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Young Women Learning in Social Struggle

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Abstract: Based on a study conducted with young activists, this paper discusses social movement learning and the personal and social transformations it fosters. The author presents a framework that broadens conventional interpretations of political economy by adding patriarchy and white supremacy to capitalism, as systems of domination, and as points of analysis.

Introduction

At the heart of social struggle there are unsettling and affirming moments – times when an activist is pushed to the limit of what she knows and forced to question who she is, and her role in the world. These critical moments are experienced in many contexts and are sparked by a number of social dynamics, but they always lead to some form of learning. In this paper, I look at what underlies learning and how it is translated into action, or not. While critical adult educators have been engaged in lively discussion on the role of education in transforming society, the study of informal learning in social movements is still emerging (Holst, 2002; Foley, 1999). I would like to develop this area of study by presenting research I conducted with young activists on their learning as they acted to transform their communities and themselves. I studied their experiences as expressions of larger socio-historical contexts, and investigated the connections and disconnections between learning and personal and social change.

Research Design

I attempted to answer two questions: What are young women's experiences of participating and engaging in social action? What is the role of learning in social struggle and how is it connected to change? Using a qualitative and feminist methodology, I tried to create 'reciprocally educative encounters' (Lather, 1991) where activists could reflect on their own experiences and learn about the challenges they, and other women, face in social action. I paid particular attention to relations of power within the research process.

I conducted interviews with five activists between the ages of 19 and 30. All of the respondents were currently, or had previously been involved in social justice work on various levels, namely: community organizing; direct action; non-violent action; and community education. They organized around issues such as: environmental justice; gender equality; antiracism; and economic justice/redistribution. I transcribed interview data verbatim and analysed it as social text. An important part of my study therefore consisted of looking for respondents' hesitations, laughter, mockeries and/or contradictory statements, and considering how these may reflect underlying social concerns, anxieties or tensions in larger society (Tobin, 2000).

Analytical Framework

Griff Foley's (1999) study of informal learning most closely resembles what I set out to accomplish with this research and I use it as a starting point. His theoretical

position is straightforwardly historical materialist. He relies on a ‘contestation’ framework, which assumes “that domination and resistance to it are universal, and that while domination has an ideological dimension, it originates in economic and political relationships” (p. 132). Although Foley is concerned with the role of ideology and discourse in learning and education, these take a peripheral role to the critique of capitalism. However, patriarchy and white supremacy – systems of sexual and racial hierarchy – like capitalism, are historical, economic, and political relations of rule. This is something that Foley fails to theorize within his analysis of political economy. Foley does not explicitly subsume race and gender into capitalism, but because his theoretical framework offers no guidance in thinking through the interconnectedness of these systems of domination, he implicitly collapses everything into capitalism. It is for this reason that I draw on the work of Himani Bannerji (1995) and Chandra Mohanty (2003), who provide a framework of analysis that posits a race-and-gender-conscious historical materialism, one that considers capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy to be interdependent relations of rule. Such a framework is useful to the study of social movement learning because it allows me to start from activists’ personal experiences and to understand them as a reflection of a broader social and multidimensional political whole.

Five Young Women

When a researcher begins with personal experiences, she begins with people’s lives. In my study, activists’ personal experiences and history of involvement in social action were central to my analysis of their learning. Below, I introduce five young activists.

Zahra immigrated to Canada from East Africa some fifteen years ago. From a young age, she participated in student protests and acted with a range of groups working to advance social justice issues. Motivated by her anger at the state of the world, she acted out of a sense of responsibility and obligation but also out of self-interest. She wanted to learn about other people’s struggles and mobilize around issues of physical survival and the redistribution of wealth. Social action eased the pain she felt at witnessing injustice. Her passion, and incredible ability to connect with others served her well in her activism.

Kathleen grew up in a small rural community in eastern Canada and also got involved in social action when she was young. Growing up in a very socially active family, she quickly stood out from her peers. Her motivation came from understanding that things were not right with the world and from the realization that not many of her schoolmates thought the way she did. Kathleen was well supported in taking action on issues she felt strongly about. She began by getting involved in an environmental youth network. From there her activism “just grew...like a tree [laughs].”

Similarly, Marie-Soleil grew up in a very politicized environment where Canadian federalism and Quebec sovereignty were hotly debated. She developed a political conscience very young. Despite her privileged upbringing, Marie-Soleil had a turbulent coming out as a lesbian at the age of thirteen. She dropped out of school, faced a few rough years of drug addiction and performed sexual acts for drugs. She hung out with an anarchist crowd but always felt like an outsider. As an adult, she worked with troubled and delinquent adolescents, in particular those involved with drugs and

prostitution. Marie-Soleil's own history of struggle drew her to work for the safety, dignity and rights of sex workers.

Hannah's activist roots also run deep. Growing up, she was involved in a number of environmental actions and volunteering through her congregation. She later directed her energy towards the issue of women's safety against male violence and privileged actions in women's only spaces. Although Hannah was supported and encouraged in her activism, she had another motivation: breaking her isolation. She made a point of connecting with people who shared common values, beliefs and politics. Hannah treasured the community and friendship aspect of social action and said it contributed to her sense of safety.

When I met Nina she had just graduated from high school and went from working on the school newspaper and writing letters to the editor to participating in anarchist reading circles and engaging in direct action. She was in a transition of sorts, trying to figure out where her life would take her next. Nina also spoke of her need to find community in the midst of exploitation and domination. She sought out groups of people who were questioning capitalism from various perspectives. Her first public demonstration was a catalyst for educating herself and it guided her future actions.

Key Findings

These activists shared a commonality: they all experienced violence in social struggle. But this violence had multiple roots grounded within a racist, capitalist and patriarchal society. Below, I present key lessons and discuss the social and political dynamics they embody.

Protesting Economic Globalization

For Kathleen, Nina, Zahra and Marie-Soleil, participating in protests against the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City, and the G-20 Finance Ministers' and Central Bank of Governors' Meeting in Ottawa, were learning experiences. Social action demystified the authority and benevolence of the State. They learned that the State does not offer protection to those who oppose it.

One of the first things I learned about being involved in this is that, first of all, democracy is an illusion. Our governments aren't working for us. And, you know, the first time I was gassed and hit with a rubber bullet, I was like: 'Man! These people are supposed to be the people who are protecting me!' And I was so naïve. (Nina)

Down there [the peaceful march] they were playing tom-toms; there was a spirit of celebration. Up there [near the fence] it was different. People were lying on the ground, there were clubs hitting... residents were inviting protesters into their homes to avoid tear gas. I came out of that moment more radical on the economic question. (Marie-Soleil)

All of the cops were armed, except for us. You see they were bombing us with gas. They were bombing us with everything, and we had no protection, none! ...If I participate in a protest [in the future] I will arm myself...at the very least, I take a mask. (Zahra)

In taking direct action against corporate globalization, these activists learned about the criminalization of dissent and the lack of physical safety for activists taking part

in protests. But there were also some notable lessons that demystified the solidarity and support offered by the groups within which they acted. Kathleen recounted her experience of being tear gassed: “When I was in Quebec city, the tear gas affected my body in a way that made me menstruate for five weeks straight ... and I really wanted to have a women’s health discussion group but it, it never really happened.” Another time, Kathleen was arrested and was essentially left to deal with the consequences of collective action on her own: “The organization was like, ‘yeah, well, we’re gonna support people after jail happens.’ And I got one phone call about a meeting and I received two emails. And I know that there are hundreds of us but they organized a march and it went terribly wrong and I haven’t been given any support with that.” Sometimes, activists faced violence from the people they were acting with. As Nina recounted: “One girl ... a guy forced himself upon her and he wasn’t an activist but he was involved in what we were doing as a member of the community and we wanted to reach out to the community ... everyone is at different levels in their understanding of gender oppression and so that’s kind of inconvenient.” Activists who face assault or violence from their peers are trapped; if they denounce abuse, they contribute to further criminalizing those in solidarity with their cause. Mechanisms that hold the entire group of women and men accountable for what happens during social action are urgently needed. Under the current circumstances, *being aware* of oppression seems to be the only system of defence. Whether they are dealing with the negative impacts of their actions, or their legal repercussions, activists often find themselves with little support and few resources.

Working With and Against Women’s Organizations

Some of the women I interviewed had chosen women’s organizations as platforms for action. The contradictions and conflicts they faced made these organizations at once supportive and alienating. Thus, they became sites of struggle. Activists learned about the impact of holding views that differed from those held by the organization they were involved with. Marie-Soleil’s work with women in the sex industry is a good example. The divide between those who consider sex work to be violence against women in and of itself, and those who argue that the leading violence done to sex workers is criminalization, is particularly heated among Quebecois feminists. Some organizations only offer services to women who practice abstinence. When Marie-Soleil fought to ensure women could receive services unconditionally she met with ferocious resistance. “It was an ideological struggle between the community workers. The centre, at the time, offered help to people in difficulty...but there were many rules...we had to struggle a lot for women to be able to receive services even though they were still engaging in sex work and consuming drugs.” These kinds of struggles eventually grew into a full-blown sex workers’ movement. “It was a revolution ...it confronted people tremendously, deep in their gut, in their deep-seated values, particularly women who had acted against porn and prostitution in the seventies. Distances were created among people and women, in particular among some of my older lesbian friends.” Marie-Soleil describes the feeling of alienation well: “Our work happens with the women’s movement but also against the women’s movement. It’s difficult to deal!”

After years of working within various women’s groups, Zahra grew weary of the so-called solidarity being promoted in the name of gender. “For solidarity to exist, you have to first recognize and respect the other ...you have to respect his history and respect

the suffering he has experienced.” Gender is not enough to bring women together and it does not sufficiently address questions of survival and universal entitlements. This exclusive focus on gender negatively impacted Zahra’s desire to act within women’s organizations. “It’s hard for me to think in terms of women’s movement...I prefer to see myself as a Black woman. I prefer it because that’s the way I am seen, and I know I am seen this way... Never will I consider myself a Woman.” In Canadian society, citizens are institutionalized, classified and racialized according to various categories (Bannerji, 2000). Commonality of oppression cannot be assumed. Unless social action tackles these divisions, it will be divided along the same lines to reflect people’s various struggles for recognition, power and survival.

Hannah also learned about the cracks in solidarity that are present within groups. She spoke extensively of working within a feminist collective, and the protection accorded to her as a lesbian woman. Safe, queer positive spaces were central to her survival in a heterosexist society. But she also spoke of the racism and oppression within women’s groups and the misogyny in queer positive spaces. “Women deal with the same shit in progressive movements as they do on the outside ...I’ve struggled with that for a while. I wanted to fight against racism but I didn’t know how because I didn’t want to speak for women of colour but I didn’t want to stay silent when racism is going on...a few years ago it clicked for me ...I have white skin privilege and if I do want to speak up against racism I do that from a white woman’s point of view.” While aligning oneself with like-minded people may support social action and help locate one’s identity in broader society, it can also be an exclusionary and “potentially repressive fiction” (Mohanty, 2003). Learning about this fiction and one’s own domination of others can be unsettling. Hannah described it as a ‘crashing down’ moment. As Sherene Razack (1998) argues, “education for social change is not so much about new information as it is about disrupting the hegemonic ways of seeing through which subjects make themselves dominant.” (p.10) In this sense, the ‘crashing down’ is also an opportunity for transforming power relations.

Connecting Learning to Personal and Social Change

As these examples illustrate, social movement learning was shaped by a number of interdependent relations of rule. Marie-Soleil’s struggle within the sex workers’ movement provides a notable example. Women involved in the sex trade were labourers in a capitalist economy; their bodies were classed, racialized, and readily available to men. These women were seen as threats to the social order and as vulnerable and in need of protection. The political economy of this movement actually necessitates an analysis of capitalism, patriarchy and white supremacy. And the study of social movement learning should take this into account.

On a more personal level, being involved in social struggle entailed questioning deep-rooted assumptions about oppression and benevolence. These young women’s involvement had far-reaching effects and their learning significantly affected their lives. It impacted their choice of employment and friends and affected their choice of strategies and actions. For example, Hannah no longer works with men; Zahra does not participate in direct action without some form of protection; Kathleen engages in actions autonomously rather than with a group; Marie-Soleil always entertains the possibility of shifting from negotiation to direct action; Nina ensures that public education is an important part of her action. Learning was closely connected to tensions and conflicts and

these influenced how activists perceived their role in the world. Intense moments such as being arrested, harassed, tear gassed and silenced within groups, acted as reminders of what they were struggling against both *out there* but also within supposedly safe spaces. These activists were learning about violence as they were experiencing it and this violence was shaped by racism, capitalism and patriarchy. Some lessons lead to a positive change in behaviour – Hannah learned about her own privilege – but as Nina’s story of sexual assault illustrates, lessons also lead to behaviour that accommodates rather than challenges oppression. Beyond personal transformations, their actions had broader repercussions. They drew public attention to the need for low-income housing; they supported sexual assault survivors; and they brought down the gates of economic globalization, making the G-20 and the OAS meetings issues for public scrutiny and concern. Their actions were pedagogical in and of themselves, serving to educate the broader public about global social justice issues.

Discussion and Implications

This study corroborates many of Foley’s (1999) findings. Learning was often the result of crises and it remained for the most part unacknowledged until it was articulated in discussions with others. Lessons can be summarized as follows:

- The authority and benevolence of the State are demystified in social action.
- Working within activist groups sometimes provides a platform for action but other times acts as a barrier to full participation. Solidarity cannot be taken for granted nor can commonality of oppression be assumed.
- Crises are at the heart of learning in struggle; activists learn about violence as they are experiencing it from the State, civil society and their peers.
- Participating in social action entails learning about yourself and others’ struggles.
- Social action is full of tensions and contradictions. It both challenges and reproduces domination and oppression.
- Activists’ experiences in social action are shaped by a number of historical, economic, and political relations of rule.

Working back and forth between the stories I gathered and adult education theory, I came to the understanding that the framework proposed by Foley (1999) is limited. In this study, I privileged a multifaceted analysis to the study of social movement learning, one that considers the everyday experiences and larger social processes at play in social struggle. Considering how systems of domination work in interlocking and mutually supportive ways, it is difficult to attribute an experience to one particular dynamic. Lessons were most often attributable to the whole experience in all of its complexity.

Conventional interpretations of political economy can be broadened by adding patriarchy and white supremacy to capitalism, as systems of domination, and as points of analysis. On a practical level, a multidimensional analysis can better equip activists and scholars in thinking through the workings of power within social movements. More significantly, activists’ experiences and learning act as a starting point for a comprehensive social analysis (Bannerji, 1995) with the intention of articulating and putting into practice more radical strategies for promoting social justice.

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