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The Rise and Fall of Socialist Adult Education in North America: Theorizing from the Literature

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Key words: socialism, radical adult education, state repression, feminism

Abstract: This paper provides a brief overview of literature on the rise and fall of early 20th century experiments in North American socialist adult education. Through a Marxist-Feminist theoretical framework, we examine and contrast the contributions of the folk school movement and the more explicitly socialist labour colleges to the broader field of adult education in Canada and the United States. We suggest that the demise of the socialist schools must be seen as a consequence of both internal philosophical and political struggles over the questions of gender and race, as well as the external forces of liberalism and state repression during the Cold War era.

Introduction

Our goal in this paper is to develop a theoretical position from which we can begin to analyze the rise and decline of radical adult education during the mid-twentieth century in Canada and the United States. Rather than presenting a straight-forward overview of the relevant literature, our intention is to use a Marxist-Feminist theoretical framework to examine some of the key historical works on the rise and fall of the socialist schools and “disrupt” those accounts which tend to be grounded in conventional forms of labour history by bringing in questions of gender and race. Our paper also serves a broader objective of studying historical parallels between the “crisis in education” during the Cold War and our contemporary political discourse on the “failure of education” and consequent neoliberal policy reforms. As educational historian Andrew Hartman observes, “education often serves as a medium for political and intellectual crises” (2008, p. 1).

Through this paper and future studies, we intend to make explicit the links between these seemingly disparate “crises” as manifestations of larger crises in capitalist production (Harvey, 2005). Thus there are three key implications of our study for adult education theory and practice:

1. An analysis of educational philosophy, curricula, and teaching methods used in socialist schools.
2. A “re-thinking” of the relationship between neo-liberalism and adult education through a critical historical perspective on the early to mid-twentieth century.
3. An exploration of research at the disciplinary intersection of cultural history, historiography and adult learning.

The deeper significance of our study is neatly summed up by Marxist political scientist Ellen Meiksins Wood in the following observation: “Thinking about future alternatives to capitalism requires us to think about alternative conceptions of its past” (Wood, 2002, p. 8).

Socialist Pedagogy: A Brief Historical Overview

In the first half of the twentieth century as corporations under monopoly capitalism began to take a strong interest in educational policy at all levels (Hartman, 2008), a number of politically radical, community-based adult education centres flourished in Canada and the United States. These schools, such as the Brookwood Labor College in New York State, the Jefferson School of Social Science in New York City, the Montreal Labour College in Québec, the Morris Winchevsky Centre in Ontario provided more than training and education for the labour movement. They offered rich and diverse programs of study which encompassed social sciences, humanities, visual and performing arts, and opportunities for experiential learning. The 1920s and 30s were two decades of highly innovative experiments in adult education. Many of these schools adopted explicitly Marxist pedagogies (Gettleman, 2008). While others, such as the folks schools, were no less “radical” in their opposition to the oppressive effects of capitalist social relations, but tended to avoid labelling their political orientation (Welton, 2001).

Across North America, the Great Depression had a profound impact on educational policy and practice, forcing many educators to rethink long-held assumptions about the social purpose of education (Shrecker, 1986). As the demand for educational “alternatives” that addressed the concerns of the working classes grew dramatically between the two World Wars, the influence of these “social movement” schools (Friesen, 1951) also spread beyond the communities they sought to serve, influencing even the traditionally conservative curriculum of universities (Kates, 2001).

Radical adult education in the early twentieth century typically fell into one of two institutional forms, one developing from the nineteenth-century Danish tradition of “folk schools” and the other, labour colleges, which had their origins in British labour education programs (Steele & Taylor, 2004). Before discussing the role of internal dissent and state repression in the decline of these schools, we will provide a brief description of their role in adult education in the early to mid twentieth-century.

The Labour Colleges

The labour colleges were an outgrowth of the labour movement, particularly Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Workers Education Association (WEA). The North American labour college movement was modeled largely on Britain's National Council of Labour Colleges and were often supported financially by labour unions such as the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (Vow, 1993). Among these colleges were Brookwood Labor College in Katonah, New York, Work People's College in Duluth, Minnesota, and Commonwealth College in Mena, Arkansas. In Canada, the Morris Winchevsky Center, the Toronto Labour College and Montreal Labour College were all modeled after the American colleges, and were often founded by Canadians who had studied at American labour colleges (Watson, 1976). Using experimental curricula and teaching methods, served as both an extension school for adult industrial workers and farmers. At some colleges, the curriculum was heavily geared toward instruction in labor history and economics and focused on training for labour organizers. Courses in economics emphasized Marxist approaches to the discipline. Brookwood College, Jefferson School of Social Science and the Tom Mooney School especially valued instruction that fostered class-consciousness and sought to combat the emerging pragmatic individualism of mainstream American education (Youngman, 1986). Faculty, administrators and students donated labour and time to provide maintenance and services at the institutions. Students at the labour colleges were encouraged to do field work recruiting new workers for the

unions and helping to organize strikes (Altenbaugh, 1991). The schools published labour pamphlets and organizing songbooks and distributed them to unions. Most notably, the labor colleges pioneered a variety of activist theater with socialist themes (agitprop) that became popular in the 1930s.

The Folk Schools

The folk schools were modeled on nineteenth-century experiments in education in Denmark (Paulston, 1980). Unlike the more conventional structure of the labour colleges, the folk schools stressed interpersonal, non-hierarchical relationships. Teachers and students often lived together, and their shared labour sustained the operation and financing of the school. While they also offered courses in labour organizing and reform, the folk schools hoped to become a base for more-sweeping social transformation (Horton, 1989; Sacouman, 1976). Culturally, they played an important role in the collection of folk music, theatre, poetry and oral history. Nova Scotia's Antigonish movement which flourished in the 1920s and 30s under the leadership of Moses Coady is the best-known example of the Canadian folk school tradition. In the United States, the closest counterpart of Antigonish was the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, founded in 1932 by Miles Horton (Adams, 1975). Highlander continues to exist today under the name, Highlander Research and Education Centre.

Decline of the Radical Schools

In a comparison of these two institutional forms: the labour colleges and the folk schools, Edwards and McCarthy (1992) make the following observation:

The survival of Highlander as a facilitator of progressive movement activism represents a major achievement, especially noteworthy when considered against the universal demise of a generation of independent "labor colleges" that were flourishing as Highlander emerged. (p. 543)

Why did Highlander survive while the labour colleges did not? While we cannot answer this question in detail here, we would agree with the prevailing opinion that Highlander's "grass-roots" or "bottom up" approach to adult education was a major factor in its longevity. The labour colleges tended towards a more rigid, "top-down" and somewhat doctrinaire structure, which eventually became a liability both in its internal struggles and its ability to resist state repression (Altenbaugh, 1991). However, in attributing the folk schools' success to their "grass roots" or community orientation, it is important to elaborate on what we mean by "grass roots" in this context. From a Marxist-Feminist perspective, we would suggest that it is the ability of the folk schools, such as Highlander, to work with(in) communities and across lines of class, race and gender to solve concrete social and economic problems and to direct adult learning towards those solutions (Alexander, 1997).

Throughout the histories of both the Antigonish movement and the Highlander folk school, women played an integral role in education for activism in the folk school movement (Coady Archives, 2010; Alexander, 1997; Phenix & Selver, 1985). The role of women in the rural and coastal villages of the Canadian Maritimes had many parallels to the lives of women living in rural Tennessee. Archival documents detailing the lives of the "Antigonish women" reveal that "the socio-economic crisis in Maritime Canada that created the Antigonish Movement affected everyone, but it could be argued that women, juggling multiple roles as wives, mothers

and farm workers, suffered the most” (Coady Archives, 2010). Like Septima Clarke and Bernice Robinson, the African-American women educators of the Highlander school, the female leaders of the Antigonish Movement also understood the material conditions of rural women living in poverty and social isolation (Crawford, Rouse & Woods, 1997; Bledsoe, 1969). This is not to romanticize the role of women in these institutions as unproblematically “feminist,” but the literature suggests that women’s work in the folk schools did appear less fraught with conflict over the “woman question” or for that matter “the race question” than in the labour colleges and their affiliated socialist and communist organizations (Kates, 2001). Kate Weigand notes in her detailed and nuanced account of the Mary Inman controversy of the 1930s and 40s, the feminist challenge to Communist Party leaders was articulated in this way:

Should communists work to improve women’s status by accepting the sexual division of labour as a given, promoting housewives as workers, and pushing for better working conditions within their homes? Or should they oppose housewifery as part of an oppressive sexual division of labour and encourage women to join the workforce so they could fight sex and class oppressions on an equal basis with men? In 1940, as now, there were no clear answers to these questions... (p. 37)

After the publication of Inman’s book, *In Woman’s Defense*, these sorts of theoretical and strategic questions were so important to the Communist Party and the non-Communist labour movement at the time that the labour colleges offered formal classes on “the woman question” (p. 91).

While sources of internal debate and dissent played a part in the demise of the labour colleges, it is important to note that government surveillance and harassment of both the folk schools and the labour colleges were also a significant factor in their ultimate demise. In the 1940s and 1950s Highlander established many “citizenship schools” that mounted African American voter-registration drives. As far back as the 1930s it trained civil rights leaders in the methods of nonviolent protest, and its role increased in importance during the civil rights campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s. Throughout this period, Highlander came under attack from conservative groups such as the American Legion, who viewed its civil rights and organizing activities as “communist” and therefore “subversive.” Highlander was also monitored by the FBI under the controversial COINTELPRO operation from 1956 to 1971 (Cunningham, 2003).

During the same period, the Cold War era, in Canada the field of adult education also went through a wrenching change in direction through which “leading social reform-minded adult educators had been expunged from the adult education scene for alleged communist sympathies” (Welton, 2001, p. 211). During this time (the late 1940s and early 50s), Drummond Wren of Workers Education Association, John Grierson, founder of the National Film Board (NFB), and Ned Corbett, then director of the Canadian Association for Adult Education, all faced accusations of varying degrees of involvement in or sympathy towards communist organizations (Selman, 1981).

History for (Re)radicalizing Adult Education

Having looked briefly at the role of both internal debates and external repression in these twentieth-century experiments in radical adult education, we must bring the discussion back to the present day and account for the contemporary relevance of such a historical study. Like anyone embarking on a historical study, we began this literature review with a question of

purpose: How could we make the history of socialist adult education relevant to the study of adult education today? Why should anyone care about the labour colleges and folk schools of a bygone era? What makes these institutions interesting for adult educators today is their deep connection to social movements based in feminist, anti-racist and anti-imperialist politics. As a result of their political and pedagogical positions, these schools were targeted for government surveillance and frequently came under attack by conservative groups both in Canada and the United States (Gettleman, 2008, 2002). The history of state repression of social movements and their educational programs reveals a long-standing agenda for social control during an era of capitalist crisis. We can begin to theorize from the literature that issues of gender and race along with those of class played a central role both in the rise of these schools and in their systematic dismantling during the Cold War. That is to say that the schools flourished because they created formal educational spaces for anti-capitalist social movements, and they suffered unrelenting state repression and harassment for the very same reason.

From our current perspective, in an era of market-driven educational programs, it is hard to imagine a time when such radical educational initiatives flourished. As researchers, we must ask why the legacy of these schools is so often just a footnote in historical accounts of adult education or a fleeting reference in histories of anti-communism in North America? What were these schools teaching that was considered so subversive, so dangerous to the internal security of the United States and Canada from 1950 to 1970 when these schools were systematically shut down? And what is the relationship between the *decline* of radical adult education as sites of organized resistance to capitalism and the *rise* of neoconservative and neoliberal economic reforms in the late twentieth century? Much of the recent scholarship on the neoliberal era in education focuses on the 1980s and 1990s as a period of economic deregulation and globalization which has had a profound impact on adult education (Hill & Kumar, 2008). One of longer-term goals for our study is to push scholarly attention beyond critiques of neoliberalism. By turning our focus towards the mid-twentieth century we better understand the complex history of the “marketization” of adult education as a force which has its origins much farther back than the dawn of the neoliberal era.

Finally, it is our contention, echoing the recent work of Stephen Brookfield and John Holst (2010), that under our current economic, environmental, social conditions, we need to radicalize, or perhaps *re-radicalize* adult education, -in light of the rich history of progressive education. We ought to look to those early examples of radical adult education in the folk schools and labour colleges not only for inspiration, but in order to better understand our own times as we witness the power of social movements working to resist capitalist injustice in places as seemingly disparate as Cairo and Wisconsin. And yet we must do so without succumbing to nostalgia. As Brookfield and Holst so eloquently argue

the vitality of a tradition such as radical adult education should not be measured solely by a count of references to it in the formalized field’s journals or conference proceedings. As academics we do look with favor upon radical adult education’s continued presence in the literature and discourse... But ultimately the vitality of radical adult education is measured by the strength of social movement activity in any given time and place. (p. 217)

The challenge for scholars of adult education is not only to make the links not only between the complex intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality and other aspects of identity that inform our subjectivities, but also to make the historical and generational

connections through time to develop a more nuanced and profound vision of what learning for social change might be.

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