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Activist Forest Monks, Environmental Adult Education and the Construction of Civil Society in Thailand

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Abstract: Situated at the intersection of adult learning in social movements, the construction of civil society, and environmental adult education, the grassroots movement of Buddhist “forest monks” in Thailand has much to teach us. This paper charts the movement’s history, philosophy, and practice in the construction of Thai civil society.

New Social Movements, Adult Learning and Civil Society

The most comprehensive recent consideration of the role of adult education in New Social Movements (NSM) is probably John Holst’s (2002) *Social Movements, Civil Society and Radical Adult Education*. In the book, Holst makes a strong case for a critical Marxist analysis of NSM (the environmental, peace, feminist, and identity movements) and their role as agents of social change in the construction of civil society. Holst (2002, pp. 5-6), following Gramsci, argues for NSM and the learning activities within them as “educational work for politics,” in the sense of building class solidarity for revolution, much in the tradition of labor unions and revolutionary workers’ parties (Old Social Movements). He proposes that theorists of NSMs, as “radical pluralists” or “post-Marxists,” have over-estimated the transformative potential of what are largely reformist middle-class (petit bourgeois) movements, “easily co-opted by capitalist democracy” (p. 8), and have under-estimated the potential for state repression of these movements: “For all their talk of NSMs coming to the ‘defense of the lifeworld’ and civil society, very little mention is made of the role of the state in repressing these efforts even when they are not interested in seizing state power” (Ibid. p. 55). As Holst (2002) argues (with finality), those who would draw on Gramsci’s notions of counter-hegemony in the construction of civil society through NSM are rather wistfully misreading him:

Essentially, the distortions of Gramsci come largely from radical pluralists who hold positions in institutions of civil society—such as schools, universities, community-based organizations—who want to believe that their educational work creates organic intellectuals and reform-oriented organizing within social movements is counter-hegemonic political work, faithful to Gramsci...[However,] Gramsci was not a radical pluralist. He was a communist who believed in the absolute necessity of a revolutionary vanguard of the working class... (which) must lead and direct the spontaneous actions of a broad spectrum of people from the oppressed classes toward an assault on the bourgeois state. (pp. 67-68).

As Holst sees it, following Gramsci (and Lenin), it is really only within a vanguard worker’s party that radical adult learning takes place: organic intellectuals are “formed through the educational activities of working class parties...[and] meld with traditional intellectuals who have committed class suicide and work to form a proletarian outlook or consciousness based on the knowledge production of the working class within the perspective of a ‘proletarian political science’”(pp.109-110). As such, for Holst, the party is the primary site of radical adult learning

and education, which are primarily ideological in nature. As he argues, working class adult educators and “traditional intellectuals” (who renounce their bourgeois roots) should above all act as educators for the development of a revolutionary proletarian consciousness.

Welton (1993), writing on the same topic, but from what Holst (2002) characterizes as a “radical pluralist” perspective (p. 98), by contrast, characterizes New Social Movements themselves as the primary learning site for radical adult education. Following Habermas, Welton (1993) sees the informal adult learning which takes place in NSM as “communicative learning processes” which counter the “colonization of the lifeworld” and the “brutalization of nature” by both the state and large corporations. In Welton’s view, the primary importance of NSM is in the construction and democratization of an “exuberant” civil society outside both the state and the marketplace (a kind of Velvet Revolution extended globally). Within civil society, social learning processes will promote deliberative democracy, and it is the responsibility of adult educators to help bolster these processes. As Palacios (2004) notes, Welton, like Freire, emphasizes the importance of reflection and dialogue in creating a participatory democracy to rebuild civil society in NSMs which challenge the terms of engagement with the state, but do not primarily work to overthrow it.

For Welton (2001) and other radical pluralists, New Social Movements are creative and democratizing public spaces. In the context of a neo-conservative onslaught on the welfare state, the adult learning which takes place within New Social Movements is all the more important in the defense and expansion of civil society (Welton, 1997). In particular, Welton (2002) suggests that it “is time to bring listening out of the theoretical basement” (p. 197) as a pedagogical practice in the maintenance and construction of democratic society. Adult education must create the infrastructure for creative, “communicative interaction” in the public sphere. This “political listening” will begin to build solidarity across differences among civil society actors (e.g. environmentalists and loggers; pro-abortion and “pro-life” advocates) and promote communicative action to bolster civil society (Welton, 2001, 2002). In Habermasian terms, Welton (2001) sees communicative action as fostering rebellions “from the lifeworld against system intrusion” (e.g. massive labor demonstrations in support of school teachers by-passed by state appropriation of curriculum design, the anti-apartheid movement). When social movements and activists encounter repression from the state, Welton (2002) tells us rather prophetically, that this experience will serve as “a symbol of the irrepressible spirit of resistance in the meanest of circumstances. The human spirit will triumph in the end” (p. 27). In short, where Holst would argue for socialist revolution, Welton (2002) embraces a faith in humanism and “post-communist” spirituality and morality:

it is not a question of setting civil society against the economy (or state) as it is a matter of locating critical resources and collective capacity to actually challenge the economic structures of domination. The Marxist critics of civil society fall back on a largely rhetorical position, parading outmoded notions of revolution at the point of production. No matter this revolution has never occurred. In our spiritually and morally post-communist world, we must gamble on lifeworld resources and the communicative power of a dynamic, intellectually alert citizenry. (p. 29)

Environmental Adult Education and New Social Movements

In recent scholarship in the field, Environmental Adult Education has been positioned as part of a global new social movement for human rights and social justice (Clover, 2002, 2003; Hill, 2003). Echoes of both Marxist and radical pluralist thought can be found in the discourse of

environmental adult education as an environmental justice (EJ) movement. It is connected not only to the oppression of poor people and the working class, but also oppressions along lines of race, ethnicity and gender. As Clover (2003) tell us, the “ideological underpinnings of globalization of increased competition, production, marketing privatization, and deregulation—all in the single-minded pursuit of wealth—have created massive ecological imbalances of unprecedented proportion,” (p. 6) where women, indigenous peoples, poor people, people of color and the working class have disproportionately born the brunt of environmental costs of globalization. Like Holst (2002), environmental adult education as a social justice movement starts with a Marxist critique of global capitalism, but also recognizes racism, sexism and other interlocking oppressions, and thus works to build alliances across a broad base of Old and New social movements. These include “community-based Green political parties, labor and trade unions... farmers’ associations, agriculture and food cooperatives... guilds... socially active religious and spiritual movement(s).” (Hill, 2003, pp. 30).

The environmental justice movement also shares in the radical pluralist tradition. Like Welton, Hill (2003) believes in the power of NGOs to strengthen democratic civil society: “Education for ecological democracy must begin with the growth and empowerment of community-based organizations that are at the heart of civil society” (p. 31). Echoing both Welton and Holst, Clover (2002) recognizes the repressive power of the state: “environmental problems are political... Although hundreds of people attempt to take action everyday, there are powerful and even brutal countervailing forces which can easily bring about defeat and instill fear, apathy and the sense that nothing can be done” (pp.321-322). However, while Holst would call for the development of working class consciousness and revolution, and Welton for communicative action, Clover (2002) draws on Paulo Freire and proposes the need for “educative-activism;” that is, for *concientización* as the basis of environmental adult education, “building upon people’s existing knowledge to create new knowledge, working with fear, apathy, and old habits through a framework of social-environmental critique and educative-activism” (p. 322). As an example of the sort of “educative-activism” envisioned by Clover, Dip Kapoor (2004, 2003), in his work with the Kondh Adivasi environmental movement in Orissa, India, shows how a local environmental movement among indigenous people has laid the groundwork for wider popular opposition challenging both state and corporate hegemony. Following Gramsci, Kapoor (2003) argues:

In terms of a politics of radical democracy, such movements need to find ways of globalizing these disruptions by forming a historic bloc of social movement in order to expand the impact of localized resistances with the view to protect the environment and the Adivasi. [Environmental Popular Education] can help to build this counterhegemonic challenge to global capital and state-led destructive development... (p. 55)

Activist Forest Monks in Thailand

In the tradition of the Adivasi environmental movement studied by Kapoor, the Chipko movement of courageous tree hugging women, tree squatting Earth First activists in the Pacific Northwest and other grassroots environmental movements, activist Buddhist monks in rural Thailand have, since the late 1980s, led a popular movement to protect local forest, water and land resources while at the same time challenging the dominant state and corporate “economist” development paradigms and practices. Most famously, these “development monks” (*phra nak phathanaa*) and “ecology monks” (*phra nak anuraksa*) have led local villagers and NGO activists in the symbolic ordaining of large trees and forests (*buat paa*) in the hopes that this will

not only protect forests from logging, but will also teach people the value of conserving forest resources, and the relevance of Buddhist doctrine (*dhamma*) in understanding and questioning the negative environmental impacts of rapid economic growth.

In their interpretation of Buddhist *dhamma*, activist monks have helped lead a popular rural movement to temper the deleterious effects of deforestation, Green Revolution cash cropping, the pollution of local waters, rampant consumerism and other destructive practices embodied in the path of economic growth and modernization embraced by the nation's development planners and business elite. Drawing on notions of "grassroots socialism" (*sangkhom niyom*) in Buddhist teachings, activist monks such as Phra Prajak (an early leader in the movement) have relied on three Buddhist principles to inform their teachings: (a) the interdependence of society, culture and nature; (b) restraint (from greed), social equity and generosity; and (c) loving-kindness and respect for the community (Taylor 1993a). As a second activist monk, Phra Kamkian, has put it: "Nature is our greatest teacher. Apart from the wood's mind-soothing peace, you can get answers to life's problems by carefully observing nature, the inter-relatedness of all things, harmony and balance. Nature teaches us the value of simplicity as well as the essence of life" (cited in Sanitsuda, 1991, p. 69). However, as Phra Kamkian also understands, villagers preoccupied with immediate concerns of poverty, indebtedness and hunger are little able to appreciate Buddhist ecology, free themselves from desire or practice Buddhist meditation. Thus he, like many other such monks, has devoted himself to developing local self-sufficiency in agriculture, moving villagers in thought and practice away from a "greed-based" cash-cropping economy destructive of local land and forest. To this end, he has created a model organic farm in his local community, and has helped organize cooperative rice and buffalo banks, while at the same time teaching the value of forests and ecology within Buddhist thought.

For business and government interests involved in land speculation and illegal logging, or more mildly in the promotion of unpopular reforestation projects, or the simple steadfast promotion of a development model predicated on agribusiness, consumerism and export-oriented industrial growth (Bello et. al. 1998), activist forest monks and the NGO and popular movement which supports them represent a powerful grassroots challenge to established authority. By contrast, for local people struggling to make a living, these same monks represent the logical extension of the role Buddhist monks have long occupied at the center of village life, education, culture, ritual, medicine, and conflict resolution. The tree ordination ceremonies conducted by Phra Prajak and other ecology monks also resonate with Thai villagers' beliefs about the sanctity of certain large trees; notably, the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment and other exceptionally large trees in which local spirit lords are said to reside (Isager and Ivarsson, 2002). Beyond the ordination of individual trees, ecology monks have also ritually extended a kind of symbolic fence around entire community forests to protect them from logging by outsiders, and have led "sanctified" tree planting ceremonies as well, thus protecting them from being cut in the future. In addition, by recruiting and sending out teams of such monks to create "forest monasteries" (*wat paa*) in areas under threat, they have called on a tradition of forest monks going off into the deep forest to meditate in nature (Sanitsuda, 1991).

However, in promoting an activist interpretation of Buddhism and community development, forest monks have also met resistance from the state Buddhist hierarchy (the *Sanga*), from developers and the government, and have been chastised for their "political" work by those who believe their role should be strictly confined to the spiritual realm (Darlington, 1998). At times, powerful business and government interests feeling threatened by activist monks have cracked down on them, sometimes violently. In 1991, for example, Phra Prajak was

thrown into jail for his environmental activism, marking the first time a robed Buddhist monk had been imprisoned in Thailand (Tavivat, 1998). Initially, he led villagers to oppose an eviction and relocation plan in which a monoculture eucalyptus plantation was to be established on village lands for pulp and paper production. He was then accused of being a “Russian monk” and a “communist monk” and faced intimidation and harassment by local thugs (*nakleng*) and the military (Taylor, 1993a), echoing an earlier history of state repression of local and student activists in the 1970s. More recently, the murder of another activist monk, Phra Sopoju Suwajano on June 17, 2005, after he exposed a local land-poaching scheme, has been cited as an example of a growing and deadly backlash against environmental and human rights activists as a whole (Asian Human Rights Commission, 2005). A total of 18 environmentalist “human rights defenders” have been killed under the current *Thai Rak Thai* regime of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra since January of 2001 (Haberkorn, 2005), bringing into question the Thai state’s ability to protect its citizens from extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary killings, and thus calling on us all as “activist outsiders” to express our concern (see first Reference listed below).

Conclusions

In brief, the forest monk movement can be seen as a new social movement with sparse ties to both the urban Thai middle class and the emerging industrial proletariat. Rather, it is a village-based popular movement led by dissident Buddhist leaders who propose and themselves live out a local alternative to both global corporate and state paradigms of development and livelihood. In this sense, it is a counter-hegemonic movement which supports the development of civil society, but is not a revolutionary workers’ movement or Old Social Movement in the sense proposed by Holst (1992). Brutal repression is, however, at best ignored, if not sanctioned by an authoritarian Thai state. Forest monks and their followers have long existed outside the official Buddhist hierarchy of the nation, but as the forests have rapidly disappeared around them, some have turned activist. In many ways, they embody a “revolutionary Buddhist consciousness” based on shared material concerns over deforestation, destruction of livelihood and the rampant ideology of global corporate consumerism. This is a somewhat more radical version of the “engaged Buddhism” promoted most famously by Ajarn Sulak Sivaraksa (1988) as a Thai alternative to imported Western notions of economic growth and development.

As an environmental adult education justice movement (Hill, 2003), the Thai movement does serve to counter state and corporate “colonization of the lifeworld” and “brutalization of nature,” and does function to create democratic civil society, as Welton (1993) proposes. However, it also challenges the power of local business people, logging companies and their political supporters. Its survival is thus not just a question of “political listening” or “gambling” on the “lifeworld resources and the communicative power of a dynamic, intellectually alert citizenry.” Gambling, as Holst intimates, is in many ways a middle class privilege enjoyed by those of us who live in the lifeworlds of “deliberative democracies” such as Canada or the U.S.. While we are contemplating the deliberative construction of civil society through NSMs, and the role of adult learning and education within these, our compatriots in countries such as Thailand or India are faced with violence, repression and even death. As Kapoor (2004) argues, the support of outside activists is crucial to these local movements and the need to build global civil society coalitions now stronger than ever.

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