

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage

Learning Activism: The Intellectual Life of Contemporary Social Movements

by Aziz Choudry

North York, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2015, 199 pages

ISBN: 978-1-4426-0790-3 (paperback)

Reviewed by / Revu par

Matthew Waugh

University of British Columbia

Angelina S. Lee

University of British Columbia

For Aziz Choudry (2015), author of *Learning Activism: The Intellectual Life of Contemporary Social Movements*, learning and knowledge production, as well as theory and strategy development among social movements, are best understood through engagement and dialogue that occur within the movements themselves. As a means to produce knowledge that is relevant to the social movement, learning comes through action and experience, the behind-the-scenes work where activists organize, negotiate and deliberate, and educate and learn from movement successes and pitfalls within formal and informal spaces. *Learning Activism*, in many ways, attempts to bridge the divide between social movement activists and out-of-the-box scholars who study or view such movements as sterile environments containing “ordinary people” who may be thought of incapable of theorizing or producing knowledge.

The first chapter, “Knowledge Production, Learning, and Education in Social Movement Activism,” begins by directly stating that the future is influenced through present and past struggles, by the choices made and theories that are developed by individuals or collectives, by “ordinary” people and so-called “experts.” The author makes clear that social movements can fail in the absence of theory that explains economic conditions and power struggles. Yet, an important point often overlooked by activist scholars specifically, as well as educational researchers more broadly, is one of Choudry’s (2015) finest critiques, who does the theorizing? While arguing against intellectual appropriation of struggles in social movements, the author challenges academics and activists to think about and legitimate the work done in day-to-day social movement practices. Without recognition and validation of knowledge production and learning that come about through social movement practices and struggles in social activism, theory development and knowledge production become monopolised by institutional “experts.”

The second chapter, “Critiquing the Study of Social Movements: Theories, Knowledge, History, and Action,” examines the intersection between theory development, understanding social movement, and knowledge production. This chapter brings a sharp critique of not only the historical social movement scholarship that perceived activism as merely a social problem, and deviant acts imposed upon a stable society, but the perception of activists displaying irrational behaviours and the movement itself being abnormal has endured to this day. From Occupy Wall Street protests in Zuccotti Park to the 2012 Quebec student strike, concerns brought forward by activists have often been dismissed in favour of maintaining current power structures while negatively characterising protestors through media outlets, elected officials, and certain segments of the public.

Aziz Choudry argues against the reflexive application of theories that have been fashioned in the First World/North towards colonized contexts without reflecting on the unique lived experiences, struggles, and social relations of people in the Third World/South. This obligates not only social activist researchers to reject “an overattachment to paradigms, typologies, and criteria for describing movements,” but for social science scholars as well who may continue to codify and rely on specialized language and knowledge that only acts as a barrier to meaningful discussions between scholars and research participants (Choudry, 2015, p. 56).

The third chapter, “Non-Formal and Informal Learning in Activism,” the author explores the dynamics of knowledge production and learning that occur in ordinary

people's everyday struggles and outside of formal settings including lectures and workshops. Choudry (2015) argues that education alone is not enough to bring about changes in social movements and that action occurs concurrently with learning. This, the author finds, raises the importance of having physical non-formal and formal spaces for social gatherings where people can learn, organize, produce knowledge, and act for social change.

Learning Activism is critical of the tendency for academics to adulate certain figures as "experts" which the author believes creates hierarchical relations. The author contends that this "credentialism" and the myths of "radical heroes" (e.g., Gramsci and Freire), a particularly common practice in North American academies, all but defeats the emancipatory purposes of popular education. Social movements, the author explains, cannot be built by merely dropping knowledge on people in a vertical or top-down manner or through formal milieus. Rather, it is through non-formal learning in activism practices including book circles and study groups, simulation and role-playing games and forum theatres that provide open and practical spaces to "engage in self-empowering processes of dialogues that foster critical thinking" (Choudry, 2015, p. 93).

The fourth and final chapter, "Activist Research," provides a rich discussion of activist research practices conducted with and within movements, drawing on interviews with activist researchers in NGOs, people's organizations, and mass movement organizations. The chapter delves into the processes, production, and dissemination of activist research, the relationship between activist research and theorizing, and how they inform social action by and for movements. In his interviews with activist researchers and organizers, Choudry (2015) explores their activist research practices and processes, including their understandings, development, and validation of strategies, theoretical frameworks, and methodologies in movement research.

Learning Activism is an insightful exploration into the discourse and spaces where learning takes place in social movements but provides a critical examination into the lack of embeddedness among scholars in the field they research that is surely generalizable in the social sciences. Aziz Choudry thoughtfully challenges the types of activities and dialogue being held that can create experts and leaders in activist organisations and mobilizations that can contribute to silencing the voices of those who are marginalized. The lesson that *Learning Activism* teaches is that activists and "boots-on-the-ground academics" either studying or working as part of a group seeking to establish a more just

and equitable society, look to embrace and learn from the tensions and politics, and the contradictions and failures that are inevitable to present day social movements. Indeed, “learning and the radical imagination found in movements as vital conceptual resources to change the world” depends on deep reflection and learning from yesterday’s struggles (Choudry, 2015, p. 10).