



Reflections

Creating Space for Social Justice Education in an Era of Global and Neoliberal Capitalism: An Imperative for Adult Education

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Adult educators have called attention to numerous forms of injustice and oppression across the globe, to include race, gender, class, sexual orientation, national origin, to name a few. Central to much of today's systems of oppression is an erosion of what is fundamental to civic life, critical citizenship and substantive democracy (Allman, 2010). The life conditions of the members of each of these groups noted above are rooted in the neoliberal ideology and practice of capitalism and globalization. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of these phenomena is important for educators to create space for social justice education and prepare adult learners to critique and understand the injustice of neoliberal capitalism and globalization.

As McChesney (1999) explains, neoliberalism is a political economic paradigm that refers to the policies and processes whereby a small number of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profits. Neoliberal initiatives are characterized as free market policies that encourage private enterprise and consumer choice, reward personal responsibility and entrepreneurial initiatives, and hold the view that everyone has equal opportunities if they are willing to work hard. Central to this thesis is the belief that the market should be the guiding force for all political, social, and economic decisions of a nation state. From this market-driven perspective, according to Giroux (2008), profit making and the exchange of capital take precedent over social justice, the development of socially-responsible citizens, and the building of democratic communities.

As critical education scholars have pointed out, under neoliberal globalization, capital is devoid of any viable form of state regulation, power is decoupled from matters of ethics and social responsibility, and long-standing social contracts that once provided a safety net for the poor, the elderly, workers, and the middle class are now replaced with notion of market freedoms. To that end, public issues and social concerns result in growing insecurity and fear regarding the most basic human issues of family care, safety and survival. Other casualties of neoliberalism include downsizing of the workforce, derailment of social services, the reduction of the responsibilities of state government to police precincts and the prison industrial complex, the elimination of job security, the creation of an increasing low-skilled workforce that is dispensable, and capitalist influence on public and post-secondary education.

Added to the local concerns, nations the world over are experiencing the same negative impact from neoliberal policies and practices. These include significant increase in social and economic inequality, a global environment on the brink of disaster, an unstable global economy, and increased profits for the wealthy. Such neoliberal discourse has resulted in an oppressive pedagogy that promotes the view that public difficulties are individually created, thus making social problems and their solution the responsibility of individual citizens.

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Indeed, adult educators have often responded to dehumanizing effects of global capitalism and neoliberalism through their scholarship and publications. Hence, it is our challenge to continue to illuminate how neoliberal ideology is situated and enacted in discourses of higher education and find ways to problematize and transform these dominant discourses.

Advancing democracy and social justice through critical revolutionary adult education is central to the discipline of adult education and its imperative of promoting and defending social justice and equity within a democratic society. However, much of the current approach to the education of adults is guided by economic imperatives surrounding work and training, leaving the concept of democracy and social justice on the periphery. Giroux (2008) reminds us that adult education is not only about issues of work and economics but also about questions of justice, social freedom and the capacity for democratic agency, action, and change, as well as related issues of power, exclusion, and citizenship. Therefore, adult education has an explicit, emancipatory, critical, and transformatory role. As Hill and Boxley (2009) emphasize, “the role of teacher educators and teachers as intellectuals instead of mechanics or technicians are necessary for the development of a critical, active, interrogating, citizenry—thoughtful, questioning, perceptive as well as skilled—pursuing a democratic, anti-authoritarian, socially responsible and socially and economically just society” (2009, p. 50). Similarly, Allman (2001) maintains, “education has the potential to fuel the flames of resistance to global capitalism as well as the passion for socialist transformation—indeed, the potential to provide a spark that can ignite the desire for revolutionary democratic social transformation throughout the world” (as cited in Hill & Boxley, 2009, p. 28).

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Even though recognition of interest for such transformation is evident among adult educators and scholars, the potential for change within a neoliberal capitalist society remains a significant challenge. This challenge has become more heightened by the diminishing autonomy of agency available for educators, programs, departments, colleges and universities as a result of established structures guided by neoliberal ideologies and practices. As scholars grapple with this challenge, they call for education to be critical, radical, and revolutionary in contesting the dominance of neoliberal capitalist ideology (Allman, 2010; Brookfield & Holst, 2011; Giroux, 2008; Hill & Boxley, 2009; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001). As Hill and Boxley (2009) explain, the neoliberal project for education is part of the bigger picture of the neoliberal project of global capitalism. Allman’s (2010) conceptualizes her neoliberal project as *revolutionary critical education* similar to McLaren and Farahmandpur’s (2001) concept of *revolutionary critical pedagogy* and Brookfield and Holst’s (2011) concept of *radicalizing learning*. Central to these innovative ideas is the re-imagining of what it means to educate for democracy and social justice. According to McLaren and Farahmandpur,

a revolutionary critical pedagogy must begin by reaffirming its commitment to the struggle for emancipating humanity from its own inhumanity.... The challenge of critical pedagogy is intimately

linked to the following questions: What does it mean to be human? How can we live humanely? What actions or steps must be taken to be able to live humanely? (p. 305)

To Allman (2010), revolutionary critical education “aims to prepare people to engage in self and social transformation, and it also is an approach that could become the norm in a socially and economically transformed society” (p. xii). In her work with adult learners, Allman uses Marxists education theory to examine and critique neoliberal capitalism and globalization theory and practice, thus making visible how these phenomena infiltrate all aspects of human lives and the critical role of education in creating a society that mirrors what Brookfield and Holst (2011) call, “democratic socialism” (p. xi). Democratic socialism, according to Brookfield and Holst, is “a political and economic arrangement designed to answer one fundamental question: How best can we arrange society to foster compassion and enhance creativity?” (p. 6). They suggest linking adult education to democratic socialism is a radical move that would allow us to move the field from its current, uncritical existence. Taking such an approach creates space for educators to critically challenge the domination and hegemonic powers of capitalist ideology, to envision a future transformed from the current state, make a shift in the organization and practice of adult education to encompass more collaboration and work of the collective, re-imagine the role of the field and its practice, and move from ideological control to a more vigilant and critical scholar-practitioner (Brookfield & Holst, 2011).

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Dialogues in Social Justice is an important outlet that emerges at a time when scholars the world over are calling for educators to reclaim their place as agents of social transformation. It provides a space for scholars to document their engagement in the critique of their practice and the practice of critique—necessary to building democratically just communities and structures. Engaging in an educational practice that is critical and revolutionary allows for the analysis and understanding of global production and its ties to all aspects of life to include economics, politics, education, social welfare, to name a few. Making the manifestations of neoliberal capitalism and globalization visible through our research and our teaching, we embark on a revolutionary transformation to reclaim social justice for all humanity. Giroux (2008) reminds us that

addressing education as a democratic endeavor begins with the recognition that higher education is more than an investment opportunity; citizenship is more than conspicuous consumption; learning is more than preparing students for the workplace, however important that task might be; and democracy is more than making choices at the local mall. (p. 108)

Allman (2010) argues, “without critical education we will never know exactly what to challenge, nor will we have a clear idea of what must be transformed in order to create a future of social and economic justice for all of humanity” (p. 1). However, Giroux reminds us that critical scholarship is important but it is not enough. Scholarship has a civic and public function and it is precisely the connection between knowledge and the larger society that makes visible its ethical and political function. Knowledge should be used for amplifying human freedom and promoting social justice. *Dialogues for Social Justice* provides a platform for making visible the ways by which we engage and promote critical revolutionary education to create a more democratic and just world.

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Biography



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