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Creating a Place for Learning: Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement

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Abstract: This is an examination of Dorothy Day's approach to social activism, the development of the Catholic Worker movement, and the learning that took place within it. The intent is to contribute to a more complete history of the education of adults in twentieth century American society.

Introduction

Adult education history has often been presented as a chronicle of the efforts of the dominant culture (largely white, male, and middle class) and focused on the institutionalization and professionalization of the field (Rose, 1989; Thompson, 1997; Welton, 1993). Learning within certain groups and outside formal institutions has been largely ignored (Schied, 1995). Scholars examining the role of women in adult education histories (Hugo, 1990; Thompson, 1997) call for more than a compensatory or hagiographic approach to the representation of women's roles in adult education efforts. Women were integrally involved in the education of adults through their work as reformers, journalists, and social activists. Their actions contributed to essential adult learning within their communities, often outside formally recognized boundaries of the field of adult education (Welton, 1993). Through the work of reform movements, settlement houses, the labor movement, and journalism, women made distinct contributions in opposition to dominant societal values (Cott, 1987). Exploring the types of learning that took place within women's efforts in social movements offers a more complete picture of the history of adult education.

This paper will explore the contributions of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement to the education of adults in 20th century America. Furthermore, these contributions will be examined using Foley's (1999) articulation of learning in the midst of struggle against the dominant culture. Foley's analytical framework broadens the boundaries of adult education by examining the "forms of the education and learning...the political and economic context...the micropolitics...the ideological and discursive practices and struggles" within social movements and what this means for the broader world of education (p. 10). This paper will utilize two components of Foley's framework: context, and ideology and discourse. Examining the context in which the Catholic Worker movement began deepens the understanding of the ideology and discourse that developed within the movement.

Glimpses of those who have critiqued dominant culture in other times can inspire, challenge, and offer opportunities to consider learning in broader, more complete ways (Welton, 1993). Viewing these efforts toward learning through components of Foley's (1999) framework allows for greater understanding of how Dorothy Day and others within the Catholic Worker movement unlearned dominant discourses and learned oppositional and emancipatory discourses. Paying attention to the social context of learning within a radical community of faith offers the opportunity to understand both a woman and a social movement overlooked in standard adult education histories, and to explore other-than-dominant culture representations of learning in the history of adult education.

Dorothy Day and the Origins of the Catholic Worker Movement

On May 1, 1933, fifty thousand people met in New York City's Union Square to celebrate May Day, the international day set aside to honor workers (Forest, 1986). Speakers warned of the

dangers of fascism and called for “worker ownership and control of industry” (p. 1). Dorothy Day was among those present in Union Square, selling the first issue of the newspaper, *The Catholic Worker*. The publication of this newspaper was met with incredulity from all sides. How could a newspaper address labor issues from the perspective of the Catholic faith? At the time, only communists and socialists were focusing on the needs of workers (Roberts, 1984).

The publication of this newspaper was a response to the pressing social needs brought on by the Great Depression. The economic hardship experienced in the United States during the 1930s affected every level of society. With the highest rate of unemployment reaching 12-15 million in 1933, about 8 million people continued to remain jobless for the rest of the decade (Ware, 1982, p. xiii). New Deal legislation sought to address the challenges of a faltering economic system following Franklin D. Roosevelt’s election as President in 1932. However, many groups of people sought alternative approaches to solving the problems of unemployment and poverty in the United States. Discussions, debates, strikes and riots by unemployed workers took place in cities across the country (Piven, 1977). New York City’s Union Square was a regular meeting place for socialist and communist organizers, unemployed workers, and intellectuals, where debates about economics and politics took place daily (Forest, 1986). It was in this social milieu that Dorothy Day initiated a newspaper that sought to address the issues facing workers from a Catholic perspective.

Dorothy Day was a journalist who wrote for communist and socialist newspapers during the 1920s (including the *New York Call*, *The Masses*, and *The Liberator*). Day practiced advocacy journalism, proselytizing from a specific point of view (Roberts, 1984). Like other journalists of the time, Day’s approach was to become engaged in the lives of the ordinary people and through her writing tell their stories about eviction, homelessness, and joblessness. Born into a middle class family in New York in 1897, Day moved many times as her father tried to make ends meet in a succession of jobs as a writer and journalist. The family endured many financial challenges during Day’s childhood and adolescence. At the age of 18, after two years at the University of Illinois, Day left university life to work as a journalist, chronicling the lives of workers in the city of New York. She covered strikes and meetings group working for peace: “the Emergency Peace Federation, the I.W.W., the socialists, the anarchists”(Day, 1997, p. 57). She described members of the labor movement at this time as “socialist, I.W.W., anarchist, and liberal” (Day, 1997, p. 67). Day’s early twenties were spent writing, listening and debating with well-known socialists and communists of the city. Sharing their radical perspective of the world, friends at this time included playwright Eugene O’Neill, communist writer Mike Gold, activist Peggy Baird and essayist Malcolm Cowley (Roberts, 1984).

The birth of Day’s daughter Tamar compelled her to act on a growing faith in God. By 1927, Day chose to be baptized in the Catholic Church, the church that welcomed the poor: “they were of all nationalities, of all classes, but most of all they were poor” (Day, 1978, p. 15). While Day was covering the Hunger March in November of 1932, she witnessed the brutal treatment of marchers in several cities. Her recognition that it was Communists rather than Christians who were acting on behalf of the workers, led her to pray for a way to use her talents to help the poor. Peter Maurin, a French immigrant to the United States whose ideas were strikingly similar to Day’s, arrived at her door soon afterwards. Influenced by Russian and French writers and philosophers, they created an agenda for radical social change based on the Catholic faith, peace/nonviolence, voluntary poverty, communal living, acts of mercy, acts of resistance (or public protest), and the use of education and consciousness-raising to create an alternative to prevailing American values (Aronica, 1987, Miller, 1973, Roberts, 1984). Maurin suggested to Day that they begin a Catholic newspaper for the unemployed (Day, 1997). Maurin brought his understanding of European socialist and personalist

philosophy to Day's journalistic abilities and her understanding of the dominant American culture (Piehl, 1982). Day's background in journalism and her Christian, anarchist, socialist, pacifist perspective, created a voice that broke across barriers and brought together those from the political left and right.

Ideology and Discourse

Central to the conceptualization of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper was its desire to address the issues facing workers from the perspective of the Catholic faith. The movement which grew alongside the publication of the newspaper challenged dominant cultural values. Foley's (1999) framework suggests the use of an analysis of ideology and discourse to gain understanding of learning within social movements. Foley's concern is to identify ways that emancipatory change can occur through "the unlearning of dominant oppressive ideologies and discourses and the learning of insurgent, emancipatory" ideologies and discourses (p. 16). Referring to Gramsci's idea of the "hegemonic struggle" (p.15) to describe the challenge presented by oppositional ideologies to the ideology of the dominant culture, Foley sees struggle as central to the learning process. Foley relies on Foucault's conception of discourse as the use of language in spoken and written forms within cultures, particularly those forms of language that maintain the dominance of one group over another. The process of "unlearning" the discourse of oppression requires a change in consciousness, or conscientization, and the commitment to a life of praxis, both action and reflection (Friere, 1999). Challenges to a capitalist worldview (or insurgent, emancipatory discourses) were evidenced in the Catholic Worker movement in several ways: through the regular publication of the newspaper, communal houses of hospitality and farms, and through public protest.

The Catholic Worker Newspaper

The focus of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper was to bring scholars and workers together to consider a variety of issues relating to work and life. *The Catholic Worker* experienced dramatic growth in circulation, from 2500 with its first issue in 1933, to 185,000 in 1940 (Piehl, 1982). Part of its continuing success was the price, set at one cent by Day (the newspaper's editor and publisher). As the focal point for dissemination of and discussion of ideas, the paper became the intellectual center from which a variety of social service and educational opportunities grew. During the first years of *The Catholic Worker*, the paper investigated such areas as "tenant evictions...seamen's strikes, the 1936 Vermont marble workers' strike...the 1937 Republic Steel massacre...[and] Arkansas sharecroppers" (Roberts, 1984, p.72). In addition to interviews with labor leaders, research pieces on topics such as Russian or Vietnamese history, and Day's regular column, articles on the lives of the saints and writings of church authorities which focused on issues of social justice were regular features (Roberts, 1984).

The issues Day chose to write about, together with the increasing numbers of people experiencing the hardships of joblessness and homelessness, drew many individuals to involvement with *The Catholic Worker*. The masthead itself served as a symbol of the alternative social order that Day and Catholic Workers sought to create: two workers, one black and one white, held hands in front of the figure of Jesus on the cross (Piehl, 1982). Shortly after the newspaper was first published, round table discussions with scholars, activists, church people, and the unemployed began meeting once a week in order to hear speakers and discuss the issues raised in the paper. At the first meeting, the rooms were packed with people, "unemployed men and women, plumbers, mechanics, steam fitters, sign painters, students from New York colleges, and Catholic Workers" (*The Catholic Worker* cited in Piehl, 1982, p.74). Day considered the close connection that the writers and editors of *The*

Catholic Worker shared with their readers unusual compared to most newspapers. An ongoing stream of readers of *The Catholic Worker* lived in the hospitality houses and had a great impact on the content and ideas expressed in the paper (Day, 1997), as well as the publication and distribution.

Hospitality Houses

Hospitality houses developed in response to the needs that the newspaper staff saw around them everyday during the Depression (Day 1997). At first, simple food was provided (coffee, bread and soup) while publishing the newspaper. As more people joined the movement, needs for housing and feeding workers and growing numbers of the poor and homeless became apparent. Houses of hospitality sprang up in cities all across the United States; by 1941, there were 32 houses in 27 cities (Piehl, 1982). Pressing needs faced city dwellers every day and the members of the Catholic Worker movement worked hard to help them. St. Joseph's house in New York City regularly fed 1200 people twice a day in 1938 (Piehl, 1982). In 1951 alone, Day recorded that St. Joseph's House of Hospitality provided "460,000 meals" and "18,250 night's lodgings" (Ellsberg, 1983, p. 104).

As Catholic Worker communities developed in cities around the country, they were self-governed and loosely affiliated with the Catholic Worker community in New York City. While Day often traveled to visit communities in other cities, her role was that of an encourager, rather than an administrator. As "Head Anarch" Day was viewed as a benevolent authority (Roberts, 1984, p.84). Living with and serving the poor gave Day credibility inside the Catholic Worker community and in the larger Catholic and secular world.

Communal Farms

In April 1936, the Catholic Worker community purchased a farm in Easton, Pennsylvania, in order to establish a farm-based community of families. A succession of twelve other independent farms associated with the Catholic Worker community developed over the next few years. Peter Maurin viewed these farms as agronomic universities or farming communes that could "make scholars out of workers and workers out of scholars" creating "a new society within the shell of the old" (Maurin, cited in Aronica, 1987, p. 63). Day saw them as communities of need, as workers lived side by side with recovering alcoholics, victims of abuse, and the homeless (Roberts, 1984). This attempt to create places where workers could learn together through working the land did not ultimately succeed as utopian communities (Piehl, 1982). The decentralized, noncoercive approach that worked well in the houses of hospitality did not transfer to the Catholic Worker farms. At houses of hospitality, there were no requirements for work but an expectation that everyone would contribute as they felt led to do so. Farming required a more concentrated and sustained commitment than was required at the houses of hospitality. Disputes between community members were common at both the houses of hospitality and farming communes. Rather than impose rules for community life, Day believed that the houses and the farms should be "an experiment in...freedom and what it implied" (Day, cited in Piehl, 1982, p.130). As a result, there was ongoing conflict and a continuous stream of people in and out of the Catholic Worker farms, making agricultural production difficult.

An important contribution of the Catholic Worker farms was to serve as sites for spiritual retreats. Beginning in the late 1930s, Day regularly made use of spiritual retreats for strength and learning. The insights Day gained from this spiritual refreshment provided continuous themes for her writing. The retreats organized by Father Pacifique Roy at the Easton farm provided opportunities for Day and Catholic Workers to gather in silence and prayer (Miller, 1987). Conferences were held during the retreat on "Confession, examination of conscience, contrition, Faith, Hope and the Mass. All are keeping silence...All our prayers are for peace" (Day, cited in Miller, 1987, p. 57). These

retreats served as an antidote to the critical needs that Catholic Workers faced in their communities everyday.

Public Protest

From the beginning of the newspaper in the 1930s, Day encouraged others to use “powerful nonviolent tools, such as prayer, fasting, picketing, and noncooperation with evil... She believed that nonviolence, voluntarily embraced and rooted in Christian spirituality, would lead to a new order” (Klemenjt, 1988). Day’s concern for the marginalized, the poor, and the oppressed, caused her to travel across the country examining and writing about workplace conditions and joining public protest efforts. Day was considered a “subversive” by the American government. The FBI maintained a five hundred-page file (covering the years 1940-1970) on the Catholic Worker, trying to understand the kind of subversion practiced within it. Hoover personally recommended that the Attorney General prosecute Catholic Workers on charges of sedition three separate times (Ellsberg, 1983).

Day and other Catholic Workers learned ways to carry out public protests for peace, through opposition to the Ethiopian and Spanish Civil Wars, World War II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and the nuclear arms race. Day was jailed four times between 1955 and 1960 for refusing to obey the requirements of civil defense air raid drills (Roberts, 1984). Day sat with a protest sign on a park bench and was jailed for calling into question the idea that there could be a safe place to go during a nuclear attack. In 1968, she traveled to Baltimore to lend her support to the Catonsville Nine, Catholic peace activists (including Daniel and Philip Berrigan). The nine removed almost 400 draft files from a Selective Service office outside of Baltimore, covered them with napalm and burned them as an act of protest over the war in Vietnam (Klemenjt, 1988). While supporting nonviolent war protestors, Day warned about the danger of protestors turning towards violence in their attempts to stop the Vietnam War. Through a lifetime of public protest, Day made use of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper as a place to reflect upon and critique American 20th century society, demonstrating a commitment to praxis (O’Gorman & Coy, 1988).

Conclusions

Foley’s framework for analysis of learning in social movements is a way to examine how participants replace dominant discourses with emancipatory discourses. By examining the political and social context in which the Catholic Worker movement began, and by exploring the ideologies and discourses present within the movement, it is possible to come to a greater understanding of learning through the struggle. Day’s use of advocacy journalism, the development of alternative, radical communities of faith, and the ongoing challenge to the dominant culture through public protest and persistent critique of church and culture demonstrate the ways in which learning through conflict was present within this social movement. For many Catholic students and intellectuals, the Catholic Worker was an ideal place to learn because of its emphasis on the integration of ideas with experience, and the opportunity to learn from people coming from a wide variety of perspectives (Piehl, 1982). This perspective is shared by Catholic Workers today who live and work in the many communities throughout the United States and around the world (Troester, 1993).

Day’s persistent challenge to the status quo links her to many women who have worked for reform in American society. By questioning the dominant culture and by creating an alternative way for herself and others to live, Day was perceived as a threat by those in power. Learning took many forms and had a great impact on the lives of those involved in the Catholic Worker movement, as well as the larger society. The Catholic Worker critique of dominant culture placed the movement on

the margins of American society, a place from which an alternative view of society could be both lived out and articulated to others.

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