legitimately overturn the referendum decision. On the other hand, demagogues of the far right who led campaigns of disinformation and thinly veiled racist vocabulary to sway the Brexit result champion the 'will of the people' in disingenuous ways. If we widen our lens there are also examples of progressive populist politics in Europe, such as Podemos in Spain and as evidenced by recent demonstrations in Catalunya for increasing migrants to the region, which are indicative of a counter-trend to the neoliberal model of globalisation. Whilst populism is mainly used as a derogatory label it can also be framed progressively as a response of the powerless, the poor and the ignored reacting to the limits of liberal democratic institutions in the current context. The election of Trump in the US and the Brexit result in the UK can be understood in these terms too. The repressed, overlooked or denigrated by the political and media elite, have responded at the only opportunity available to them. At the same time, the kind of social purpose adult education which aimed to engage with people in communities, on their own terms, has withered as neoliberal forms of lifelong learning and citizenship transform educational practices into 'remoralising' citizens to take care of themselves. In this context adult education and democracy are in crises. However, both crises can be turned towards generating productive synergies which adult educators need to connect with. This presentation seeks to explore and stimulate this debate.