Learning by dispossesion: The practice of adult education in a war zone

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The context
Following the 2003 US occupation of Iraq, a considerable effort was made to implement a comprehensive ‘democracy’ training program, involving women in particular. A careful analysis of the pedagogy, practice, and politics of ‘democracy’ training programs implemented and delivered under the conditions of war and occupation directed me to indistinct places where adult education ideas and practices converge with imperialist desire and vision. The purpose of this paper is to trace and explain the process of this convergence. My research on the relationship between war, learning, and violence in conflict zones has opened up new possibilities for an expansive theorization of adult education in/and imperialism. I will argue that the existing body of literature on critical adult education does not identify the encroachment of imperialism in adult education pedagogy, politics, and practice.

The imperialist wars of recent decades have raised serious challenges for adult education. The wars led by the United States, as the super-military force among Western powers, have created new social/educational needs. National and international policies shaped by the ‘war-on-terror,’ ‘clash of civilizations’ and ‘security culture’ demand new mass-based formal and informal learning strategies. At a global level, war has also turned into a ‘development’ process under the rubric of ‘post-war reconstruction.’ Training of large cadres, from NGOs to peace or aid workers, to community developers, and other more specialized bureaucrats and technocrats, all are involved in adult learning, training, and education. Learning plans, the development of curricula and pedagogical techniques to sell the ideology of ‘post-war reconstruction’ using notions such as ‘empowerment,’ ‘democracy,’ and ‘freedom’ trainings are emerging examples of the response of adult learning to the social condition created by imperialist desire for expansion and occupation. The US military analysts have theorized this process by arguing for a closer link between post-war ‘reconstruction’ projects or humanitarian-aid effort with the military (Natsios, 2008; Ryan, 2008). Although ties between military and development, military and war/peace propaganda, or ‘humanization’ of military do not constitute a new ‘strategy’, the concerted effort in legitimizing the tie through thick theorization is astonishing. In September 2002, the Bush Administration released a National Security Strategy in which development
The release of this document put the spotlight on the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the major player in the ‘post-war reconstruction’ projects in Afghanistan and Iraq. These are some of the emerging themes connecting adult education/learning to imperialism that require deeper empirical and theoretical investigation (Nelles 2003).

The practice of adult education in a war zone
I visited Iraqi Kurdistan in August 2005. I began my research by visiting women’s NGOs in order to understand and analyze their inner political, financial, and cultural dynamics and to make sense of their activism under conditions of war, militarization and occupation. At the time of my visit, almost all women’s NGOs were preoccupied with the discussion on the draft of the Iraqi Constitution. They complained about ‘being workshopped out’ of the constitution. The concept of ‘workshop’ was used as a borrowed English word, and everybody seemed to understand its tiring and frustrating connotation. While visiting women’s NGOs, I was astonished at the presence of vast US-based funding agencies, all preoccupied with the ‘post-war reconstruction’ of Iraq. I collected documentation on the funded projects as well as the curriculum of diverse training programs for women. My intention was to review the content of their training curriculum in order to probe into the ideological underpinnings of the ‘democracy training’ project. One of the documents, Foundations of Democracy: Teacher’s Guide, was intended as a reference for democracy and civic education training in Northern Iraq. This curriculum is produced by the Center for Civic Education based in the US and funded by a grant from The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) as well as a grant from the Danforth Foundation. The OJJDP works from the premise that ‘Juveniles in crisis—from serious, violent, and chronic offenders to victims of abuse and neglect—pose a challenge to the nation’ and that they have to be policed and controlled (http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/about/about.html). This pathologising logic of the individual as the source of social problems has been problematized in the work of Colley (2000), Eccelstone (2004) and Pupavac (2001). This logic serves to reproduce social inequalities by separating the individual from the objective social reality of inequality.

The curriculum is organized around four concepts of authority, privacy, responsibility, and justice. It instructs teachers to promote compromise and consensus. The ‘Bible, Koran, or Torah’ are presented as examples of sources for moral authority (Foundation of Democracy, 2001, p. 36). These religious texts have, however, been critiqued for their promotion of patriarchal models of authority and for offering a blueprint for the subordination of women. The gendered, orientalist, and colonialist ideological underpinnings of the training manual, Foundations of Democracy, are best manifested in one
of the lessons it offers -- the story of ‘Bill Russell and Red Cloud.’ In this story, Bill Russell and Amy Clark, two ‘pioneers’, are sent to ‘negotiate’ with Red Cloud and Morning Sun, two indigenous persons from the Cheyenne tribe. Following the story, there is a set of questions about where each of the four characters derived his/her authority. It is interesting to note that the only person who derived authority from consent is Bill Russell, representing the white-male-rational thinker. In other words, the settler or occupier is presented as the authority. The other pioneers ‘consented’ to send him to negotiate. His female counterpart derived her authority directly from Russell who chose her as an assistant. In other words, she derived her authority from the male authority with power over her. Red Cloud, derived his authority from ‘custom’ and Morning Sun derived her authority from ‘morality’ because ‘she possessed great wisdom’ and was the spiritual leader of the tribe. This portrayal of legitimate female authority is consistent with the patriarchal, feudal, and religious nationalism that perceives women’s role as the pillar of moral strength in the family and nation. The story normalizes the genocide of the indigenous peoples of North America carried out by European settlers by labeling it as ‘conflicts created by the westward migration’ (p. 37). It portrays the ‘conflict’ as one between two groups having equal say and power to negotiate as opposed to the disparate power relations that characterize colonialism and occupation. In the story, consent is associated with the colonizer and custom with the indigenous man. In this context, the occupier is represented as the mediator of conflict and the occupied as the guardian of old conflicts.

The curriculum also describes how one should use authority. It states, ‘we use authority (1) to protect our safety and our property; (2) to help manage conflict peacefully and fairly; (3) to distribute the benefits and burdens of society; and (4) to maintain order’ (Foundation of Democracy, 2001, p. 39). ‘Authority’ in this context is constituted as the arbitrator of equality. This is a characteristic of the capitalist notion of democracy. ‘In this form of democracy,’ Allman explains, ‘citizens alienate their political power and capacities by handing them over to elected representatives, over whom they have little or no day-to-day influence or control’ (Allman, 2007, p. 36). In order to establish this bourgeois model of democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan, occupation was soon followed by setting up an election process. Allman compares this bourgeois model of democracy with the revolutionary democracy of the Paris Commune of 1871 where ‘... citizens ‘reabsorb’ their political powers rather than alienating them in the state or political representatives’ (Allman, 2007, p. 36). In this regard, Wood (2006), in “Democracy as ideology of empire,” raises a pertinent question. She asks: How is it that freedom, equality, and universal human dignity can seem a convincing justification for imperialism and war? Her response is in what she calls the co-existence of economic and non-economic powers (political exploitation). In other words, she argues that both capital and labour can have democratic rights in the political sphere without completely transforming
the relation between them in the economic sphere. Capitalism can, therefore, coexist with the ideology of freedom and equality in a way that no other system of domination can.

Iraqi women are expected to use the Teacher’s Guide in training their constituents for the cause of ‘democracy’; they are expected to be both the subject and object of imperialist restructuring of a country devastated by tribal, feudal, religious, and nationalist conflicts. Kurdish women experience these relations of domination and re-domination all at once in an ideologically assembled way: I have called this process ‘learning by dispossession.’

Learning by dispossession: Implications for critical/revolutionary Social transformation

Some critical education theorists have recently started focusing on the link between critical pedagogy and the struggle against capitalism, imperialism, and globalization. This body of theorization does not provide us with the tools to explain how education, or more specifically ‘democracy’ training, acts as an active component in the (re)production of the imperialist order. As I will show below, some critical/Marxist adult educators put at the core of their analysis the fundamental contradiction of capitalism, that is, the relationship of labour and capital, and the significance of consciousness in resolving this contradiction. Indispensable as this body of theory is, it does not distinguish between capitalism and imperialism, and more significantly, it does not give us enough analytical tools to understand patriarchy, racism, and colonialism.

In the analysis that I have outlined above, I am tentatively leaning toward an understanding of how democracy promotion projects end up disconnecting and dislocating both the trainers and the participants from their material reality of war, militarization and occupation. I have named this process ‘learning by dispossession,’ based on David Harvey’s conception of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey, 2006). I see ‘learning by dispossession’ as a learning process by which something other than ‘learning’ (which can be measured, evaluated, or assessed) is happening. That, much like primitive capital accumulation, learning, too, has a dual character, that is, it produces learning as well as something ‘outside of itself’, that is deeply entrenching self/mind/consciousness into the perpetual mode of capitalist social relations. To put it differently, ‘learning by dispossession’ refers to the ways learning produces new skills and knowledge as well as alienation, fragmentation of self/community, and confuses learners with the idea of capitalism and imperialism. Allman calls this process ‘ideological thinking’ and explains (Allman 2007, p. 39):

... For Marx, ideological thinking/consciousness, at least the type that he calls ideology is historically specific to capitalism; it is produced by people’s sensuous experience of capitalist reality, within
uncritical/reproductive praxis. Ideology serves to mask or misrepresent the real contradictions that make capitalism possible, and, therefore, by helping to perpetuate capitalism, it serves the interest of the dominant class (capitalist/bourgeois)… The only thing natural about ideological consciousness is that it conforms to the actual separations and inversions of capitalism’s real contradictions because consciousness and experience are an internally related unity, praxis.

The American project of ‘regime change’ was a conscious intervention in a country already torn apart by civil war (1961-91), Iraq-Iran war (1980-88) and the two US wars of 1991 and 2003. The end result, by 2009, is a fateful disintegration of the polity in extraordinary ways. While the US trains Iraqi women in ‘democracy’, the fragmentation of political power into blocs of religious leaders, tribal lords, feudal blocs, and numerous ethnic, political and military factions has denied women safety even within the confines of their homes. Clearly, understandings of this situation will be as conflictual as the situation itself. I find Marxist-feminist frames of analysis more adequate in making sense of democracy and dictatorship, and consciousness and praxis as unity of opposites. Adult education, as a conscious intervention in reality, enters into conflictual relations with imperialism; this relationship, too, seems to be a unity of opposites.

My argument is that critical adult education literature does not provide the necessary analytic tools to engage with the complexities of the imperialist stage of capitalist development. In reassessing the theoretical framework employed in Adult education and socialist pedagogy, Youngman (2000:42) asserts that ‘The book did not elaborate on imperialism and the international context of adult education, nor did it consider the specific nature of peripheral capitalism’ Responses to the challenges of the imperialist order are limited to reforming rather than replacing the capitalist mode of social relations. The critical edge of this literature is often lost in so far as it does not address the fundamental contradiction within capitalism, that is, the relations of unity and conflict between labour and capital. Most of this ‘critical’ literature does not articulate how this contradiction is racialized and gendered, neither does it recognize how colonial relations are embedded in it nor does it fully address the role of consciousness in understanding this contradiction (Allman, 1999). Marxist educators have consistently addressed the primary contradiction between labour and capital (Rikowski 2001; Colley 2000), and emphasized the importance of consciousness in understanding and overcoming this contradiction (Allman 1999). My main conclusion is the need for understanding contemporary capitalism as imperialism, that is, the era of finance capital and monopolies in the context of unceasing scientific and technological revolutions and growing gaps between the rich and the poor.

Some critical education theorists have recently started dealing with imperialism. However, these few attempts do not go far enough in their
analysis of imperialism as a higher stage of capitalism. McLaren and Farahmandpur (2003) link education and imperialism more generally, but limits discussion to developing a critical pedagogy in order to struggle against imperialism and the globalization of capitalism rather than how education is actually an active component in the (re)production of the imperialist order. Furthermore, they do not elaborate a complex theorization of imperialism as a stage of capitalism (p. 53). Although there is reference to Lenin's theory of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism, they do not do justice to the complexity and detail of this theorization and often conflate 'globalization' with capitalism (p. 52). Similarly in McLaren and Martin’s ‘The legend of the Bush gang: Imperialism, war, and propaganda,’ theories of imperialism are confused with theories of empire. They refer to the U.S. as gaining ‘hyperpower status’ (p. 192). This characterization precludes discussions of the emerging imperialist powers of China, Russia and India and its implications for the re-division of the world into new spheres of influence. Most of the analyses cited here confine themselves to a polemical critique of the U.S. administration as the ‘imperial mafia’ (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale, Suoranta, Jaramillo and McLaren, 2006).

In Revolutionary social transformation: Democratic hopes, political possibilities and critical education (1999), Critical education against global capitalism: Karl Marx and revolutionary critical education (2001), and On Marx (2007), Allman situates her analysis of the contemporary world and the educational responses required to change it within the Marxist framework. Using a dialectical-materialist method to provide a rigorous analysis of the lived world, Allman shows how we can apply this method to our own writings and thoughts. In Revolutionary social transformation, she provides a detailed analysis of Marx’s theory of consciousness/praxis, and contends that ‘our consciousness is actively produced within our experience of our social, material and natural existence’ (Allman 1999, p. 37). Conversely, the main element of bourgeois consciousness is the abstraction of thought from material reality. This in turn leads to a distorted understanding of reality, one in which there is a focus on the results or symptoms of social relations rather than the relations themselves (p. 55). This consciousness is reflected in dominant educational practices. In order to overcome this, we need to think of consciousness/praxis as the dialectical relationship between thought and action. It is this dialectical understanding of thought and practice that will allow one to clearly apprehend reality and go about transforming the social relations of capitalism.

In her work, Helen Colley provides a critique of the ‘ideology, the political economy [and] prevailing social constructs surrounding mentoring and education’ from a dialectical-materialist perspective (Colley 2000, pp. 2, 6). She engages with Marx’s notion of the dialectical relationship between appearance and essence. Glenn Rikowski, too, engages with Marx’s notion of labour-power and has put it at the core of discussions of work and learning.
He contends that in today’s workplace environment exchange-value has replaced use value. So labour, as use-value, does not have any import unless it can be replaced by labour-power as exchange-value that can be sold as a commodity. This is the process whereby workers become capital and labour-power is objectified. According to Rikowski, education and training are one of the primary means through which we socially produce ourselves as labour-power, thereby ‘subcutaneously [being] taken over by an alien, de-humanising, dominating social power that literally, though always partially becomes us—capital’ (Rikowski 2001, pp. 29, 36, emphasis in original).

These authors put the fundamental contradiction of capitalism, that is, the relationship of labour and capital, and the significance of consciousness in resolving the contradiction, at the core of their analysis. They provide an invaluable starting point for our analysis. However, they do not extend their analysis to understanding the global dynamics of capitalist power relations in the age of imperialism. This next step is crucial for developing a radical and emancipatory adult education with a focus on teaching about imperialism and resistance to it. Certain adult education theorists have begun to move in this direction.

In the expansion of capitalism and its historical development into imperialism, adult education has been a key ideological component. It has also allowed radical and critical educators to teach resistance to and raise consciousness about the persevering power of capitalist relations. We have argued 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 labour 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.

**References**


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