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## **Social Movements in the Era of Neoliberal Crisis as Sites for Transformative Adult Learning and Emancipation of Everyday Consciousness\***

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### **Abstract**

In the context of the ongoing capitalistic crisis in Greece, neoliberal memorandum and surveillance policies were imposed while a number of restructuring and institutional modifications were attempted, all of which intensified the general clash as well as the imposition of power relationships and efforts to ideologically manipulate the employees. This resulted in an impressive rise of social movements during the period of 2009-2015. In this paper, we study the social movements' influence to an informal and collective type of learning which adults acquire from them, whether as direct and active participants or as indirect ones. In particular, we study their influence on the ability to reform the conformist character of everyday consciousness in the prevailing social reality and on the formulation of a consciousness that is emancipated from the dominant ideology and aims on social change. The questioning of the memorandum policies does not entail, in a self-fulfilling way, the awakening and social emancipation of the participants from the opposed movements. However, the crisis overthrows the limits of the operational efficiency and compromise of everyday consciousness, thus raising disorienting dilemmas and conflicts that demand reconsideration. These processes create the conditions for a transformative learning, providing the opportunity for a meaningful connection with the very essence of phenomena, in order to achieve knowledge and comprehension of social reality. It is a fact that may lead to an active involvement and conscious aspiration to change this reality.

**Key words:** *Transformative learning, emancipation, everyday consciousness, social movements, social transformation*

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## **Introduction**

During the increasing, on a global scale, economic crisis "the optimistic apologetic ideologemes of the capitalist economy make way for a speech that is overtly authoritarian and pessimistic.... [which] uses more and more as an apocalyptic argument Margaret Thatcher's devastating 'There is no alternative' ..." (Patelis 2011, p. 18). The crisis that the neoliberal agenda and its applied policies induce, cause deep fractures which, combined with the absence of a positive and appealing prospect, lead to a generalized distress, since apart from the already miserable lower classes, the middle classes are more and more marginalised and impoverished. Moreover, the increasing unemployment and the prevailing precarious employment take away hope, especially from younger generations and thus, for many people, give a sense of living in "dark times" (Hill et al. 2016, p. 3, 28; Mayo & al. 2013, p. 680).

Meanwhile, quite often, maybe even inevitably yet not always, the people in power, according to Foucault (1982), reach a fighting state possessed by a feeling of permanent challenge and a readiness for resistance. This fighting disposition becomes evident through the collective organization and resistance of individuals, through the development of a wide range of social movements as an attempt to overcome desperation and emotional inactivity and mostly as a need to fight "...to change a world that we do not like even if we do not have a recipe for doing so" (Mayo & al. 2013, p. 680).

Indeed, the severity of the capitalistic crisis triggered a worldwide emergence of several social movements. In Greece, especially after her submission to memorandum and surveillance mechanisms, signs of public uprising and protest were apparent quite early and were the answer to such policies as well as an objection to TINA, through numerous social movements (labour movements with mass strikes, the movement of the squares, the "I don't pay" movement, educational movement etc.). During the period 2009-15, these movements had a notable rise, were mass and fierce since they expressed the discontent and resistance of an extended majority of employees and citizens, although since the past two years they have subsided significantly.

It is a fact that people gain, on a daily basis, either a formal learning, through educational activities and programs offered by a variety of institutions and organizations and have some type of formal or typical accreditation, or a non-formal learning through semi-structured learning activities which take place in workshops, seminars, events and training activities. They also gain an informal learning as well, through their interaction with people and situations in which they are involved in their everyday life and also in various contexts and forms of self-education, outside of educational institutions, in a spontaneous, non-organized way without planning (Sumner 2013; Rogers 2002). It is these everyday activities precisely, that capture the informal learning that takes place during the activities of the social movements as well as the ability to facilitate the accumulation of experiences which will end the alienation through collective action. Since these exact experiences and activities bring about important opportunities for a transformative learning which will emancipate everyday consciousness and will impel to action for social change (Sawan 2013, p. 545; Brookfield 2002).

In this paper we elaborate on the theoretical and conceptual analysis of social movements in relation to the adult's socially transformative learning and its contribution in social change. Specifically, it investigates the influence of social movements to the adults' learning whether they are direct, active members or indirect ones or even if they do not belong to a movement, yet are affected by them. Adults accept social movements' effects on the ability, on the one hand, to reform the conformist character of the everyday consciousness in the dominant social reality and the present juncture that binds it, and on the other hand, on the formulation of a consciousness that is emancipated from the dominant ideology and one that will aim on social change. In particular, the purpose of the present paper is to study the rise of the social movements in the period during the peak of the economical crisis (2009-2015) and their influence to the adult population's transformative learning on developing people's critical consciousness and to their ability to participate actively in the political and social change.

### **Common sense and everyday consciousness**

“Common sense” or “common logic”, a term introduced by Gramsci (1971), is always inextricably dictated by an opinion about the world. It included the common practical wisdom that is applied in an everyday context along with the

assumptions that dictate it and its context is determined based on the social classes. Therefore, different social classes have a different common sense (Winch & Gingell, 1999, p.107). Thus, the decisions that derive from it are a subjective expression of some kind of dictated public opinion. In other words, common sense is a theoretical context of assumptions, stereotypes or ideologies that helps in the decision making for an immediate resolution of the demands in conflict, however the further our quest for fundamental or comprehensive principles goes the more theoretical our deductions become (Elias & Merriam 2005, p. 5; Pring 2004, p.145).

As relevant and undifferentiated, when it comes to context, characteristics and form, according to Gramsci's term, is the term of everyday consciousness as well, which one could say that gives substance to the subjective intake of common sense (Mitsopoulou 1994). When we use the term everyday consciousness, we mean the spontaneous formulation, in a random, fractional, non-systematic way, of individual or mass ideas or else the formulation of the perceptions of the common sense which directly reflect a total of everyday situations expressing mostly, their seeming, empirical and often unconscious intake. It constitutes a theoretical context of assumptions or stereotypes or ideologies that mostly draws from direct experience (everyday practical activity, interpersonal dealing and interaction with other people), or indirect-collective experience (oral or written narrations) and/or the collective experience of the people (sayings, proverbs, various forms of folklore), often unconscious without the intervention of critical reflection based on which, everyone makes their decisions and conducts their affairs (Brookfield 2011; Pavlidis 2003a, pp. 94-5 & 2004; Elias & Pring 2004; Merriam 2005; Mitsopoulou 1994). It is formed through the dominant social-class relationships and thus expresses a consensual attitude towards, eventually, the dominant sociopolitical and economic system which, as long as it is not questioned, is reproduced. That is why these ideas are the main flow of thoughts and ideas and constitute a form of mass ideology (Pavlidis 2003a; Mitsopoulou 1994).

Everyday consciousness has a plasticity since it is renewed, modified and filled with new information that bring new ideas either scientific or philosophical or journalistic that govern people's everyday life. It is characterized by an objectified realism and a factual necessity that will facilitate the effective making

and application of decisions concerning the practical affairs of everyday life (Pavlidis 2003a, p. 95). Its ideas have a strongly inflicted, collective and empirical/factual character whose power often lays in an automatic reproduction of its self-evident individuality. For example, in order to understand its automatic, reproductive character, one can think of the widespread false perception about the name of buses with a bellows which are called “harmonica” while they, obviously, resemble more an accordion.

In this confinement of consciousness within the sustainable daily routine economy also lays the cause of insufficient knowledge of the common sense, which comprises the context of everyday consciousness, on the base of its practical functions and fails to distinguish the relevance between contradictory phenomena and processes (Pavlidis 2015, pp. 4, 12 & 2003a, p. 95). This empirical assumption of the world makes clear only the partial, the obvious, the outside-seeming side of things which comes out as finite and static while their relevance, historicity and totality elude. Plus, the more functional are the perceptions of the common sense, the more the everyday consciousness is turned into an “absolute, generalized and catholic archetype, a dogma” (Pavlidis 2003b, p. 16).

It is, thus, rational to ask: What, when, where, why and how... is the everyday consciousness emancipated? How can it be transformed into a unified thinking and action which will seek to find opportunities to dispute and change unfair social systems and the social reality that supports them? (Kincheloe & McLaren 2005, p. 291; Pavlidis 2003b, p. 98).

### **Transformative learning and emancipation of everyday consciousness**

According to the theory of “transformative learning” which was developed by Jack Mezirow as a resultant of the Freudian psychoanalysis and the Marxist sociopolitical emancipation, there is no deeper human need than understanding the meaning of our experiences (Mezirow 1991). Hence, he claims, that learning constitutes a process of meaning making, during which a former experience is used in order to give to it a new or revised interpretation which will later direct the person's future understanding, evaluation and actions (Mezirow 1996, p. 162). Transformative learning concerns the process through which we transform the meaning-making process, that is our certain frames of reference: habits of mind,

meaning perspectives, meaning schemes. Therefore, we transform the way we have learned to interpret things, our perception system, our personal ideology, the various ways of learning but also our mental or practical habits and many other dispositions which are transformed into meaning associations-views when they are used to interpret a certain situation and/or decision making concerning the passage in action. In other words, our everyday consciousness (Mezirow et al. 2007, p. 47 & 1990, pp. 1-2).

The transformation, when it comes to everyday consciousness, takes place either when we experience an “activating event” (Cranton 2002; Keen & Woods 2016) or a “disorienting dilemma”, which is triggered by a life crisis or a major life transition (Mezirow 1998; Mälkki 2012) or else when we experience a number of contradictions that provoke a “crisis” (Brookfield 2009). Moreover, it takes place when we have an accumulation of transformations in meaning schemes which lead to a significant contradiction between the meaning habit and the meaning perspective and consequently lead to a conflict that permeates people's relationship with reality. A “crisis” overthrows the sustainable daily routine economy, to such a degree that the automatized, common belief and its consequent actions are insufficient to manage effectively everyday affairs. Such an overthrow questions the limits of the operational efficiency and the conformist tendency of everyday consciousness, leading it to conflicts and raising disorienting dilemmas that demand reconsideration processes (Mezirow et al. 2007; Pavlidis 2003b).

Transformative learning presupposes *critical reflection*, through which fundamental assumptions as well as our instructional principles and the base of our reasoning are put in question. However, the fact that we use critical reflection does not entail evaluation of what we use critical reflection upon. Evaluation is the specific difference between reflection and critical reflection. Although reflection, in general, can be an integral part of the decision making process concerning actions and also can include a later criticism of this process, critical reflection cannot be perceived as an integral part of the immediate action process. It, necessarily, presupposes a gap, a distance between decision and action, through which the views will be re-evaluated and in case it is deemed necessary for them to change. Critical thinking reflection constitutes an emancipation process that will allow us to become critically aware and it is not related to how but to why we

shall act and also the reasons and consequences of our actions (Gioti & Fourlas 2014; Brookfield 2011 & 2009; Finger & Asún 2001; Mezirow 1998 & 1990).

Therefore, we should comprehend the ways in which we can use critical reflection about the way we perceive reality that is about the meaning perspectives -in grammar- and not about the meaning habits -on the surface- where unfortunately the greatest part of learning takes place (Colley et al. 2013, p. 692; Kokkos 2010; Mezirow 2003; Mezirow et al. 1995, p.131).

The overthrow of reference contexts either on a micro-, meso- or macro-level results in some kind of transformative experience for people, which at first is oriented towards the individual transformation of the meaning associations-views and afterwards moves towards the transformation of social associations-views. Actions on a personal level often include some kind of social action that, in some cases, means a collective political action (Mezirow 2003; Mezirow et al. 1995, p. 131). At the same time, transformative processes provide the opportunity for a meaningful connection with the very essence of phenomena, in order to achieve knowledge and understanding of the social reality which may lead to an active involvement and conscious aspiration for its change (Pavlidis 2003b; Mezirow at al. 2000; Brookfield 2005 & 2009).

If these processes aim only to the subject's adaptation to society and not to profoundly transform society then it is determined by the highly important establishment of the role of the dominant ideology as a critical factor for a deep understanding of the emancipation, the misleading and the obfuscation of people's everyday consciousness so as to maintain, legalize and reproduce the existing economic and social inequalities (Brookfield 2005). Such establishment takes place when this type of critical thinking is cultivated, as characteristically quoted by McLaren & Kinceloe (2005, pp. 307-312) an "evolving criticality" which will promote the understanding of the relationship between social structures and ideological and hegemonic thinking schemes that limit people's imagination and actions.

In the era of the expanded capitalistic crisis, the emergence of social movements comprises a vital space for the adult learning which, due to the escalation of conflicts and changes that the crisis brings in peoples' relationship with reality, gains, potentially, advantageous conditions for transformative learning processes.

### **Social movements as sites for adult learning**

A big part of the bibliography about the education of adults, has dealt, in the past years, with the study of the wider socio-cultural and political context inside which, adult learning takes place and it has also dealt with how the context itself forms and becomes an integral part of the learning interaction (Pavlidis 2015; Merriam 2010 & 2005; Brookfield 2002; Zald 2000; Mezirow 1998 & 1996; Benford 1997; Sleeter 1996). Indeed, some claim that the social movement is the ideal context for prompting an adult learning that aims at social justice and social change (Roy 2013; English & Mayo 2012; Hall et al. 2012; Torres 2011; Hall 2006; Holst 2002; Kilgore 1999). Particularly, today, as emphatically Preskill & Brookfield (2008, p. 199) claim, when community is made difficult by social and technological developments that force us further and further apart into a chaotic assemblage of fractured individual existences, finding ways to bring people together, disseminate alternative information and encourage collaboration and engagement is crucial to building solidarity.

Using a wider term, we could claim that a social movement is a peculiar kind of organized collegiality that seeks to change certain dimensions of the social class (Zald 2000) can be understood as Mario Diani defined (1992, p. 165) “a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflict on the basis of a shared collective identity”. It consists of a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society. The shared beliefs and solidarity are mobilized about conflictual issues, through the frequent use of various forms of protest (Della Porta & Diani, 199, p. 16). “A social movement organization (SMO) is a complex or formal organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a countermovement and attempts to implement these goals.” (Zald & McCarthy 1979, p. 2)

Among the different theoretical traditions that SMs study, three basic components of social movements have been identified: *networks of relations between a plurality of actors*, *collective identity* and *conflicting issues* (Hall 2006; Bluechler 2005; Benford 1997; Diani 1992). Most social movements try to influence the decisions of those in power while revolutionary movements, which



are a subset of the social movements, try to change fundamentally the face of power. Accordingly, the extent of change that SMs promote varies, some seek power and others fight for more fundamental transformations (Goodwin 2005).

Social movements are distinguished coarsely in two types: old and new. Old social movements are composed of the organized labour class and are class-based, practice recognized strategies such as strikes and work to rule and get involved in organized politics (Sumner 2013, p.586). However, post-war, a wide perception of compliance prevailed as a consequence of the traditional politics' dissolution, resulting in the depression of the explicit pleas for political changes that would be collectively beneficial. New social movements (NSM) emerge during the 50s and 60s and as conservatism had gained ground ideologically, they attempted to disconnect from their class basis (Taylor et al. 1992, p.554). The NSMs that emerge, like the peace or the environmental or feministic movement etc. are more issue-specific, cut across class lines, employ a wide variety of unconventional tactics and operate more outside the realm of organized politics (Sumner 2013, p. 587; Zald 2000; McCarthy 2000 in Sumner 2013, p. 586; Sleeter 1996, p. 239; Diani 1992).

Many theorists of NSMs claim that “the contradictions and structural strains identified by Marx no longer hold in the contemporary era, at least not in the manner identified by Marx, and that new structural determinates of conflict have emerged” (Crossley 2002, p. 125). NSMs emphasize on the subtopic which is deemed more important than the catholic and on dissimilarity rather than collegiality (Sleeter 1996, p. 239). The political dimension is organized around a common identity, whose autonomy and establishment of rights they seek. This collective identity draws from the common interests, experiences and solidarity among the members of a team and its building process is an important issue when it comes to the interpretation of complaints and discontent in not only the so called NSMs but in all kinds of collective actions and it is, also, connected with the development of politicized collective identities (Taylor et al. 1992). NSMs support political action as an action that questions the so far clear distinctions between the private and the public, the personal and the political (ibid). However, the political action of the NSMs that establishes this collective identity contains “the double prospect of autonomy and consolidation, but also the possibility of descent into sectarianism and political impotence” (Carroll 1997, p. 275).

SMs are learning sites of major importance (Sumner 2013; Holst 2002). People that participate in SMs gain a mutual learning from one another as well as from the overall struggling context in which they are involved under their own conditions. The learning that is associated with SMs according to Hall et al. (2011) is a learning both from people inside SMs and from people outside SMs either as a result of actions taken or simply from the very existence of the SMs. Moreover, a significant part of learning is related to the conflicts and tendencies created inside the movement while it has been found that many active members of movements are worn out and as a result they realize that no change can be achieved through them (Zielińska, Kowzan & Prusinowska 2016).

Learning in SMs, as a type of collective learning of individuals and teams that are involved in a collective action to resist the dominant status quo, to fight for social justice and for political equality or to defend or even promote a common social vision, is developed through the interaction among conflicting teams (Pavlidis 2015; Roy 2013; Sumner 2013, Hall & al. 2011; Torres 2011; Kilgore 1999). In this context, the understanding of the relationship between collective consciousness and collective action constitutes a vastly interesting issue that concerns how personal transformation can arise through collective learning and particularly, as a transformation of the everyday consciousness of the subjects involved either directly, indirectly or peripherally with the SM (Anyon 2014; Taylor et al. 1992, p. 352).

However, NSMs are socially constructed examples and thus their participants are not by default people that share a commonly structured idea. Through this perspective, there are no a priori collective political actors but instead they are created in the SMs activity context. The way in which the learning that takes place can be observed and studied, is based on the exploitation of certain analytical categories and distinctive characteristics, both for the individual like: the identity, the consciousness, the sense of duty, the sense of value, the sense of relevance and for the team like: the collective identity, the acknowledgment of the team, solidarity and organization (Anyon 2014, pp.10-11; Buechler 1995; Kilgore 1999). Furthermore, according to McAdam, McCarthy & Zald (1988), as it is mentioned in Taylor et al. (1992, p.349), emphasis should be given to the micro-motivation processes that connect the macro with micro and which generate a collective action as they substantiate the importance of bonds

among the pre-existing teams for the construction of movements and approach typeless networks, with strong bonds between them, as “the main constructional parts” of SMs. Moreover, another really interesting fact is that still latent is the understanding of the way these networks transform their members into political actors and the way the structural inequalities are translated into a subjectively experienced discontent (Taylor et al. 1992).

### **Conclusion**

The establishment of the collective identity and the involvement in collective action through SMs were historically the starting point for creating politicized identities as well as transforming and emancipating everyday consciousness. The movements that emerged in the period of the peak of the crisis (2009-2015) in Greece declined quite quickly, no matter how mass and fierce they were and no matter how severe the capitalistic crisis was. Their emphasis on the partial character of claiming through attempting to change some aspects of reality combined with the incrimination of the elevation of their agenda's class character and/or with its concealment, produced partial collectives, disconnected from their structural components and also political identities and actions. The emergence of a “left” government after the elections which played a big role in their creation, confirmed the previous education of the masses that took part in the logic of assigning the management of the “evils” of the system, which could be eliminated through negotiation and activism within the system's limits. It invested in the spontaneous emergence of a struggling condition of mostly the middle-class that was deeply affected by the memorandum policies and when they failed to fulfill the vain hopes that people had, these movements declined. Therefore, a big part of the movements of this period did not associate their struggle imperative with the profound questioning of the sociopolitical and economic system and with the class character of its imposed policies; neither did they prepare the ground for a harsh class conflict with probable serious losses. Lastly, they also did not promote a dialectical understanding of their role and actions, and/or their failure, concerning the contradictions and internal relationships as well as dynamics that were developed within them or in their circumference and concerning their ability to bring social change. Paula Allman (in Colley et al. 2013, p. 697) clarifies that “it is important for those committed to a critical transformative social vision to make

a distinction between the ‘critical/revolutionary’ action or the ‘uncritical/reproductive’ action, approaching, through the logic of dialectical materialism, the transformation of people's consciousness as a consciousness based on the internal relationship between subjectivity and collegiality, between thought and action, as a ‘unification and conflict of opposites’”.

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