Unpacking the ideological construction of citizenship education: Creating new paths for inquiry

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In recent years, the category of 'citizenship' has become the focus of increased anxiety and attention. Citizenship education is seen by politicians, academics, and educators as a pedagogical response to the problems of a globalizing world. The vast majority of literature produced on the subject is directed towards the refinement of pedagogy, the assessment of 'citizens', or the polemics of one particular version of citizenship over another. As a thesis student interested in questions of political consciousness, I find engaging with the literature on citizenship education to be something of an onerous task. In this paper, I will demonstrate that the existing literature on citizenship education, and the approach to inquiry taken by many scholars in this field, is at its core ideological in the sense that inquiry separates the consciousness of the learner from her/his material conditions. I will then propose that the way to ground political education is to turn towards the use of dialectical feminist materialism as mode of inquiry and praxis.

Unpacking the ideological construction of citizenship education

In reviewing the literature on citizenship education, my goal is not to summarize. I would rather offer an analysis that locates the presuppositions that guide inquiry in the field. These 'thalwegs', the deepest currents in a river that guide what we see on the surface, are the key to understanding how citizenship education inquiry today is idealist in nature. The first thalweg is the preoccupation with the individual as the center of a democratic crisis and thus, simultaneously, the solution. Citizenship education literature tends to follow mainstream political debates concerning social capital, voter decline, political apathy, and a decrease of individual participation. Even in situations in which democracy is not presented as the core problem that needs to be addressed, individualized behavioral change remains the goal of citizenship education. The second thalweg is an intense focus on 'others' as the particular individuals in need of citizenship education. In most instances, the focus is youth, but there is an insidious focus on immigrant 'others', particularly on immigrant youth, as well. These individuals are often pathologized as the problem or romanticized as the solution. The third thalweg is relativism in defining citizenship. A large amount of literature is focused on offering different iterations of the ideal citizen and authors take a conflict avoidant approach to engaging with these debates. Every version of the citizen is equally good and well-intentioned; politics is evacuated. The fourth thalweg is a focus on 'disciplinizing' citizenship education. Literature focuses on the knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, or values that are considered indispensable to the good citizen.

These thalwegs, taken together, indicate a particular path of inquiry into citizenship education that reflects an overwhelmingly liberal orientation and an ideological method of reasoning. The emphases on individuals as separate from the social, the political as separate from the economic, and democracy as an aggregation, rather than collaboration, of individual behaviors, are all hallmarks of liberal political discourse. Furthermore, the attention towards creating a disciplinary body of knowledge that can be transmitted from teacher to learner in the form of 'skills' is a cornerstone of liberalized approaches to
education (Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997). Citizenship education begins in the ideal in two ways. First, it seeks to impose an ideal of citizenship through various articulations of the good citizen. By doing this, inquiry into citizenship is made idealist in the sense that it does not begin with the actual activity of people under material conditions (Smith, 1991). The actual realities of research participants and learners are abstracted and made to fit pre-existing frameworks on theoretical understandings of citizenship. The actual political consciousness, the daily life and praxis, of the learner is lost.

Creating new paths for inquiry

Engaging with this body of literature poses many barriers for those interested in pursuing a critical path of inquiry. I propose that feminist dialectical materialism offers the best way to resolve these problems. In doing this, I don’t want to follow the many fragmentations of Marxist educational theorizing that Rikowski (1997) has thoroughly analyzed. Rather, I think the work of Paula Allman, Helen Colley, Rikowski, and Dorothy Smith offer a way to actualize a Marxist ontology directed at understanding political consciousness. I understand dialectical materialism as a process of understanding a social phenomenon as being ‘made up’ of internally related, inextricable social relations. Focusing on these relations means focusing on how phenomenon continually shape and determine each other within the relation. Marx’s ontology (Marx and Engels, 1978) is itself an articulation of this dialectic. The individual cannot be understood apart from the social. Political, social, cultural activity is inseparable from material conditions. Furthermore, these relations take place with the larger relations of racialized patriarchal capitalism. Inquiry into citizenship is then understood to be ideological in the Marxist sense of negative ideology or a mode of reasoning that begins in the abstract rather than in the material, and through this abstraction, distorts understanding.

Applying a feminist dialectical materialism to citizenship education begins with changing how we understand what ‘citizenship’ is. Citizenship is no longer an abstract category of participation, a legal status, rights, responsibilities, or activity. Citizenship is a social relation specific to a particular form of capitalism taking place under conditions of patriarchal and racialized exploitation. It is a relationship of the individual and the collective, state and citizen, political and economic. Citizenship education is then understood as a process of bringing people into these relations. A feminist materialist approach to citizenship education would work not to inculcate learners into these relations, but to transform them.

The first task is then to try and understand citizenship education as a social relation, particularly as an evolving and historical relation. Following Colley’s (2000) work on appearance and essence, also articulated by Allman (2001), we need to understand how citizenship education develops historically within the political and economic context of the nation-state. In this way we can begin to understand what the core relation of citizenship is and its relation to our everyday experiences. This means thinking beyond citizenship education as pedagogy, social movements, or community practice and particularly beyond the boundaries of progressive politics. If citizenship education is seen as an array of attempts by diverse actors to inculcate a population with a particular notion of what it means to be a citizen and to construct through education the categorical boundaries of citizenship, then the project includes things not traditionally seen within the framework of formal/non-formal/informal learning. How consciousness of political subjectivity is formed must move beyond the narrow framework of individualized learning processes. Examples in the American context would include examining the colonial project of nation-building outlined by Max Weber and Benjamin Franklin, the era of Jacksonian democracy, the residential schools and First Nations assimilation programs, the Freedman schools and
vocation training, the Americanization movement and settlement houses, the cold war, the social movements of the 20th century, and even the impact of neoliberal policy. Carlson (1975) began this type of analysis 30+ years ago, but it has largely fallen away from our present analyses of citizenship learning.

Dialectical materialism shifts the focus of inquiry into citizenship education away from individualized learning processes and towards the formation of consciousness. This shift, however, is not in contradiction with the project of transformative educational and political practices. Idealist forms of citizenship education remain marginal in their effectiveness when they separate the learner from their own material conditions. The contradictions of liberal capitalist democracies remain obscured and a transformative politics cannot be engaged. Rather, dialectical inquiry into political learning gives educators a better way to understand of the totality of the social experience, a way to relate the total complexity of the political lives of learners. Only through this relationship to learning can the contradictions of capitalist democracy be confronted and its social relations transformed (Allman, 2001).

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