

Revolutionary learning

Stephen Cowden

Sara Carpenter and Shahrzad Mojab, *Revolutionary Learning: Marxism, Feminism and Knowledge*, Pluto Press, London, 2017

Because of my interest in Critical Pedagogy I like to keep an eye out for anything new which is published in this area.

Unfortunately this is usually a fairly disappointing experience. My observation is that most of the books written about Critical Pedagogy invariably fall into one of two categories. The first sort are books that are essentially re-statements of the work and insights of Paulo Freire. There is nothing inherently wrong with that - though some of these do tend slightly toward hagiography. My problem with this is that while Freire is without question a foundational figure for Critical Pedagogy, this also needs to develop into something more than a reiteration of his ideas. A book like Antonia Darder's *Reinventing Paulo Freire* (2002) is very good as an introduction to Freire's work, but I don't see the re-invention promised by the title; this book is a re-statement rather than a re-invention. On the other hand are books which define themselves as part of the Critical Pedagogy tradition but which are basically Marxist critiques of capitalism. There is of course nothing specifically wrong with that - indeed I'm all for that - but it isn't clear how these books embody the approach of Critical Pedagogy. A recent example of this is Mallott and Ford's book *Marx, Education and Capital: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Becoming* (2015). This book offers a really valuable Marxist

critique of the commodification of education based on Marx's work, but I couldn't see the 'Critical Pedagogy of Becoming' offered by the title. Is it simply thought that anger about the revealed state of things will lead people to, in the phrase they borrow from Jodi Dean, 'become communist'? If only, I felt myself thinking as I read this book. A book like Peter McClaren's *Capitalists and Conquerors: A Critical Pedagogy Against Empire* (2005) is similar. The book offers an entirely necessary critique of the brutality of neoliberal capitalism and its imperial plunder of the world and I agreed entirely with everything that was in it. But again, despite the title, there was no specifically pedagogical dimension to the work.

Demanding

Reading books like the latter two, one could think that Critical Pedagogy was simply about offering people a compelling Marxist analysis of capitalism, sexism, racism and imperialism, and then demanding (or hoping) they do something about that. But that approach strikes me as very un-Freirian. Freire's starting point in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) concerns the ontology of the pedagogic relation; what it meant to teach and to learn. His exposition of the dominant 'banking model of education' explained the way this acted as a power relation which silenced the voices and experiences of learners, thereby undermining the

potentially transformative possibilities of education. Freire revolutionised the field of Pedagogy by outlining the way in which the process, the social relations and content of teaching and learning were all dialectically inter-related, and, he argued, were articulated in the form which education took in capitalist societies. Despite the fact that the book said almost nothing about what the alternative to 'banking education' actually looked like, this insight was a major step forward. In the two books above, 'conscientisation' seems to take the form of an exhortation to anti-capitalist action. Freire's emphasis strikes me as much more about a shift in ontology of the learner; the way social action becomes possible not so much through exposure to radical analysis, but through people seeing themselves differently, and thus being able to act on the information instead of responding fatalistically.

The two books above also assume a particular relationship between Critical Pedagogy and Marxism. There clearly is a relationship, but the problem lies in the way this is assumed. As commentators such as Jones Irwin (2012) have argued, it is Marx's attack on the limitations of philosophy in the *Theses on Feuerbach* that appears to be most significant for Freire, but in other senses his ideas about justice and equality come out of his unorthodox Catholicism rather than political economy. The point here is that there is a need to address the relationship of Critical Pedagogy with Marxism, but one would hope that this could be done in a way that holds onto and develops what is distinctive and valuable in Freire's work.

Apprehension

Given this often disappointing experience with new books in the field of Critical Pedagogy, it was with a certain apprehension that I began reading *Revolutionary Learning: Marxism, Feminism and Knowledge* (Pluto Press, 2017) by Sara Carpenter and Shahrzad Moab, two writers whose work I was unaware of before picking up this book. It didn't take me long to realise how impressive this piece of work is and what a significant contribution it makes to the field. One of the book's major achievements lies in the way it constructs an argument for Critical Pedagogy rooted in a particular conception of Marxist feminism. While there has been a certain amount of discussion of the issues of gender and feminism within Critical Pedagogy, such as the work of bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), the discussion moves to a new level in this book. The authors argue that critical education cannot move forward without 'profound attention' to the social

relations of difference of gender, race, ability, sexuality, but that these have to be understood as 'inter-constitutive relations' within both capitalism and imperialism. This is different from the currently popular theory of 'intersectionality', which is based on the idea of 'interlocking' forms of oppression. The authors argue rather that sexism, racism and other forms of difference need to be conceptualised as 'social practices historically specific to capitalism, and so dialectically related to modes of consciousness that are historically specific as well'. What strikes me as most valuable about this is the way their Marxist feminism offers 'a re-theorisation of the material as a necessarily sexed and gendered and differenced phenomenon existing in a dialectical relationship with forms of consciousness' (2017:76). While intersectionality has been valuable in getting away from reductionist accounts of the relationship between class/gender/race etc., it lacks a sense of praxis within it - what you might do about those interlocking problems - compared to the way difference is located within the dynamic of capitalist exploitation as it is expressed here.

Path-breaking

Carpenter and Moab discuss throughout the book the work of three Marxist feminist writers who have paved the way for their specific contribution to Critical Pedagogy: Paula Allman, Dorothy Smith and Himani Bannerji. These three writers are distinctive and path-breaking for the way they have offered a powerful feminist critique of patriarchy but which is derived methodologically from Marx's dialectical and historical conception of materialism, where patriarchy is understood historically as an embedded structure of capitalism. Paula Allman, who died only recently, in 2011, was an American who lived in Nottingham for most of her life and is probably the best known of those three to readers of this magazine. Though she has been a revered figure within Adult Education and Critical Pedagogy circles, her work is not nearly as well known as it should be. I read her book *On Marx* (2007) in 2010 and was really struck by the way she had constructed both a highly accessible introduction to Marx, at the same time as re-reading Marx's work through a Freirian-Gramscian lens. Dorothy Smith is also not hugely well known in the UK though she has been publishing in the area of Feminist Sociology since the 1970s. She is originally from Yorkshire but has lived most of her life in Canada. In 1987 she wrote a Sociology text entitled *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* which was widely regarded as a major inspiration for feminist scholarship in the way it

revealed and conceptualised the material basis of women's exclusion from 'male-stream' forms of knowledge. The third writer they draw on, Himani Bannerji, is an academic, novelist and poet originally from Bengal now working in Canada and who has also produced a highly original body of work.

The book itself is structured as a series of essays in related topics all of which focus in different ways on questions of ideology and consciousness and the practical implications for these in educational settings. Running throughout the book is the question of knowledge and 'how we think about what we think'. While they argue that the starting point has to be experience and 'where the learner is at' they never seek to reify or romanticise this as some versions of Critical Pedagogy do. As they argue:

'Reflection cannot stop at the acknowledgement of shared experience and cannot fast forward to political action. Analysis has to go beyond experience itself and into the conditions that determine experience and the forms of consciousness we have used to interpret our experience. These conditions and our relationship to them have to be interrogated as a source of knowledge and the conditions have to be historicised and understood as relations. (2017: 87)

Ontology

Critical pedagogy in this sense is 'the critical theorisation of the self' which develops through a relationship between epistemology and ontology. It follows from this conception that critical knowledge does not develop by replacing 'bad' (i.e. oppressive, racist, patriarchal etc.) ideas with 'good' anti-oppressive ideas. Instead critical knowledge develops through re-evaluating the significance of things we already 'know' (ontology) but don't see as significant (epistemology). It is through developing the capacity to problematise and interrupt this relation that 'revolutionary learning' takes place. In this sense 'ideology' needs to be understood not simply as 'a system of ideas or thought content, but as an epistemology, a way of knowing, that abstracts and fragments social life . . . [and which is] a direct consequence of the mode of life embodied in capitalism [which] thrives on the spatial temporal and experiential separation of the dialectical contradictions in everyday life'. (2017: 15-16). So while Critical Pedagogy begins with real experiences, the critical element emerges through our grasp of 'the particular historical forms of social relations that determine that experience' (2017: 84). The power of existing social relations is real and

material, but at the same time can be interrupted through an understanding of why it is that we 'think what we think', and this shift is the terrain on which new forms of collective political agency can develop.

One of the great strengths of this book lies in the way it places Critical Pedagogy on a theoretical footing which offers a clear understanding of the material world. Not only is this a really useful way of understanding critical education, but it's also a very necessary critique of too many of the things that are offered up in the name of 'critical' or 'progressive' education. Carpenter and Mojab describe an 'insidious but popular' conception of critical consciousness where it comes to be understood as 'the outcome of replacing systems of thought which are 'ideological' or 'false' with ones that are presumed to be 'critical' or 'radical'.' However what this results in is critical educators seeking to impose their views on students. Not only does this contradict the emancipatory aims of Critical Pedagogy but it leaves students 'with a language of critique but no ability to embody the critical ontologically or take it beyond its particulars' (2017: 19). This is the problem with 'political correctness' and the way this fails to manifest a form of genuinely critical knowledge.

However similar problems are also widespread in activist circles and nothing embodies this more than the 'no-platforming' that has taken place in UK universities by the National Union of Students over the past few years. One notable example of this took place when the Iranian secular activist Maryam Namazie was 'no-platformed' (i.e. denied the right to speak publicly) by the Warwick University Students Union in 2015. Namazie was prevented from speaking because it was argued that her criticisms of the abuses of power by Islamist political movements and theocratic states speaking in the name of Islam would 'spread hatred and intolerance' towards Muslim students at Warwick University (*Guardian* 26/9/15). Within the so-called progressive framework that the Student Union had adopted, Muslims were conceived entirely one-sidedly as 'victims of racism'. Therefore any criticism of Islam was seen as perpetuating this victimisation. But what this prevented from being discussed was the actual context and experience of the speaker, who, as well as coming from a Muslim background herself, is criticising the lack of rights and really serious persecution of women, LGBT people and those who want to leave Islam altogether, as these are imposed on people by authoritarian states and Islamist movements. As Maryam Namazie later argued,

'Aren't many critics of Islamism Muslims too? In fact, Muslims or those labelled as such are often the first victims of Islamism and are at

the forefront of resistance. Also, not everyone in what's referred to as the Muslim "community" is a Muslim, and even if they are, religion is not the only characteristic that defines them' (*Guardian* 13/10/2015).

The whole phenomenon of 'no-platforming' has been rightly criticised for the way it closes down debate and undermines free speech, but at a deeper level it demonstrates a worrying absence of a critical understanding of 'knowledge' on the Left, particularly amongst a younger generation over-exposed to identity politics and under-exposed to real political struggles. As Paula Allman put it,

'knowledge is a tool that we use to delve into reality, and it is a tool that we constantly test in order to ascertain whether it is enabling us to develop a more complex and comprehensive understanding of the world' (2017: 20).

Experiences

Reconstructing an emancipatory politics on the Left strikes me as more than ever to be a pedagogical project. This has to allow the real experiences of people to be articulated rather than policing the content of ideas, or obsessing over the presence or absence of particular statements of belief, all of which prevent us from seeing and understanding the underlying social relations which constitute that experience. This is so important in a period where the institutions we have historically relied upon to undertake education are being undermined by marketisation and financialisation. 'No-platforming' in this sense could be seen as the mirror image of the conception of 'knowledge as a possession' which is central to the neoliberal marketisation credo. It's in a context like that that the radically democratic conception of Critical Pedagogy these authors offer is so important.

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