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Learning Power from the Margins: Analyzing Action and Reflection in a Social Movement

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Abstract: In this paper, I apply the notion of *praxis*, the dynamic interaction of action and reflection needed for social change, to empirical analysis of a defining moment in the Chilean women's movement.

Introduction

Some of the most powerful learning occurs as people struggle against oppression, as they struggle to make sense of what is happening to them and to work out ways of doing something about it. (Foley, 1999, p. 1-2)

Within the study of social movements, there is often implicit acknowledgement that social movements are sites of profound learning within civil society. However, "learning in such situations is largely informal and often incidental – it is tacit, embedded in action and is often not recognised as learning" (Foley, 1999). Through a study of the popular women's movement in Arica, a small city in the north of Chile, it is the intent of my research project to explicitly expose the learning dimension of a social movement and spotlight the educational processes at work within the movement.

From the election of Salvador Allende in 1970, though the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990), to the present transition to democracy, Chile has undergone tumultuous socio-political and economic changes. The military coup in 1973 signaled a severe disruption in a longstanding democratic tradition and represented a most brutal example of encroachment of the state into civil society and the elimination of democratic space: the constitution was suspended, media censored, political parties and trade unions prohibited, and thousands were captured and detained, exiled, disappeared, or executed.

Paradoxically, political mobilization of women increased sharply in the 1980s in the midst of state repression and stringent economic policies. At a time when traditional political avenues were prohibited and men were not as widely available for protest (due to detention, exile, and migration for employment), the women took up the challenge. Despite threat to their own lives and livelihoods, women publicly protested against the human rights abuses of the regime, collectively organized popular subsistence and survival-oriented initiatives (e.g., collective kitchens), clandestinely disrupted the functioning of the regime, and inaugurated a second wave of feminism linked to grassroots organizing and service provision in poorer neighbourhoods. It is well documented that the strong, persistent and brave actions of the Chilean women's movement was a powerful force in the eventual downfall of the military dictatorship in 1989.¹

Methodology

This research is founded on nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in the small city of Arica (pop: 180,000), Chile's most northern outpost, more than 2000 kms from the capital city of Santiago. Prior to 1973, it was a socially and economically thriving community (Universidad de Chile, 1972). After the coup, it became a highly militarized and economically depressed zone. In general, the population is composed of diverse disenfranchised groups such as poor and indigenous peoples.

During the study period, I was situated in a local women's NGO, *Casa de Encuentro de la Mujer* (CEDEMU), and relied heavily on cultural immersion and personal contacts in the study community to develop trust and gather information. Research methods included document

review and participant observation. Formal interviews were conducted in Spanish with a total of 66 individuals including in-depth personal interviews, group interviews, and supplementary semi-structured interviews with local governmental and non-governmental organizations. All of the women interviewed had been active in social and/or political movements in Arica at some time during the past 30 years. They ranged in age between 30 and 75 and represented women from all the left/centre parties, the Catholic Church, community kitchens, the University, and the popular neighbourhoods.ⁱⁱ Standard academic ethical procedures were followed with extra care taken to respect cultural differences.

A variety of means for analytic reflection were incorporated in the field: ongoing reflective analysis sessions and transcript review with the research assistants, collaborative analysis sessions, and a learning/cultural event that included presentation of some of the research themes. Data management was facilitated by the use of *HyperRESEARCH*, a qualitative research software package.

What is Praxis?

The idea of praxis has its roots in early philosophy. It became a central tenet of Marxist philosophy in the 1800s (Youngman, 1986). Marx challenged both idealist philosophy, which held that ideas create the world, and mechanistic materialism wherein the material world is merely recorded as ideas. Rather, Marx contended that ideas originate in our *relationship* with the material world. “Basically, [praxis] refers to the human activity by which people shape and are shaped by the world around them” (Youngman, 1986, p. 55). Praxis is a uniquely human phenomenon because human interaction with the environment is conscious and purposive. “The idea of praxis at the level of individual behaviour therefore conceptualises the connection between consciousness and reality, between thought and action” (Youngman, 1986, p. 56).

To understand praxis, we must get our heads around two ideas. First, while I tend to use the word “reflection,” there are many terms used to signify the two internally related (Allman, 2001a) facets of praxis. For example, thought, theory, or vision might also signify *reflection* and practice or experience might alternatively signify *action*. Second, it was indisputably *not* Marx’s intention to present action and reflection as polarities, dualisms or dichotomies. Instead, Marx intended to demonstrate that praxis is a *dialectical* relationship between action and reflection. As Allman (2001b) explains:

To understand a phenomenon dialectically... involves conceptualising it as composed of two parts that are necessary to each other because they could not exist as they currently do without each other. (p. 52)

In the following quote, Freire (1990) demonstrates the fundamental relationship of action and reflection by drawing attention to the potential consequences of delinking the two.

When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into *verbalism*... If action is emphasized exclusively, to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into *activism*. The latter – action for action’s sake – negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible. (p. 75-76)

While the notion of praxis in radical adult education is often assumed to imply a revolutionary or transformational phenomenon, this is a misreading of the basic notion. Rather, as noted above, praxis is the dialectical unity between one’s thought and one’s action in the material world – a neutral interpretation of human experience. It follows then that there are different forms of praxis. Allman (2001a) describes the difference between uncritical and critical praxis as follows:

If we simply partake in the relations and conditions that we find already

existing in the world and assume that these are natural and inevitable... then our praxis is uncritical and simply reproduces the existing relations... In contrast, we can choose to question critically the existing relations and conditions and actively seek to transform or abolish them and to create relations and conditions that will lead to a better future for all human beings, in which case our praxis becomes critical or revolutionary praxis. (p. 167-168)

A critical revolutionary praxis, then, requires a certain kind of thinking. Not only does one need to think but also, aided by a revolutionary ideology, one needs to think *critically*.

The Meeting

From the outset of my immersion into the community, my attention was drawn to repeated references to a clandestine meeting of women held in October of 1983. The meeting was called by a handful of Communist women who hoped to advance the anti-dictatorship struggle by incorporating feminist analysis and reflection that would simultaneously contribute to women's advancement in Chilean society. The majority of women, however, prompted by the recent detentions of four prominent Communist Party male leaders, perceived immediate and confrontational action to be the most urgent need, the single stated objective being to oust the dictatorship. They saw no immediate relevance of either feminism or "study" as proposed by the organizers. While individual understandings of exactly what happened and why at the meeting in 1983 differ, it is clear that the meeting precipitated a chain of activity that was sustained in diverse forms until the end of the dictatorship.

Empirical Analysis

Rarely are researchers presented with an opportunity to unambiguously analyze a scenario from a particular perspective. In this case, I was alerted to the potential significance of *praxis* as an analytical tool by the terminology used by the women themselves. For example, the following statement, made by a woman in my first group interview, stayed with me throughout the research project: "We will get rid of Pinochet and then... what?" My analysis of the meeting presented a remarkable opportunity to apply a theoretical concept to empirical scrutiny in the real world.ⁱⁱⁱ

Within their woman-only Communist cell in the early 80s, a half dozen women embarked on an analytical quest. They speculated that the integration of their longstanding socialist/communist praxis with their newly discovered feminist praxis held exciting potential for revolutionary practice in their current context. These women intuitively knew that "... revolutionary theory and practice must be conceived as a unity. In other words, revolutionary theory must not be seen as a complement or accessory of practice" (Allman & Wallis, 1995, p. 123). Thus, they imagined that reflecting was an imperative component of the actions they knew would be necessary.

However, their mission was in direct conflict with the dominant perspective that the priorities and needs of the day dictated urgency for single-minded action, leaving no time for reflection or theorizing beyond the established Marxist rhetoric. Hence, the women were left misunderstood, isolated, and vigorously opposed by the other women who were keen to act immediately. Thus, *the emergence of the movement is coincident with the philosophical division of the emerging movement* into two women's organizations: CEDEMU, doing community-based feminist work in the poor neighbourhoods (*poblaciones*), and MODEMU, engaged in street demonstrations and clandestine activities. Adult educators know that for social change to occur, a cycle of both action and reflection are required. Simply stated, MODEMU wanted action while

the much smaller CEDEMU hoped to also incorporate reflection. Therefore, the *action/reflection dialectic needed for social change was fractured* from the outset.

Without doubt, political and social activism is a powerful tool to achieve social change. Women in Arica, as elsewhere, contributed in large measure to the achievement of the imperative change they sought – the downfall of the dictatorship. Furthermore, activism is impossible without some form of reflection. In Arica, the women planned their activities, analyzed security issues, evaluated outcomes, and formulated strategies. Oftentimes unconsciously (and sometimes in spite of themselves), movement participation prompted many women to critique and challenge their place in society.^{iv}

Yet, intuitively, many women knew that they needed time to reflect. But women repeatedly told me “there was no time to think.” Younger women complained most strongly about the lack of “ideological formation.” They were initiated into “politics” by their involvement in actions, such as barricades in their neighbourhood streets or strikes on campus, so were not so strongly situated ideologically as the older women who had lived and learned their politics earlier. Consequently, only the small circle of feminists consciously incorporated critical reflection into their activities, leading study circles and conducting workshops with women from the *poblaciones*. Women’s sexuality/sexual health, violence against women, and women’s place in society became strategic focal points for understanding and analyzing the authoritarian regime and injustice in general.^v Gramsci offers a clue to the missing element in the women’s movement in Arica.

The crucial element for Gramsci in holding social movements together was the ‘cement’ of ideology... in his case the ‘philosophy of praxis’ [Marxist philosophy]^{vi} ... Without such theoretical/analytical principles, elements within every social movement only cohere – to borrow Marx’s term – like ‘potatoes in a sack.’ (Allman and Wallis cited in Holst, 2002, p. 102)

Such a philosophy would not have been unfamiliar to most of the woman participants in Arica.^{vii} Consciously embracing it within the women’s movement might have allowed the women to analyze their reality through the benefit of their own Marxist philosophies, possibly combining them with a feminist critique in time, thereby salvaging a true revolutionary praxis. For example, Marx advised us to challenge the *relations* of capitalism, not the *results*. Critiqued accordingly, the *result* (the dictatorship) would not then be the focus of direct attention as it was during those years. Rather, an analysis of the neoliberal project would place the immediate crisis (i.e., the dictatorship) squarely into the capitalist system of *relations*.^{viii} According to Marx, capitalism is marked by inherent crises due to its own internal contradictions. Hence, focusing on the crisis will not fundamentally transform the relations from which it emerges. Thus, *reform* is not possible. The goal of removing the dictator is one purely of reform because the system is left completely intact once the objective is achieved – precisely what happened; Chile today carries the unmistakable stamp of the success of the capitalist project.

Women in Arica now recognize a need to have thought about what would come after the dictatorship, i.e., What would the new democracy look like and what would be women’s place in it? In interview after interview, I heard that citizens fought together to rid themselves of the military regime without a vision or a clear sense of what should follow. If the women held any assumption at all, it was that Arica would return to the socialist project that they or their parents knew from the Allende era. That is not what they got.

Almost fifteen years post-dictatorship, the women of Arica wonder how they arrived, after all their sacrifice and struggle, at this neoliberal, pseudo-democracy^{ix} where they see only growing

poverty and isolation in Arica and little real change for women. To their dismay, they realize now that “then what?” was neither asked nor answered. Many now see the need to have been more concrete in their vision, combining it with a critical analysis of the real world.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

In this research, I document not only actual learning *processes*, but also specific learning *effects* – effects that had important consequences on the collective movement and the individual actors. The theme addressed in this paper exemplifies the “organic” educative and learning dimension of social movements and the vital importance of the action/reflection dialectic. In the Chilean case, the urgency of the anti-dictatorship struggle left little room for an anti-capitalist, anti-sexist, anti-racist analysis, even within the Left. I argue that, ultimately, the socialist and feminist dialectic that we call praxis was inhibited in this instance by a lack of concrete theorizing and “explicit curriculum” (Youngman, 1986, p. 106). If “education is an instrument of power which shapes knowledge within social movements” (Zacharakis-Jutz cited in Holst, 2002, p. 79), then it is incumbent upon adult educators to reposition social movement theorizing from the margins to the center in service of a more just and peaceful society.

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