

# NEW SEEDS FOR A WORLD TO COME

POLICIES, PRACTICES AND LIVES  
IN ADULT EDUCATION AND LEARNING

10<sup>TH</sup> ESREA TRIENNIAL CONFERENCE

edited by Laura Formenti, Andrea Galimberti and Gaia Del Negro



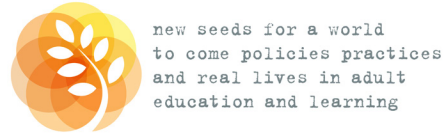
# **NEW SEEDS FOR A WORLD TO COME**

## **POLICIES, PRACTICES AND LIVES IN ADULT EDUCATION AND LEARNING**

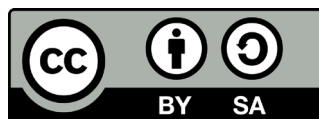
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# Radicalization and Transformation in Everyday Life. Educating the Radical Thinking

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Abstract - The pandemic has generated and increased many events of radicalization based on fake news, hate speech, new forms of populism. These phenomena have been discussed often only in the public arena and in the mass media channels as understandable points of view, in opposition to the scientific perspectives and data. For many communities or movements, the reaction has been to sustain and develop radicalized forms of thinking about the idea of freedom, the idea of democratic society and the role of the law. This paper aims to expand the idea of radicalization processes within the tradition of adult education theories.

**KEYWORDS:** Radicalization, critical thinking, education, prevention.

## 1. RADICALIZATION. GOOD AND BAD INTERPRETATIONS

As Coolsaet has recently underlined the term radicalization has become a ‘catch-all concept’ (2011, p. 261) and it has been used in the last decades as an exclusive concept of security affairs (Gallie, 1955). This notion of radicalization (and by extension violent radicalization) is today the subject of various debates both in the academia and the public sphere, with larger meaning and references. In this area of research some studies have questioned the precise meaning to be attributed to the word “radicalization”, others have criticized its scientific use (Richards, 2011) or its negative impact in the social public debate (Kundnani, 2012). The fact remains that the idea of radicalization has become a key debated notion in social sciences and now in adult learning research (Wilner, Dubouloz, 2015). Theories of adult learning and education allow us to see radicalization as a phenomenon that belongs to everyday life and they allow us to deal with the radical thoughts that we develop during our life journey as an adult. Finally, is there a good and bad radicalization? All we must do is say that if it is self-destructive, it is a desirable educational objective, or we have to go into the direction that the process must take. Radicalization stresses the direction that the adult learning process could follow. Becoming radical can be a transformational event, for individuals and society, but a dangerous journey also.

We well know the importance of the security approach and that collaboration is necessary, but goals can differ and likewise so can methods of prevention. In the book’s title we have used “everyday life” as a reminder that radicalization takes place in the initial stages of informal learning contexts. Peer groups, family, sport teams, workplaces and social media are spaces where people can radicalize their positions. In these spaces of everyday life, we can find companions, authorities, and beliefs ready to validate more radical ideas.

Each one of us can potentially develop personal, political, religious, or ethical perspectives that could be considered extreme, at least from others’ points of view.

Radical views only become problematic when they legitimize, encourage, or validate violence or forms of extremist behaviors, including terrorism and acts of hatred which are intended to promote a particular cause, ideology, or worldview. Individuals going through a process of radicalization can encourage, assist, or commit violence in the name of a specific system of beliefs because they are convinced that their assumptions are absolute and exclusive, and not framed within a personal or social history that can be re-read and re-negotiated.

The studies on radicalization are situated at the intersection of two traditions of research. On one side we have “radicalization and terrorism studies,” in which extensive and well-documented literature has developed aimed primarily at understanding terrorist phenomena, the link between this and public policies, dominant cultures, policy measures and economic systems (Antonelli, 2010). On the other hand, these studies intercept Adult Education debate, particularly referencing critical-emancipatory theories in which radicalization is interpreted as a particular form of the adoption of pre-critical thinking (Fabbri, Romano, 2021). For many years these two notions have begun to confront each other and engage in dialogue, to find spaces and ways to build a common language and multidisciplinary models in order to interpret radicalization.

Many studies ascribable to the first tradition have attempted to describe the factors that can generate and nurture radicalization phenomena but often stray by resorting to second-tier sources, producing knowledge derived, for the most part, from data already in the possession of decision makers or security officials. Even though these studies increase scientific knowledge and debate, they risk having a limited impact for those who work in the field and often use primary sources, prompting them to consider the scientific discourse on radicalization a product of knowledge that is already largely known. However, the advantage of this research is that it contributes to building descriptive knowledge (how big is the phenomenon of radicalization within a given community?) and acknowledgement, and studying the practices implemented in different social contexts (what prevention practices have developed?).

However, adult learning studies have also become increasingly involved in understanding radicalization phenomena. In recent years they have seen promising development, likely due to decreasing tension regarding specific issues of religiously-motivated terrorism and a broadening of the semantic scope of the term 'radicalization,' which was initially closely associated with the term 'terrorism'. Psycho-educational studies have made it possible to shift the focus from how to anticipate a terrorist act through intelligence strategies or the collection of preventive data considered to be predictable “signs” of violent behavior, to strategies that make the most vulnerable people resilient, help communities avoid polarizing public discourse, and train school and social service professionals in managing cultural diversity. It was a chain of thought that succeeded in developing models and deductions in the attempt to answer the question “how does a person become radicalized?”. It has offered a potential tool for reading into the process of the phenomenon that develops in stages, in levels of commitment or in the development of increasingly rigid thoughts and actions, exclusive and impermeable to diversity. Some argue that these steps have proven ineffective in predictive terms as there is no linear model that can be used to anticipate people's intentions, let alone be valid as an interpretation which disregards the kind of radicalization (religious, political, cultural, etc.) or the cultural context in which it takes shape. A new area of research and intervention shall be labeled 'micro-radicalization' (Fabbri, Melacarne, 2023).

Radicalization has, for many years, been synonymous with terrorism, with a particular focus on violent radicalization rather than radical meaning/thinking. Many other meanings in this sphere have been developed and used. For example, Schmid notes that even within scholarly and public debates not all forms of political violence are all-terrorist or all-extremist (Schmid, 2011).

Widespread uses and abuses of the term radicalization have appeared in the media and more broadly in the public sphere. This has created confusion regarding the various meanings of the term, and ultimately delegitimizing the role that some forms of radicalism have had, throughout history, in promoting democracy and social justice. It is therefore important to reaffirm the distinction between violent radicalization and nonviolent radicalization (Schmid, 2011).

We know that radicalization should not necessarily incorporate the idea that a subject performs a violent act, or that the radical position assumed may be connoted a priori as negative or dangerous. Radicalization is a situated phenomenon. Developing a radical point of view is a variable that can be understood and evaluated in connection with rights, community

practices, and the opportunities people have to discuss and contrast these ideas. People can adopt radical ideas, although they may be considered radical with respect to the social or collective norm, they are not necessarily extremist or contrary to democratic norms and values. Radicalization can also lead to different legitimate forms of democratic coexistence if the dialectic debate is allowed into a social context. What is considered radical in a social, cultural and specific historical time cannot be considered so in another. Some nonviolent radical people have played an extremely positive role in their communities, as well as in a wider political context. They have generated forms of political action based on participation, advocacy programs, awareness campaigns or groups of consciousness that grow through dialectics or critical reflection. Sometimes the progress in societies and civil rights has been the result of some form of radical thinking. But radicalization might also be better understood as an evolutionary process. Many people develop radicalized thinking through a specific life experience in a spectrum that can in no way reach violence or be closed to other points of view. People experience radicalization more or less consciously as the result of a process of sedimentation of meanings and perspectives that can become rigid and impermeable to debate, dialectics and confrontation over time. Violence can be an expression of this extreme state, where violence is interpreted as the only or right way to assert and to impose an idea.

## 2. CONCLUSION

Radicalization is not a propriety of the person (ontology) and it is not a characteristic of an environment (structuralism or culturalism). It is an emerging phenomenon from an education or learning process. Transformative learning theory can be mobilized as an interesting lens of analysis to understand radicalization phenomena. It incorporates the idea that radicalization can sometimes be interpreted as a form of distortion of thought, as an expression of rigid thinking, unable to transform. But it can also take the form of an emancipatory process of thought when it opens the doors to constructive criticism and coexistence. The transformative theory spoke indirectly of radicalization. Mezirow reported positive examples related to women's empowerment or professional development and described how transformation produced a hard reframing of the personal assumptions, following a process by which people lose a radical perspective on the relationship between women and professionals. He illustrated how the profound transformations of meaning are only partially self-destructed towards ends 'noble' as socially built.

The transformative theory also allows us to see radicalization as a phenomenon that belongs to everyday life. It allows us to deal with the radical thoughts that we develop during our life journey as an adult. The connection transformation/radicalization helps us as educators to work with people who by developing a radical thought risk turning it into violent actions.

The last point of potential development and interest is the challenge that the radicalization construct poses to the transformative theory in the ethical sense. What is a good and bad transformation? All we must do is say that if it is self-destructive, it is a desirable educational objective, or we have to go into the direction that the process must take. Radicalization stresses the direction that the learning process could follow. Being radical can be a transformational event, for individuals and society, but a dangerous journey also. Transformative learning could be explored more strictly in its relationship with values and rights as an expression of microradicalizational processes.

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