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Learning by Dispossession: Gender, Imperialism and Adult Education

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Abstract: This is a Marxist-feminist theoretical study of ‘democracy training’ projects delivered among Iraqi women as part of ‘post-war reconstruction’ efforts of the US. This frame of analysis can assist us in dialectically understanding the ideological practice of these training projects and conceptualizing consciousness/praxis in order to explain adult education, gender, and imperialism.

An Encounter

In 1997 I first attended the meeting of the Women in Conflict Zones Network, a consortium of researchers, activists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), representatives of UN organizations, humanitarian aid agencies, and human rights groups (for an overview of the objective and history of the Network check the following website: <http://www.yorku.ca/wicz/>). Each one of us, located in a different region of the world, was trying to make sense of women’s experiences of war, militarization and violence. In this meeting, half-way through going around introducing ourselves, a woman representing an NGO started her remarks by calmly saying, “...before continuing further, I need to pause for a moment and ask the woman who identified herself as an adult educator to explain to me what does it mean to be an adult educator and what do they do?” I was both perplexed and intrigued by the question. I tried my best to define our ‘elusive’ field. She interrupted me and continued, this time in a frustrated voice, “in my organization, we have been inundated with flashy consultancy products which all claim to use adult education principles and philosophy to provide training programs on conflict resolution, peace education, team building, participatory decision-making, creating consensus in war-torn communities, participatory human rights fact-finding missions, community need assessment, planning, evaluation, and much more.” In brief, she was wondering what adult education had to do with “managing conflict in war zones,” as she put it. This encounter put me path for discovery; to search for new places and spaces where adult education acts in unison with imperialism to create the ideological conditions for the perpetuation of the social relations of submission.

The US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan provided an opportunity to study relations between imperialism and adult education in a contemporary and concrete context. The 2003 American project of ‘regime change’ in Iraq was violent and destructive, and led to more violence and destruction. The war has continued to this day, and it is difficult to talk about ‘post-war reconstruction.’ The US has in fact launched a number of projects ranging from (re-)training security and armed forces to ‘democracy training’ of elite women activists. In this paper, I will analyze ‘democracy’ training programs in Iraq as the ideological practice of the ‘post-war reconstruction’ of an imperialist power. I will argue that a careful analysis of the pedagogy, practice, and politics of ‘democracy’ training programs could direct us to indistinct places where adult education ideas and practices converge with imperialist relations of domination. My goal is to make visible the process of this convergence and, thus, to contribute to the theorization of the relationship between ideological practices of adult education and capitalist social relations in the age of imperialism. The Marxist dialectical-historical-materialist approach, as is articulated in the work of educators such as Allman (1999; 2001; 2007), Au (2007), Colley (2000), Rikowski (2001; 2002), and Youngman (1986) inform my analysis. The Marxist-feminist analysis of

genderized and racialized imperialist social relations constitutes the conceptual core of this paper. This perspective is being articulated by a critical adult educator collective based in my department at the Ontario Institute for Studies of Adult Education at the University of Toronto (this collective is working on a forthcoming book to be co-edited by myself and Sara Carpenter and it is tentatively entitled *Contesting Knowledges: Reading Adult Education through Marxist-Feminism*).

Tracing Adult Education, Mapping Imperialist Social Relations

My research in the Women in Conflict Zones Network was focused on the impact of war, militarization and occupation on Kurdish women's learning, resistance and survival. The Kurds constitute one of the world's largest national populations without a state of their own. Their territory, called Kurdistan, has been divided between Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. The Kurds captured the attention of international media in both the US-led 1991 Gulf War and in the 2003 US occupation of Iraq. I have followed, for three decades, the formation of various masculine nationalist political alliances in this region and the role of Western powers, led by the United States, in constructing, destructing, and reconstructing these alliances. This complex process of shaping and re-shaping the social and political order often has had adverse impact on the lives of women (my website, www.utoronto.ca/wwdl records and archives most of my published work and research activities in this area).

Gender relations before the 1991 and 2003 US wars on Iraq were patriarchal, although the traditional exercise of male power was regulated through the dictatorial "law and order" imposed by the secular Ba'athist state. The two wars, especially the 2003 war, disrupted this order and unleashed unprecedented male violence under the banner of religion, tribalism, nationalism and in the context of full lawlessness (for an excellent overview of the source of the funding of women's NGOs in Iraq see El-Kassem, 2007; Al-Ali and Pratt (2009), Mojab (forthcoming), and Zangana (2007). While the US did not invade Iraq in order to promote democracy, the Bush Administration claimed democracy as a goal. The target of democracy training was the elite, well-educated, adult Iraqi women, who were trained in order to educate other Iraqi women and men to act as a social base of support for a pro-American polity. Whereas this war has been critiqued from a variety of political positions, educators have not examined the pedagogical project of 'democracy training'.

While the brutality of war has made it difficult to conduct academic research in the 'field', the challenge in this study is primarily theoretical. We already have a body of theory, rooted largely in Marxism and feminism, which confers on education a powerful role in (re-) producing capitalist relations. Concepts such as 'dominant ideology' and 'hidden curriculum' point to the conformism of educational practice in capitalist democracies. However, while capitalism changes incessantly, there has been less interest in distinguishing between early stages of (mercantile) capitalism and its contemporary stage of (post-)industrial monopoly capitalism conceptualized, in this paper, as 'imperialism.' This study conceptualizes contemporary US capitalism as 'imperialism' to be distinguished from the popular meanings of the term, i.e. globalization, expansionism and conquest. Comprehending the ideological practice of adult education in the context of 'post-war reconstruction' requires the understanding of the dialectics of the internal relations of imperialism and patriarchy.

A critical understanding of the 'democracy training' project calls for other theoretical and methodological tools, such as dialectical understandings of 'appearance' and 'essence'. For instance, can the stated 'liberatory' appearance of 'democracy training' be the expression of an

oppressive essence? Why do Iraqi and Kurdish nationalists, targets of US political engineering, see no distinction between this essence and phenomenon in ‘democracy training’? Are there deeper or more complex relations that cannot be readily comprehended? In her articulation of Marx’s dialectical conceptualization, Paula Allman (2007) states:

... to discover and then expose the truth of capitalism, Marx employed a specific type of critical thinking—actually, a new paradigm of critical thought. Marx’s dialectical conceptualization is not a method, in the strict sense of the word. In other words, it is not an abstract, formal, step-by-step approach but rather a manner of intellectually grasping the truth, or the internal structure/essence of any real phenomenon, which is not transparently obvious or observable (p. 4).

Another theoretical issue is the dialectics of consciousness and practice. Allman argues that it is the internal relations of knowledge/knowing and being/becoming, which constitute our consciousness/praxis. She differentiates between critical/revolutionary praxis and uncritical/reproductive praxis. This is indeed a central theoretical question for all educators. I hope that this study will contribute to raising this old philosophical question again by focusing on the dialectics of consciousness/praxis through the unpacking of one of the lessons in the ‘democracy training’ teaching material.

Democracy Training in Practice

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 underpinning of the training manual, *Foundations of Democracy*, is 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, 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 [sic]. 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, Ellen Meiksins Wood (2006) in her chapter "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 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. Paula Allman, Glenn Rikowski, Wayne Au, as were listed above, and others like Mike Cole (2004 and 2008) put at the core of their analysis the fundamental contradiction of capitalism, that is, the relationship of labor 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 articulates 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/bourgeoisie)... 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.

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