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View from the Stoop: Exploring the Impact of Place on Learning in Social Movements

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Abstract: Studies from the field of geography offer insightful perspectives about the impact of place within social movements. Issues such as the complex construction of space, contested discourse, and boundary setting, particularly relating to gender, are affirmed within oral history interviews with women of the Catholic Worker Movement.

Introduction

Scholars who explore the dynamics of learning within social movements address the context within which social movements develop (for example, Finger, 1989; Foley, 1999; Hill, 2002; Kilgore, 1999; Rachal, 1998; Welton, 1993a). Adult education historians who attend to those on the margins also often place context at the center of their work (for example, Hart, 1990; Scheid, 1995; Welton, 1993b). Context has been variously defined and applied within the literature to address the layers of complexity brought about by intersections of race, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, familial and societal structures within contemporary and historical settings. Attending to the conceptualization of place within the study of social movements has much to offer those who examine learning within these settings. An exploration of studies which address the concept of place will be followed by comparisons to conceptualizations of place within oral history interviews conducted with women of the Catholic Worker movement. It is hoped that the resulting insights and questions will enrich investigations of learning within historic social movements.

Concepts of Place

How does a particular “view from the stoop” encourage social movement engagement? How do conceptualizations of place assist the process of understanding learning within social movements? Many recent studies from the field of geography offer perspectives on the nature of place within social movements, an essential aspect of historic and geographic context-setting (Martin, 2003; Martin and Miller, 2003; Miller, 2000; Hou and Rios, 2003). Two seminal works commonly cited by contemporary geographers include *Topophilia* by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1974) and *The Production of Space* by sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1992).

Tuan (1974) examines attitudes and values toward the environment, defining topophilia as: “the affective bond between people and place or setting” (p. 4). Tuan posits that places that are most “compelling” for us have “become the carrier of emotionally charged events or perceived as...symbol[s]” (p. 93). Tuan notes the following about urban neighborhoods:

intimate space is a segment of the street, a street corner or courtyard: this is the felt neighborhood....A large city is often known at two levels: one of high abstraction, and another of specific experience. At one extreme the city is a symbol or an image (captured in a postcard or a slogan) to which one can orient oneself; at the other it is the intimately experienced neighborhood(pp. 223-224).

Lefebvre (1992) explores the production of space, seeking to develop a theory of social space which accounts for the hegemonic practices of neocapitalist societies. Lefebvre’s utilizes the following conceptualizations: spatial practice, perceived by the relationship between “daily

reality (daily routine) and urban reality (the routes and networks which link up the places set aside for work, 'private life' and leisure);" representations of space, conceived by planners and architects; and representational space, lived "through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'" (pp. 38-39).

Lefebvre's (1992) concept of representational or lived space (p. 39), together with Yi-Fu Tuan's notion of the intimately experienced neighborhood (p. 224), provide a helpful framework which geographers have used to explore the impact of place on social movement involvement. Additional considerations in examining the impact of place include: the complex construction of social spaces, issues of scale and perspective, contested discourse and contention, and boundaries, particularly relating to gender.

Martin (2003) defines place as "socially constructed through several complex and intertwined elements," serving as "a setting for and situated in the operation of social and economic processes" and providing "a 'grounding' for everyday life and experience;" she explores the ways in which "the experiences of daily life in the material spaces of a neighborhood" shape social movement participation (pp. 731-732). Sociologist Gieryn (2000) describes the ways in which the structures of daily life exclude, noting that:

place sustains difference and hierarchy both by routinizing daily rounds in ways that exclude and segregate categories of people, and by embodying in visible and tangible ways the cultural meanings variously ascribed to them (p. 474).

Utilizing collective-action framing from social movement theory (how movements "articulate issues, values, and concerns in ways that foster collective identity and activism"), Martin (2003) explores "'place-based collective-action frames,' or 'place-frames' to highlight the potential relationship between activism based on an idea of neighborhood and the material experiences of that place" (p. 733).

Miller (2000) asserts the importance of scale, noting: "place-based contextual effects are not reducible to localized neighborhood effects," but instead "represent the interaction of multiple processes operating at a variety of geographic scales" (p. 17). The close-up view of lived experience within a particular community offers rich insight into daily human life, "but may blind us to the powerful institutional and structural forces" shaping that life (p. xi). Miller notes that "sexual, gender, 'racial,' class, and ethnic identities are constructed through and obtain their meanings in, space" (p. 34). Miller offers another significant concept using the words of poet and author Andrei Codrescu: "what we see depends on where we stand" (Codrescu, 1996, in Miller, 2000, p. xi). While this notion of perspective rests on the scale at which we view the world, it also gets at the shaping of a particular view. The view from the stoop is determined by hegemonic structures, and in the relationship of the viewer to those structures.

In addition to the complex construction of social places, and the scale and perspective used to view them, contested discourse and contention further illuminate the power of place to impact social movement involvement. Martin and Miller (2003) consider the ways in which the construction of a place assists in understanding contention within that place. This construction "by capitalists, planners, communities, social groups, religious institutions and media shape place-specific notions of fear, safety, comfort, and belonging" (p. 148). Resulting action and contention emerge out of "the context of place-specific social norms, e.g., notions of place-appropriate social behavior (to be violated), and place-based symbolism (to appeal to)" (p. 148). Hou and Rios (2003) further assert that "the process of community-driven place making requires a discourse-building process with purposeful framing of issues and construction of meanings" (p. 26).

Racial, ethnic, class, and gender boundaries create very real expectations for action in private and public spaces. Of particular interest to this review is the nature of gendered boundaries. Hayden (1997) notes that “one way to limit the economic and political rights of groups has been to constrain social reproduction by limiting access to space” (p. 117). Miller (2000) notes that constructions of gender are “clearly spatialized, as norms of gender-appropriate behavior vary by location and the spaces of daily life are conventionally structured in terms of a female private/domestic sphere and a male public/political/economic sphere” (p. 35).

Tuason (2000) examines the activism of women in urban parks in Chicago during the Progressive Era. Her research demonstrates the changing role of women during this time, from the focus on home and family to a broader public “housekeeping” role (p. 141). As women pushed against gender boundaries related to physical space, they also “claimed more social space within the urban public arena” (p. 146). Similarly, Hayden’s (1997) examination of urban landscape history explores the built environment as well as the gender segregation experienced by women at the turn of the twentieth century.

What did the women of the Catholic Worker movement actually see from the stoop on the Lower East Side of New York during the 1930s and 1940s? How did that view and that specific place affect their social movement involvement and their learning?

View from the Stoop: Historical Context and Women’s Words

Drawing from oral history interviews carried out by the author during the summer of 2003 with women who participated in the Catholic Worker movement during the 1930s and 1940s, several themes related to the impact of place emerge from descriptions of daily life, affirming findings from geographic studies. The women in this study share common experiences of being raised in ethnically strong Catholic churches and schools, while differing in terms of ethnicity, educational level, class, and life experience. Women’s words highlight intimate daily experiences of hegemonic economic and social structures within specific neighborhoods, contested discourse/space, and boundary setting, particularly in relation to “public housekeeping” initiatives defined by gender.

Before examining women’s narratives, a brief introduction to the Catholic Worker movement and the particular context of the Lower East Side of New York will provide important historical and social context. The Catholic Worker movement developed alongside the publication of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper during the Great Depression, intended to address the needs of workers and the unemployed from a Catholic perspective. Co-founders Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin published the first issue of the newspaper in Union Square in New York on May 1, 1933. As a result of the issues raised in the paper, people from all across the country flocked to New York to learn and to become part of the movement, taking what they learned back to cities and farming communities across the country.

The view from the stoop for women of the Catholic Worker in New York in the 1930s and 1940s included Italian and Chinese neighborhoods; overcrowded and dilapidated tenement buildings; evicted families searching for housing; thousands of working poor and homeless guests waiting in lines for food and clothing; as well as Catholic Workers gathered to publish and distribute *The Catholic Worker* newspaper, discuss books and learn from speakers addressing current economic and social issues.

The unhealthy living conditions of tenement life provide testimony to hegemonic nature of the social construction of place in the Lower East Side: “perhaps four hundred square feet of living space for an entire family, minimal plumbing, only one or two exterior windows”

demonstrating the “claustrophobic experiences of immigrants living for decades in crowded, unhealthy space (as part of the reproduction of the labor force)” (Hayden, 1997, p. 126). Dorothy Day (1952) noted about the Catholic Worker house of hospitality on Mott Street that two houses had been built on the lot, with the original house in the back and a second building built in front. Day noted that the “rear house had two rooms on either side with one toilet between them, open fireplaces, a sink and a washtub in each kitchen. In these primitive, unheated bathless flats, make of a kitchen and bedroom, the Irish first came to live and then the Italians” (p. 189). Women who came to live at the Catholic Worker experienced a variety of living arrangements. Some lived in the House of Hospitality on Mott Street, and others in tenement apartments nearby. Those who lived in the Catholic Worker house lived alongside a diverse group of people. Mary Durnin recounts: “I lived on the 3rd floor with a Japanese Buddhist, Kichi Harada.” Helen Adler describes the place she shared with a recovering alcoholic:

Mrs. Lavin was the one that cursed me all night....the walls were thin...we were [in] dumbbell apartments...she had a big room and I had a little room with no windows...And I was right next to her dumbbell...and she stole all my clothes the first day I came and sold them for wine.

Betty Doyle describes where she stayed on her first visit to Mott Street:

We had never really seen such poverty...it was a little tiny 2 bedroom, with just a toilet off the kitchen, no sink. The sink was a big metal tub in which you took out the inner portion to take a bath. Then there was no refrigerator...you just put your food out on a ledge...a little box on the ledge. And if it was summer, it was just too bad...you couldn't keep it.

A major component of the movement was the production of The Catholic Worker newspaper, and its regular distribution in Union Square, a center for political debate. The newspaper created opportunities to provide an alternative discourse and to contest mainstream conceptualizations about economic and social structures. Betty Doyle notes: “there was a lot of radicalism around...that was new to us. But it was all very thrilling for young people.” Mary Durnin remembers the excitement of selling the newspaper in Union Square:

There would be a lot of soapboxes around and people would be orating on their favorite subject. Peter [Maurin] would be there speaking. And then there would be clusters of people around each soapbox...Some would be fundamentalists, speaking on Scripture, and socialists...

In addition to the experience of daily living space, women were involved in “public housekeeping” tasks within their neighborhoods, including finding apartments for evicted families, establishing a maternity guild, working at the breadline and distributing clothing to the homeless. During the 1930s, landlords regularly evicted families that could not pay rent. By 1935, new tenement housing law required that landlords fireproof buildings and provide a toilet for each family (“Moratorium,” 1935). If landlords chose not to renovate, buildings were condemned and people were evicted.

The Catholic Worker newspaper ran articles about the housing crisis and often helped people find new quarters. Katherine Moos Mella describes the regular task of looking for apartments for those who had been evicted. People lived in deplorable conditions: “you have no idea...how terribly, terribly poor the people were at that time. Particularly those who stayed at the Catholic Worker, they were just destitute.” With her friend Evangeline Mercer, Nina Polcyn Moore collected money for expectant mothers in the neighborhood:

Dorothy had us work on a maternity guild and we went into steaming tenements with steam just coming down...gruesome green walls...we got a list...of pregnant women and

they paid us 25 cents a month...for their lying in. But you know...we were scared stiff to go in these tenements.

While women and men worked alongside each other at the Catholic Worker in assisting the unemployed with food and clothing, women describe in detail the “housekeeping” activities which occupied their days. Mary Durnin describes her typical day: “we’d give out clothes and there would be scrubbing to do and washing windows and housekeeping needs, laundry.” Betty Doyle remembers the breadline: “they [were] almost all somewhat older men or people who were out of work...It was really sad. It was quite shocking to us.”

Women’s lived experience in the Lower East Side of New York had great impact on their involvement in the Catholic Worker movement. From life in tenement apartments to gender specific “public housekeeping” tasks, women’s intimate daily experiences laid the groundwork for a new way of seeing the world. These daily “lived” experiences of physical place, together with articulation of a discourse of contention, pushed women to activism, both in New York and in other locations across the country.

Implications for Adult Education

Scholars who investigate learning on the margins seek to uncover the contexts within which social movements develop. Literature from the field of geography considers the ways that place contributes to understanding the context out of which a movement develops. By attending to the conceptualization of place within historic social movements, it is possible to begin to “ground...everyday life and experience” (Martin, 2003, p. 747), giving further insights into the nature of learning within these important settings.

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