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The Third Way and Feminist Imaginings

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Abstract: *The Third Way purports to be a new way which merges the best elements of social democracy and neo-liberalism. Although it is an extremely ambiguous concept, it clearly exhibits androcentric characteristics. Its ambiguity offers adult educators the opportunity to influence its direction and operationalisation in order to improve the dis-location of women.*

Introduction

The Third Way is a term which has currency in intellectual, political and increasingly in educational circles (Ainley, 1998; Elsey, 1993; Gillborn, 1998; Halpin, 1999; Power & Whitty, 1999; Webster & Parsons, 1999). The concept has a long history which can be traced back to attempts to reject revolutionary Marxism and simultaneously retain the egalitarian ideals of Communism. In modern times, it re-emerged in 1982 as the Swedish *tredje vagens politik* (economic policy of the third way) which was an attempt to restore and revitalise the economic balance yet retain full employment and a large public sector providing social services.

Although Giddens, a major proponent of the idea, contends that the term does not refer to "some kind of mid-point between two extreme political philosophies" (1999, p. 1), many authors clearly find it difficult to disentangle themselves from that positioning. Thus, it has been used interchangeably with terms such as the centre left, the New Middle and the new radical centre. As well, there is much discussion of a new path which resolves the ideological tensions between Left and Right, between progressive liberalism and the radical free market and between social democracy and laissez-faire/neo-liberalism.

The struggle for authors is to extend their conceptualisation of the Third Way "beyond, rather than between, left and right" (Faux, 1999, p. 68) to consider fully issues of social justice, yet to accommodate conservative reforms. Those that believe in the Third Way argue that "a strong economy and a strong society are mutually reinforcing" (Latham, 1998, p. 384) and that the "sterile debate" (Clinton, 1998 in Abrams, 1999, p. 19) can move beyond those who identify government as the "answer" (ibid) and those who say it is "the enemy" (ibid).

The notion certainly has its detractors. It has been variously dismissed as "catchy as a journalistic headline" (Hemerijck & Visser, 1999, p. 117), as "a formula for winning elections" (Abrams, 1999, p. 17). Indeed the evidence suggests that latter might be a fair comment, for in various forms and to varying degrees, it has been adopted by political parties which now hold power in Britain, Germany, the United States, France, Western Europe and New Zealand.

Among those who believe it in, one persistent message is of hope for the marginalised. As such, it offers new possibilities to eliminate women's oppression. A useful question thus becomes: What is the potential of the Third Way to eliminate women's economic, political and social dis-location? To address this question, I first present an abbreviated exploration of the evolution and characteristics of the Third Way project. Second, I offer a brief feminist analysis of the concept and suggest a way forward. I conclude with a challenge to those who are concerned about women's dis-location.

The Third Way Project

The contemporary version of the Third Way supposedly evolved from several factors. First, the mixed results from both the social democratic and the neo-liberal projects fostered the search for a new approach which could both remediate inequalities and stabilise economies. Second, it was seen as a response to rapid changes which have transformed our worlds. These included: globalisation, advances in science and technology within an information age, and the transformation of societies' values and lifestyles.

The details of the modern vision of the Third Way are difficult to pin down. As Abrams notes: "the wonderful vagueness of the term…has been of immense utility, conjuring up as it does some magical mid-point between Left and Right that does not

obligate the individual invoking it to be very clear about specifics" (1999, p. 19). However, despite its lack of specificity and although authors tend to emphasise, to varying degrees, their Left or the Right positions in these visions, some common themes emerge.

First, and foremost, although there is a strong emphasis on balance, the Third Way tends to be discussed and analysed in terms of economic opportunities, wealth and growth, rather than in terms of social terms and conditions. Gidden's writings (see: 1994, 1998, 1999) initially stimulated much discussion and his works have a strong and clear social agenda. Although he is a prominent guru in constructing the United Kingdom project, the most authors write of a society revitalised through economic progress and stability. The emphasis is on the details of "deregulation and privatisation, free trade, flexible labour markets, smaller safety nets and fiscal austerity" (Reich, 1999, p. 1).

A second theme revolves around the role of civil society and the third sector . They are often mentioned as keystones to the project which blossom as the state sector remains contained and semi-privatised. Most of the literature subsumes the notion of the latter – charities and non-profit voluntary organisations (Giddens, 1999) – under the former – the wide range of organisations operating outside the governmental and business sectors (Rieff, 1999). Lifelong learning is presented as the vehicle to create a civil society. Community renewal, capacity building and an active citizenry are frequently identified as desirable outcomes of strengthening society, particularly at the local level. Most frequently, these outcomes are linked through civil society to up-skilling, increased human capital, a flexible workforce, and to economic stability and growth.

Third, the vision is strongly based in a particular moral stance. Notably, "(paid) work is seen as a moral precept as well as a policy idea" (Reich, 1999, p. 1). Social justice is hailed as a worthwhile goal and principles of fairness, decency, humaneness, collaboration and cooperation are promoted as means to meet the challenges of the times. Productive partnerships at all levels are presumed to be possible: among individuals, organisations, the public and private spheres and nations. This connectedness links individuals to government in a democratic process (Lloyd & Bilefsky, 1998). In sum, a "social compact" (Reich, 1998) is created in which all members and levels of society feel obligations toward one another and share the resolution of problems.

Fourth, the vision is one of optimism. It suggests that individuals embrace risk and explore the benefits inherent in the new way. Challenges are reframed as opportunities in this world of optimism. The vision is positive, future orientated and consists of "what might be or even should be" (Dahredorf, 1999) rather than the presentation of lived conditions. Advances in technology, science and the information age are key elements in this optimism.

Fifth, the Third Way honours the notion of diversity. Its response to the multiple needs and demands from groups of individuals is to discuss social inclusion. It acknowledges that context is an important definer of economic and social needs, and that context also exhibits great diversity. There are thus an infinite number of responses to the needs of those within diverse groupings, and multiple understandings of how democracy, justice and capitalism can be exercised within particular contexts.

A Feminist Critique

Although the Third Way project is not without hope for feminists, below I briefly present my major concerns, that is, my concerns as a woman who acknowledges the diversity in "woman" and also believes that women share an oppression which is socially constructed. In part, this reflects space limitations, but it also reflects my basic assessment of the project.

First, I have a basic difficulty with this new model because it is based on two models which never worked particularly well in alleviating women's oppression in the first instance. The positive changes that we have seen in our day to day lives have been limited, and inconsistent within, between and among groups of women who differ in class, race, colour, sexual orientation or ability. Indeed, in many countries we have seen our economic, social and political gains reduced or retracted under both models. Given the failure of those "old" models, I remain very suspect of this one which attempts to take the best from each of them.

Second, much of the Third Way discourse is androcentric (Stalker, 1996). The most obvious way in which it displays this is by its tendency to make women invisible. At its most basic, women are sim-

ply not acknowledged in the discourse. This is more than a little depressing to realise, given that deletion of women from a discourse is one of the most primitive, unsophisticated and longstanding androcentric practices. Mention of us, when it does occur in the literature, is all too often inserted in superficial or unproblematised ways (see Giddens, 1999).

The invisibility of women is fostered by the Third Way conceputalisations of two of its major tenets. In the first instance, the Third Way conceptualises "work" as a single entity and ignores the distinction between paid and unpaid work. This consistent failure to acknowledge these two different kinds of work negates the essential contribution of women to the social, economic and political well-being of a learning society through our unpaid work. As well, it silences discussion about the inequitable sexual division of labour and the link between the public and private spheres, that is, spheres of power organisations and decision making, which tend to be dominated by men and spheres of domesticity, nurturing and caretaking which tend to be dominated by women. Indeed, usage of the same terms, public and private, as equivalents to state and business suggests an insensitivity to feminist theorisations.

In the second instance, the notion of "diversity," places problems related specifically to women's oppression into a pool of problems. This homogenisation places 50% of the world's population in a peculiarly diminished position. The resultant analysis of problems and creation of strategic solutions lacks credibility when it does not address the specific problems which women face simply because of our sex (Bacchi, 2000).

We have seen that women are deleted from the discourse by the primarily male authors, and that two key conceptualisations also disadvantage us. In addition, the gendered nature of some issues are ignored. Thus, we read of the "economically displaced" (Reich, 1999, p. 1), "low income earners" (Nahan, 1998), "…new realities of double, one-and-a-half, and less than one earned income households, unstable family structures…." " (Hemerijck & Visser, 1999, p. 117) or a general critique that the Third Way does not suit "groups….who aspire to a way of life in which conventional employment is less central" (White, 1998, p. 4). Such discussions, presented without their close links to women's lives, do a disservice to women for whom these situations are particularly relevant. Similarly, discussions of

civil society ignore the gendered nature of a large portion of that phenomenon. Since women constitute the majority of participants who support the third, not-for-profit, voluntary sector, this weakens the total analysis. Given the high profile role which civil society is often allocated, this is an important silence.

The third major concern I have about the Third Way project is based in its optimism for the future. Located in the information age, based in computers, science and technology, it gives women little reason to be optimistic. Although women are shifting into these areas, there is considerable evidence that women have not adopted the cyberspace whole heartedly (Spender, 1995). At the same time, and in parallel with the more traditional media, cyberspace has become a prime promulgator of misogynistic messages, pornography and violence against women. The information age, applauded as a base for the success of the Third Way, does not deliver much hope to women unless reconstructed.

The fourth and final concern I have is based on the impure understandings we have of its success to date with regard to removing women's dis-location. Tony Blair, for example, has been identified as committed to improving the lot of women in the UK, under the banner of the Third Way. However, some of these advances have been led and controlled by the European Community (Dickens, 2000) and its involvement in sexual equality issues had less to do with its concern for them and more to do with expanding its jurisdiction and mobilizing support for the Community (Streeck, 1994).

In summary, the Third Way offers promise, but it clearly needs reconstructing if it is to address women's dis-location in society. This is the challenge for adult educators--to help shape that new way. This is not an improbable task, for the Third Way is not a reified reality. Rather it is a paradigm which, because of its highly ambiguous nature (see Eichbaum, 1999), is vulnerable to pressures.

We have an important opportunity to shape the Third Way discourse. We can call for the state's role in shaping society to be revitalised in a way which acknowledges women's economic, political and social location. Legislation has always had the capacity to improve women's lives. Legislation for equal pay for equal work, sex discrimination legislation, sexual harassment laws, the franchise to vote are just a few of the examples of that.

We can call, in addition to targeted legislation and laws, for an active state to provide funds, programmes, policies and structures targeted to women and to men's support of women. This separation out and treatment as "other" has its critics. However, it is one of a plethora of approaches which cannot be easily dismissed. Surely the failure of the First and Second Ways to deliver to women has demonstrated that no single way provides the solution. In keeping with the agenda of the Third Way, the trick will be to find a balance and the conditions under which the most successful approaches from each way can be enhanced.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Third Way is an emerging paradigm which may define, for many years into the future, the environment within which adult educators conduct their theorising, research and practice. It is a complex notion which has strong themes of economic opportunity, civil society, morality, optimism and diversity. I tried above to sound a warning about its deeply androcentric nature. At the same time, I suggested that adult educators have a "window of opportunity" to influence its direction and operationalisation. Given the strong connections of many in our field to civil society and the third sector, it is possible to imagine that we could make a real difference in the day to day lives of women. It is, as always, an exciting prospect.

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