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The Politics and Economics of Globalization and Social Change in Radical Adult Education: A Critical Review of Recent Literature

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Abstract: This review analyzes perspectives on globalization within radical adult education focusing on how perspectives of the globalization process affect people's understanding of the nature and agents of social change. It argues that new movements move us beyond the limits in current globalization perspectives.

Throughout most of the decade of the 1990s, it was widely held that radical politics were, if not outright dead, at least, in near fatal crisis. At the beginning of the decade, marking 10 years of Reaganism-Thatcherism, the European socialist camp was quickly disintegrating. Socialist movements in power or on the verge of taking power in Central America were in retreat. Neoliberal structural adjustment programs were the norm for the Third World as welfare states were dismantled in the First World. Postmodernism, that was more than anything else an attack on Marxism, was all the rage in academia. In 1992, Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* declared the world to be forever capitalist, as many leftists and Marxist were finishing their journey from neo-Marxism, to Post-Marxism and on to anti-Marxism. The field of adult education, with its progressive tradition, was not immune to this retreat from traditional left politics. Jane Thompson's (1993) ironic and sad "open letter to whoever's left" captured the sense of defeat among radical adult educators.

Nevertheless, all of the capitalist class euphoria over neoliberal globalization and postmodern-inspired smug cynicism did not last long. In 1992, Los Angeles erupted in one of the largest urban revolts in the history of the United States. On January 1, 1994, the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN) greeted the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)—a codification of transnational neoliberalism—with an armed seizure of major cities in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. The year 1995 was witness to, among other events, the Million Man March of African American men in the United States and the most massive strikes in France since 1968. The 'grand narrative' of postmodernism began to lose steam by the mid-1990s—helped along in great part by Alan Skopal's parody that slipped by the postmodernist editors of *Social Text* in 1996—and today stands merely as a trend within many fields including Adult Education. With antecedents at least as far back as the anti-IMF protests in Venezuela of 1989 (Katsiaficas, 2004), in the United States, a growing student movement, environmental movement and reform trends within the labor movement reached a certain plateau and coalescence captured by the dramatic World Trade Organization (WTO) protest in Seattle in 1999. Subsequent anti-globalization or global justice protests, including the first World Social Forum attended by over 12,000 in Porto Alegre, Brazil in January of 2001, have occurred in major cities across the world. While the crisis of socialism is far from over, and the fascist backlash following the events of September 11, 2001, is a setback, we are now in a very different political conjuncture 14 years on from the end of history.

The intent of this review is to assess currents of globalization analysis within recent radical adult education literature. Central to this review is an analysis of how perspectives of the

economics of the globalization process affect people's understanding of the prospect for social change, how this change should take place, and who are most likely to be the agents of this change. Taking from Marjorie Mayo (2005), "these are not simply semantic debates; different perspectives on globalization relate to differing and potentially competing political agendas" (p. 13).

Globalization, Social Change and Radical Adult Education: Recent Literature

Radical Adult Education

I am using the term "radical adult education" to encompass those within the field who are explicitly dedicated to investigating, promoting or engaging in adult education for progressive, social democratic or socialist transformation. When we look specifically within the area of radical adult education as I am defining it for work focusing on globalization, we can discern two broad perspectives and in this review I propose a two-sided typology of the radical adult education literature that directly addresses the issue of globalization. I believe this typology of civil societarian and Marxist-oriented perspectives is useful because it helps highlight important distinctions within radical adult education regarding globalization and the prospects for social change in the current period.

After critically reviewing the literature in radical adult education on globalization using this typology, I will address areas within radical adult education that I believe do not necessarily fit easily within the typology and are pointing toward new emerging social agents and the possibilities for social change beyond the limitations of both civil societarian and prevailing Marxist-oriented perspectives in the field.

Perspectives on Globalization and Social Change

Typologies of the various political economic interpretations of globalization generally center around four interrelated areas: (a) the current nature of the working class; (b) the extent to which capital is internationalized; (c) the relative strength of the three forms of capital (financial, productive, commercial); and (d) the role and strength of the contemporary nation-state. For the purposes of this paper, I will draw on Tabb's (1997) characterization of the debate between what he calls the *strong version* of globalization and the *longer version* globalization.

Since civil societarian perspectives in adult education are largely based on a strong version of globalization, let us begin by looking at the general argument put forth by this interpretation of globalization. First, strong versions of globalization argue that we have witnessed a qualitative transformation of capitalism beginning in the post-World War II era and accelerating in the last three decades. This transformation is the result of an explosion in information-based technology and automation that have pushed manufacturing and productive capital to the margins of capitalist relations. Today's economy is technology- and information-based, characterized most typically by the billions of dollars of financial capital that effortlessly and continuously circulate across the planet conflating space and time, creating a truly globalized economy. In this new economy, the nation-state is nearly powerless. As Jarvis (2002) argues, "governments are now not only incapable of regulating the global companies, they are becoming a part of a superstructure controlled to a considerable extent by those who control capital" (p. 8). Since productive capital is now marginal in this globalized, financial economy, the producing or working classes are equally marginal as significant actors for social change. In short, then, strong versions of globalization posit that we have a globalized and ever-expanding information economy where productive capital, the nation-state, and the working class are becoming

increasingly irrelevant. The political implications of this argument are clear: with virtually no working class and no nation-state, the traditional socialist paradigm is obsolete.

With the agent of the working class and its traditional socialist goals now seen as no longer viable or even desirable, a significant sector of radical adult education has turned to NGOs and new social movements operating in what these adult educators call civil society (a social sphere generally seen, to varying degrees, as relatively autonomous from the state and the market) as the agents best situated to protect and perhaps expand this social realm of civil society in the face of increasing “colonization” from new economy forces. This political strategy, often feeding off the “privatization” of former state-run services in housing, education, and community development, is a turn to the local, often couched in a global/local dialectic where low-income people, along with professional adult and community educators, seek private or public funds for local social service projects as a response to globalization forces.

While strong globalization perspectives are the dominant view in adult education, it is important to look at how a longer version of globalization provides the basis for a different adult education politics. Longer versions of globalization, drawing explicitly from Marxist political economy, begin with the premise that capitalism from its beginning over 500 years ago has been based on international or global economic relations. Therefore, one must be immediately skeptical of talk of a qualitative transformation to a “new” global economy. Long versions of globalization are also skeptical of claims of a post-industrial era. This argument is largely based on the idea that the North, through capital flight to the low-wage South, has been deindustrialized. Data on foreign direct investment (FDI), however, reveals that FDI is almost exclusively controlled by the economies of the North with eighty percent of it is invested within the nations of the North (Moody, 1997, p. 56). The fact that Northern economies still dominate FDI and invest it largely among themselves sheds light on the fact that the nation-states attached to these economies are still strong and in fact vital to the continuation of the historical expansion of capitalist relations. The nation-state “is not being reduced; it is being given different tasks, but by no means necessarily fewer. While globalization has limited the state’s power in some respects [social services], the state’s role in other fields [aiding capital expansion] has become even bigger” (Went, 2000, p. 48).

The most important aspect of the longer version of globalization is the political implications to be drawn from the theory. Ironically, at the very height of the “end of the nation-state” and “farewell to the working-class” rhetoric couched in post-modernist jargon, the working class and peasants have, according to advocates of a longer version of globalization, put themselves in the forefront of current anti-neoliberal struggles. These struggles highlight the continued existence and importance of the working class and popular sectors as agents of social change, as well as the fact that neo-liberalism is not an inevitability but a policy choice brutally implemented by nation-states and their international institutions.

Longer versions of globalization are the minority view within radical adult education. There are, however, sectors within the field that operate from a Marxist political economic perspective challenging strong globalization perspectives and arguing for a revitalization of Marxist political economy and longer versions of globalization.

Assessing Radical Adult Education Perspectives on Globalization and Social Change

I would like to point out weaknesses I see in both the civil societarian (strong versions of globalization) and the Marxist perspectives (longer versions of globalization) that have general

implications for advancing our understanding of globalization, social change and radical adult education. While the critique of civil societarian perspectives of globalization implicit in the Marxist perspective is compelling for its sophisticated use and advocacy of political economy, it is generally lacking in three areas. First, the local/global dialect is often insufficiently problematized in Marxist critiques of civil societarian perspectives. This dialectic supposedly helps explain theoretically the postmodernistic fragmentation and plurality of reality today. In addition, from the standpoint of practice, this dialectic informs us that we should challenge globalization by focusing on its local manifestations. The problem with this global/local conceptualization is that it misses the mark in understanding the dialectical process of change within capitalism. The fundamental contradictions within capitalism are not external relations (global/local), but contradictory relations internal to the process of capitalism itself that manifest themselves through the long history of the vertical (creating market relations where none existed previously) and horizontal (territorial) expansions of capitalism that today are commonly placed under the label of globalization. As Allman (2001) argues, the most fundamental of these internal relations or contradictions are: a) capital/labor; b) production/circulation; and c) social forces/social relations of production. We need to understand that the contradiction of the global and the local is the result of the continuous development of the internal contradictions of capitalism, and in order to overcome the global/local contradiction, we must critically understand and struggle against the internal relations of capitalism from which it emerges. This is what Allman (1999) calls moving from a limited/reproductive praxis to a critical/revolutionary praxis.

Second, while some have challenged the notion—often present in some form in civil societarian perspectives—that globalization is an inevitable and uncontrollable force by pointing to the continued role of the nation-state in making the specific policy changes that allow for globalization processes, analysis of the role of the nation-state remains undeveloped. Specifically, what has gone particularly under-theorized among adult educators and the left generally, is the continued power of the state, particularly in some highly visible Third World examples, to control or at least manage the forces of globalization. Cuba, for example, even given the tremendous pressure imposed by the universally-condemned US blockade, continues to maintain and expand an economy in very significant ways outside the parameters of the neoliberal model. Elsewhere in Latin America, the presidential electoral victories of Lula in Brazil, Chávez in Venezuela, Kirchner in Argentina, Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay and Morales in Bolivia, on platforms of varying degrees of rejection of the neoliberal model, point to the fact that it is only through the nation-state that the Third World can fight the annexation process implicit in neoliberal globalization policies directed by the United States.

Third, while the longer, Marxist perspectives are largely successful in exposing many of the shortcomings in the civil societarian theories of globalization, they are sorely lacking in examples of alternative organizational forms or political practices of an explicitly Marxist or revolutionary perspective to match the plethora of case studies on civil societarian NGO initiatives.

Fourth, there are serious shortcomings in the Marxist-inspired perspectives in terms of political practice. Beyond few examples of revolutionary practice, the general notion is that since we have not seen any qualitative changes at the level of the economic, we do not need to reassess our political practices. Basically, we just need to do more of what we have always done. There are two major problems here as I see it. The first problem is the real crisis in most of the institutions (trade unions and political parties) of the left that were built during the twentieth century. Calls to build the labor movement as currently constituted at a time when, at least in the

U.S. as well as in many other areas, it is in what can only be described as a fatal decline seem unproductive. Marxists have rightly challenged and not given into the abandonment of the goal of profound social transformation and the call for scaled down utopias by civil societarians. Yet, by not realizing that we are facing qualitative changes at the level of the economic, the practical calls by the Marxists to keep doing what we have been doing are as untenable as the civil societarians insistence on a return to what Marjorie Mayo (1995) calls the “(broken) wheel of community-based strategies” (p. 14). Perhaps Antonio Gramsci (1977) writing at another period of profound transformation can help clarify this point.

The period of history we are passing through is a revolutionary period because the traditional institutions for the government of human masses, institutions which were linked to old modes of production and exchange, have lost any significance and useful function they might have had...But it is not only bourgeois class institutions which have collapsed and fallen apart: working-class institutions too, which emerged while capitalism was developing and were formed as the response of the working class to this development, have entered a period of crisis and can no longer successfully control the masses. (p. 175)

Gramsci understood that qualitative changes at the level of the economic are dialectically related to transformations at the level of the political. Moreover, he also realized that a sure sign of these changes was the changing nature of the spontaneous movement of the masses themselves.

The masses of workers and peasants are the only genuine and authentic expression of the historical development of capital. By the spontaneous and uncontrollable movements which spread throughout their ranks and by relative shifts in the position of strata..., the masses indicate the precise direction of historical development, reveal changes in attitudes and forms, and proclaim the decomposition...of the capitalist organization of society. (pp. 173-175)

When we do as Gramsci suggests, and we look to the actual movement of the masses, we see that much of the most dynamic radical motion, is outside the established institutions of the Left. In the United States, for example, most of the cutting edge worker activity is based outside the labor movement in workers’ centers, non-union worker organizations such as the Coalition of Immakolee Workers, or rank-and-file action of union members outside of the union structures such as the Soldiers for Solidarity movement in the auto industry. When we look more broadly in Latin America, we see even clearer evidence of innovative and powerful radical motion outside of the traditional left institutions with the Zapatistas (a guerrilla of a new type) and indigenous movements in many other countries of the region, factory occupations and Piqueteros in Argentina, the Landless movement in Brazil, etc. Much of this movement is based in some of the most marginalized sectors of these societies and, seemingly paradoxically, the demands of these movements are rather basic: water, jobs, plots of land, and, yet, given the nature of globalization today, basic demands by the most marginalized are increasingly striking at the very heart of capitalism. For, the changes at the level of the economic that civil societarians have aptly recognized, are of a qualitative nature, and are creating a growing, and widely recognized polarization between the capitalist class and a growing sector of the world’s population increasingly on the fringes of the basic capitalist relation of working for a wage in order to buy what you need. More and more people are finding themselves without any employment, with less and less stable employment or with employment that no longer pays livable wages. Therefore, the basic demands, increasingly raised by growing sectors of the world’s population for shelter, water, food, healthcare, without necessarily the wages with which to pay for these necessities, exposes the growing crisis of capitalism and calls forth the simple yet revolutionary solutions of cooperative, sustainable socio-political economic relations that resolve the basic needs of a

growing sector of humanity. As Vandana Shiva (2005) puts it, “The epic contest of our times is about staying alive” (p. 133).

Analyses that seem to most clearly recognize the major features of globalization today as I am outlining them here can be found in feminist literature of integrative (Miles, 1996) or structural and transformative (Shiva, 2005) perspectives. This may be because as many have argued, globalization disproportionately impacts women. The result of this, as Miles argues is that women are more able not only to conceive of their concerns as general community concerns but to pursue them as such....The articulation of general community concerns by women from women’s points of view is not the abandonment of feminist vision but potentially its full realization. (p. 135)

Moreover, centering praxis around the most negatively impacted allows for an organic integration of many struggles.

The global understanding of women’s oppression as the product of a long historical process of colonization and control of women, workers, nature, and indigenous and colonized peoples links all oppressions organically, not as add-ons or a litany of separate dominations...and reinforces the conviction that what is needed is a paradigm shift of enormous proportions. (Miles, 1996, p. 133)

Ironically, the revolutionary paradigm is not necessarily all that new, as it is rooted in the basic survival demands of the growing sectors of humanity most marginalized by globalization.

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