CHAPTER 3

ADULT EDUCATION AND CITIZENSHIP –
A CONTESTED TERRAIN

Citizenship is a contested terrain, very much linked to configurations of power, and often, as in the case of progressive literature, associated with contributions made by individuals and groups/movements to the democratic public sphere. This entails an engagement in the ongoing struggle to safeguard public spaces from the onslaught of privatisation and commodification (Giroux, 2001). It also involves transforming hitherto undemocratic and exclusive structures into more democratic and inclusive ones. Adult education for citizenship, in this context, is a democratic education, one in which students learn about democracy not simply by talking about it but by engaging in a democratic learning experience governed by non-hierarchical social relations of education. This is in keeping with John Dewey’s (1916) over-arching concept of education for democracy.

The struggle for the democratisation of educational opportunities is also connected to the issue of citizenship: the ability of more people to benefit from an education that provides, as we argue in Chapter 8 on Competences, not only the skills and competences to earn a decent living but also the disposition and critical literacy necessary to enable persons to contribute to the workings of an ever evolving democracy. In this regard, we have been exposed to the idea of citizenship that is tied to not only notions of “thin democracy” but, in a number of contexts, a much more robust sense of democracy, referred to in Chapter 8 as “thick democracy.” We note that the Porto Alegre, Brazil, experience of a participatory democracy centring around a participatory budget (PB), and that entails a “deliberative democracy” (Gutman & Thompson, 2004), is in keeping with the idea of a thick democracy (Gandin & Apple, 2002). Historically speaking, the world has witnessed struggles for industrial democracy, the attainment of basic civil rights, greater access to power structures for traditionally disenfranchised groups and the reconfiguration of institutions to accommodate different needs, forms of knowing, and action. All these were linked to struggles over the meaning of citizenship.

As far as education is concerned, schools, universities and the more progressive forms of adult education were conceived of as vehicles for greater participation in the polis. The ideas of bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins in the United States, Raymond Williams and R.H Tawney in Britain, Don Lorenzo Milani, Aldo Capitini (with his concept of “omnicrazia”–grassroots democracy– and his centres for social orientation (COS) throughout Umbria) and Danilo Dolci in Italy, Mary Arnold
and Mable Reed in the Antigonish Movement in Canada, Myles Horton and his citizenship schools at Highlander and Eduard Lindeman, both in the USA, and Paulo Freire, Frei Betto and Bettinho (Herbert Jose de Soúza) in Brazil, to name just a few, served this purpose admirably.

It is, however, not just individuals but also organisations within social movements which provide beacons of light in this context. People working within movements, especially the women’s movement, refer to the work of collectives as sources of inspiration for a notion of education for citizenship that owes no special indebtedness to cult, often predominantly male, figures/gurus. One only has to think of the leadership of Les Madres in Argentina, who have worked on behalf of mothers of the disappeared, as well as global leader Vandana Shiva in the environmental movement in India.

Some would argue that “education” has to be viewed critically, and has western colonial connotations. They prefer the term “learning” in this context and for a reason which is diametrically different from that expounded through a neoliberal discourse. They happily and perhaps often romantically refer to the myriad ways by which everyday people learn through their daily living and subsistence work in the fields of Chiapas and other Southern contexts, escaping “education” in its institutional and predominantly “Western” form (see Prakash & Esteva, 1998). These people therefore engage in a notion of citizenship that does not fit within the dominant totalising paradigm “reflective of the modernist nation state. It is a “grassroots post-modern” notion of citizenship characterised by difference and myriad learning webs (shades of Illich) intended to enable the disenfranchised regain and reclaim the “commons” (Prakash & Esteva, 1998).

The UNESCO “master concept” of lifelong education (and not the more narrowed concept of lifelong learning that dominates international policy discourse these days; see Chapter 1) emphasised an expansive notion of education for citizenship, characterised by a participatory democracy. And yet, as explained earlier, the transition from lifelong education to lifelong learning, as a result of which less emphasis is placed on the state’s responsibility for “education for all” and more emphasis is placed on the individual taking charge of his or her own learning, with all the financial implications this might have for members of different social classes, marks a defining moment in the discursive shift that occurred with respect to education for citizenship. It certainly reflects a shift in the dominant discourse which sits comfortably with the ideology of neoliberalism, with its emphasis on individual, as opposed to social, responsibility. Recall our earlier statement that the OECD promotes this particular version of lifelong learning. For all its emphases on “social cohesion” and “active citizenship,” the EU’s lifelong learning policy discourse gestures in the same direction. This particular conceptualisation of lifelong learning is all in keeping with a very narrow notion of citizenship. It would be worth reiterating that citizenship is reduced to a matter of producing and consuming, something about which Ian Martin, Mae Shaw, and others have been writing about for years (Martin, 2001). It is an individualistic notion of citizenship based on attributes deriving from the internationally promoted doxa that, as stated