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# Building from Marx: Race, Gender, and Learning

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**Abstract:** *This symposium will examine the development of a Marxist-Feminist framework for adult education through the discussion of several ongoing research projects and is intended to contribute to the critical and feminist theorizing of adult learning and education. The authors gathered for this symposium have been collaborating on a theoretical research project in the development of a Marxist theory of education extended through feminist notions of difference, identity, consciousness, social relations, and learning. This work includes both original empirical studies and theoretical analysis to examine the sites, theories, and practices of adult education from a Marxist-Feminist perspective.*

In recent years, scholars in the field of adult education have identified a developing incoherence between the theoretical directions of the field and current global conditions wrought by the expansion of capitalism and militarism. Adult educators have been working to develop an important body of literature on neo-liberalism, capitalism, and imperialism. At the same time we are increasingly frustrated by the co-optation of the social purposes of adult education by the agendas of capital through constructs such as human capital theory, the knowledge economy, neo-liberalism and imperialism. Our capacity to resist this co-optation depends on our ability to generate transformative praxis; a unity of theory and action based in truly critical and useful forms of knowledge. Thus, the theories we use to guide our inquiries are of the utmost importance. Every theoretical framework performs the dual function of illumination and obfuscation. These lenses leave us able to see some relations and not others. This is a common consideration when dealing with theory, however we want to argue that it is equally important to consider that these theoretical frameworks also result in particular horizons of political possibilities. As adult educators we are well aware of the complex relationship between theory and practice.

Debates continue about the kind of feminist theory and politics that are employed in adult education and the political horizons they dictate. With the exception of Jane Thompson's work as an early socialist

feminist, a Marxist-Feminist framework has yet to be articulated for adult education. One of the primary purposes of the development of a Marxist-Feminist framework for adult education is to address this fracture and to provide a theoretical framework that can explain the complexity of social relations under capitalism. We argue that building a Marxist-Feminist framework for adult education will enhance the development of research in the field that works from a basis in feminist-materialist theory as opposed to the field's traditional reliance on liberal and post-structural modes of feminist inquiry. The Marxist-Feminist framework we have developed includes, thus far, five main theoretical categories: a theory of the social, a theory of capitalist relations and social difference, a theory of knowledge, a theory of consciousness and learning, and a theory of social change. These categories have been developed through extensive readings of original works of Marx, feminist theory, adult learning theory, and feminist adult education practice as well as through original empirical research.

Dominant theoretical trends in the social sciences over the last twenty to thirty years reject the idea of theorizing the social. However, in critical adult education the goal is to develop our understanding of experience in order to change actual social conditions; this necessitates that we theorize the social. To do this, we employ a notion of dialectical social relations. The ontology of dialectical social relations begins with Marx's argument that the social can only be understood as *sensuous human practice* (Marx, 1888/1991), not as structures, systems, or a 'thing' that exists outside of people. The social is a historically evolved form of social organization and human cooperation, meaning the social is organized human activity. Because we understand the social world as complexes of actual human activity and associated forms of cooperation, we use the term *social relations* to describe the social world. Social relations are both forms of consciousness and practical, sensuous, human activity (not just what we think but also what we do). These social rela-

tions are understood to exist in *dialectical* relationships. Dialectical conceptualization means looking at the social world as sets of relations between multiple phenomena accruing simultaneously at both local/particular and global/universal levels. We call these forms of social organization *modes of production*. A mode of production encompasses the entire complex of social life at a given time, including people as its productive force (how they work to produce their material existence and life) and the relations of production (how they organize themselves). Taken together, productive forces and relations of production constitute the conditions in which we work to produce and reproduce the human social world. We use the concept of mode of production in tandem with the concept of social relations so that we can understand the social as a complex, changing, historical, form of human organization. In this way we understand capitalism as a mode of production that encompasses social relations such as particular arrangements of race, gender, and labor.

One of the persistent ethical problems in Marxist educational theorizing is the issue of social difference and its relation to the labor-capital relation, class. Similar to the rest of the social sciences, the tripartite of race, class, and gender is a constant refrain in adult education. For Marxist-Feminism, accounting for social differences such as gender, race, and sexuality is of the utmost importance. A theory of difference and social relations in Marxist-Feminism addresses the question of why our social world is organized along the lines of “difference,” i.e., race, gender, sexuality, and class. We understand “difference” to exist within a social whole, a mode of production, which is a historically evolved form of social organization. We know from Federici’s (2004) work that a particular way of producing and reproducing material life cannot exist without a complete integration between all social relations. These differentiated social relations are “concretized” through specific social relations as well as forms of consciousness and concrete social practices (Bannerji, 2005). They are both “meaning” (Bannerji uses the term “connotative”) and are actual social relations. Social relations cannot be disarticulated from one another. Thus, a mode of production is constituted through this complex of concretized, differentiated social relations. Bannerji argues, “viewed thus, ‘race’ is no more or less than a form of difference, creating a mode of production through practical and cultural acts of racialization. ‘Race’ is as such a difference and it cannot stand alone” (2005, p. 152). The material, labor, is raced, sexed, “differenced.” This means that “differences” are not

transhistorical. What we mean by that is that social relations are differentiated in a specific way to a mode of production. What gender and race not only *mean*, but how they are *used to organize* social life is particular to the dialectical relationships within the mode of production. This social life, in its different mediations known as experience, forms the basis of a Marxist-Feminist epistemology.

The questions of “how we know” the social phenomena we investigate are vitally important. As long as human beings are subjected to oppression and exploitation and this subjection is tolerated, knowledge production can and will serve the interests of those who benefit from this subordination. However, knowledge production can take on oppositional forms, by which we mean the materialist critique that explain how and why certain social relations arise, operate, and dominate consciousness. For this kind of oppositional work to take place, knowledge must be understood as a historical project arising through gendered and racialized divisions of labor. Beginning with the first division of labour by gender and continuing through its racialized forms, knowledge production has become a class-based activity within the capitalist mode of production. Knowledge production is not confined to mental labour, that is, knowledge is produced by all classes. Nonetheless, knowledge production, as actual human activity, is imbued with power relations so that certain forms are legitimated and promoted as valid. This process of creating knowledge that upholds existing social relations understood by Marxism as ideology. The central relations of a Marxist-Feminist epistemology is first, the relation between science and ideology, and second, the relations between experience and consciousness.

Ideology is understood here as not just a system of ideas or thought content, but as an epistemology, a way of knowing, that abstracts and fragments social life (Allman, 1999). Ideological reasoning is accomplished through a complex of tasks that require researchers to disarticulate everyday experience from the conditions and relations in which it takes place. These dismembered bits of human life are then arranged within the framework of pre-existing interpretive notions. The concepts, categories, and theories that result from this process are then given power to frame and interpret other social phenomena. This is the process described by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* (1932/1991) and elaborated on by Dorothy E. Smith (1990, 2004) as the ideological practice of social inquiry. Ideological methods of reasoning pull apart the social world. They require that elements be removed from their relations so that they

can be theorized as abstract concepts that order our interpretation, our consciousness, of the world around us. Pulling apart the social world is a political project; such fragmentation obscures the relationships between various social phenomena and our experiences of exploitation, oppression, and violence. Ideology results in uncritical, reproductive praxis.

In critical praxis, knowledge is generated through the critical interrogation of our social world, through the examination of lived experiences and realities of individuals in conjunction with their own forms of consciousness. In this framework, theorizing and critique are essential components of knowledge production. A theory of consciousness and learning for a Marxist-Feminist perspective is actually a theory of praxis; the unity of thought and action. Praxis is a transhistorical (Allman, 1999), in contradistinction to Marxist critique of transhistorical because it is the embodiment of epistemology and ontology, as such it is a dialectical theory of consciousness in which thought, action and social relations are inseparable. To say it differently, praxis is uninterrupted process of meaning making (epistemology) rooted in our everyday experience (ontology). It is not a linear, causal, or correlation relationship between thought and action as is often depicted in experiential learning models. Because praxis is epistemological, ideological methods of thinking lead us to interpret our experiences in such a way as to maintain structures of oppression, exploitation, domination, and violence. Ideological forms of abstraction naturalize these everyday experiences as inevitable components of the human experience.

This framework is explored in this symposium through the explication of three ongoing Marxist-Feminist research projects.

### **Adult Education and/in Imperialism.**

*Shabrazad Mojab*

In this study, Mojab situates adult education today within the Marxist concept of imperialism. Imperialism is understood here not as occupation or colonization, but as the latest stage of capitalist development. What distinguishes this latest phase from previous ones is the predominance of monopolies in the major industries, the formation of financial capital through the merging of industrial and bank capital, the predominance of export of capital, the formation of international monopolies that divide the world among themselves, and the scramble of imperialist powers to re-divide the world. To put it differently, imperialism

is the transition from the early phase of *laissez faire* or free competition capitalism to the rule of monopolies.

While these structural transformations did not change the nature of capitalism, they have significant implications for the theory and practice of adult education. The rise of modern adult education is associated not with the early stages of the rise of capitalism but, rather, with the transition from *laissez faire* to monopoly capitalism. The creation of a productive and loyal national labor force was part of the nation-building process in which education played a crucial role. With the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery, the nation-state, still in the process of expansion and unification, continued to rely on immigration. The assimilation of immigrant labor and aboriginal peoples relied on both coercion and education. Mass literacy and the expansion of primary, secondary and higher education were, in part, responses to the demands of monopoly capitalism. Adult literacy, however, provided a more dynamic response to skill shortages.

There is a sizeable body of literature in adult education that provides a 'critical' engagement with capitalism. This 'critical' literature, coming from diverse approaches such as Marxist humanism, left-wing postmodernism, resistance theory, and social democracy, all recognize hegemonic relations of power, be it represented as class, race, gender, and sexual inequality, or world scale disparity denoting colonial legacies. While this body of literature is important in understanding relationships between adult education and capitalist social relations, it does not provide the analytic tools to engage in a rigorous analysis of imperialism. It is my contention that 'critical' adult education has a tendency to render capitalism invisible in its critique of the contemporary world order by neglecting the contradictory relationship between labor and capital and treating imperialism as an aberration of our times that is separate from capitalism, rather than its higher stage. Given the ability of imperialism to reproduce and renew itself, this theoretical oversight limits the ability of critical adult education to come up with a transformative revolutionary consciousness/praxis. It is not enough to recognize that bourgeois consciousness or ideology dominates educational practice and that we need to overcome this by recognizing the dialectical relationship between thought and practice. We need to make visible the particularity of imperialism in the context of the universality of capitalism, and focus on the active role of adult education in its (re-)production as well as its potential for envisioning new alternatives.

## Learning to mentor young people: a saintly vocation or an alienating experience?

*Helen Colley*

This paper revisits a study of adults learning to mentor disadvantaged young people, a significant arena that has received little attention in adult education research. All too often, the literature on youth mentoring (such as in the Big Brothers Big Sisters programme) is celebratory and uncritical, despite considerable evidence that the outcomes of these relationships are far from always happy. Here, then, I draw on our developing Marxist-feminist framework to deepen my original analysis of mentoring as a form of emotional labour, and in particular to focus on alienation as an aspect of labour in the universe of capital (Rikowski, 2002).

Firstly, I broach two ideological abstractions which form a dialectical unity of opposites: a 'saintly' concept of the mentor at the disposal of 'the Other' abstracted from the actual social relations and practices in which mentoring is embedded; and disadvantaged youth abstracted via 'empty constructions of alterity' (Hewitt, 1997) from actual young people and their lived experiences. In both popular and academic literature on mentoring, images of the mentor have become highly feminised and maternalistic, cloaking the contribution of youth mentoring programmes to oppressive welfare-to-work policies. The idealised concept of saintly caring becomes objectified and commodified in a set of values, attitudes and behaviours – 'employability' – that can be traded by both mentor and mentee as labour power.

In this context, women's classed and gendered oppression is related to the assumption that women 'naturally' have responsibility for 'caring': for the unpaid labour of reproducing wage-labour in the form of future generations, and for producing and reproducing – in part at least – the labour power of their partners and children by nurturing them (Federici, 2004). This essentialising of women and their roles is also invisibly racialised, since ideals of maternal care are largely derived from the values of privileged White people. They ignore forms of caring that have to be adopted by women who experience the harshest conditions of disadvantage, particularly those who are non-White (Thompson, 1998, Federici, 2004)..

Secondly, I consider the risk of alienation when learning entails such ideological praxis (Hochschild, 1983, Allman, 1999, Brook, 2006). Mentors' caring efforts, which implicated their very selfhood, were externalised from them and turned against them with painful consequences, as they encountered deep ten-

sions between meeting prescribed outcomes (making young people employable) and responding to the resistance their mentees pursued through independent agendas (dealing with their own pressing social and economic issues). Different mentors demonstrated different degrees of compliance and resistance to official accounts of their role. This paper focuses on Marxist-feminist theory of consciousness and learning, to explore such experiences of alienation and their inner contradictions.

## Examining the social relations of learning citizenship: Citizenship and ideology in adult education

*Sara Carpenter*

Since the American Watergate crisis in the mid-1970s, social scientists across advanced capitalist democracies have renewed their focus on citizenship as a fundamental category of political subjectivity and liberal democracy as the ideal, although troubled, form of political organization. Global conditions characterized by the mobility of capital, deindustrialization in the global north, urban resettlement resulting in mega-cities, increasing militarization, war, and migration from the global south have caused theorists to reconsider the legal boundaries of citizenship. At the same time, the uneven development of neoliberal political formations and the growth of security states have provided new grounds for governments to redefine citizen rights and entitlements, particularly civil liberties and economic security. In this milieu, educators have turned to citizenship education as a way to re-stabilize national identities, promote global solidarity, renew democratic community practice, and, in some cases, struggle against new formations of global political economy.

In the field of citizenship education, the citizen is posed as the solution to a myriad of social crises including war, migration, ecocide, poverty, and ethnic conflict. Governments across North America and Western Europe have begun to re-mandate civic education in schools, in both nationalist and cosmopolitan forms. Countless community-based programs focused on international development and conflict resolution base their practice in the development of civic agency and democratic values. Adult educators have turned towards the study of social movements as well as experiments in civil society and participatory democracy as a means for promoting of a new, more powerful, civic agent. As educators, we are experiencing the most pervasive focus on citizenship in capitalist democracies since the beginning of the Cold War.

It is imperative at this historical moment that scholars in adult education engage in a rigorous interrogation of the purposes and practices of citizenship education and seek to understand not just how people learn to be good citizens, but what kind of democracy we promote through particular forms of citizenship education.

This chapter explores current approaches to adult citizenship learning and their ideological limits by focusing on a particular civic engagement program operated by the American federal government, the AmeriCorps national civilian service program. I argue that understanding not only the ideological content of

this program, but also its ideological construction and function allow us as educators to see the extent to which citizenship education can rely on methods that abstract learners from material and social relations in order to generate a liberal democratic subjectivity and corollary political consciousness. Critique of this nature provides the groundwork for detailing a Marxist-Feminist approach to the idea of citizenship education and a shift from understanding learning as the acquisition of political skills, values, and knowledge and to a detailed articulation of how political consciousness is formed, transformed, and activated.

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