

Adult Education Quarterly

<http://aeq.sagepub.com/>

Centering Marxist-Feminist Theory in Adult Learning

Sara Carpenter

Adult Education Quarterly 2012 62: 19 originally published online 13 December 2010

DOI: 10.1177/0741713610392767

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://aeq.sagepub.com/content/62/1/19>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



American Association for Adult and Continuing Education

Additional services and information for *Adult Education Quarterly* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://aeq.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://aeq.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Dec 27, 2011

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Dec 13, 2010

[What is This?](#)

Centering Marxist-Feminist Theory in Adult Learning

Sara Carpenter¹

Adult Education Quarterly
62(1) 19–35
© 2012 American Association for
Adult and Continuing Education
Reprints and permission: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>
DOI: 10.1177/0741713610392767
<http://aeq.sagepub.com>



Abstract

Using feminist extensions of Marxist theory, this article argues that a Marxist-feminist theory of adult learning offers a significant contribution to feminist pedagogical debates concerning the nature of experience and learning. From this theoretical perspective, the individual and the social are understood to exist in a mutually determining relationship, with a social world conceptualized as active human practice. The primary theoretical task is then to rearticulate the central relations of adult learning theory (the individual, the social, and experience), which necessitates a dialectical formation of social difference and oppression. This allows for an examination of the reification of experience as a core relation of adult learning theory and a reimagining of feminist praxis.

Keywords

feminist, adult learning, Marxism

In recounting the mundane experiences of women during war, poet Muriel Rukeyser asked a question that sits at the center of feminist praxis: “What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?” Her response was, “The world would split open” (Rukeyser, 2005, p. 463). The relation established in these quick stanzas troubles feminist educators; how do we learn from the experiences of women, experiences of violence, racism, sexism, poverty, exploitation, to “split the world open.” There has been much debate among feminist scholars on how best to understand not only the splitting of the world, or rather its transformation, but the notion of “learning” that might sit at the center of this process. This theorization is critical to the work of feminist adult educators. However, there is a very real theoretical tension between the kinds of feminism used in adult education and the critical tradition of the field. For Marxist-feminist theorists, this tension is rooted in the long-standing philosophical debate of the relationship

¹University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Sara Carpenter, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1V6
Email: sara.carpenter@utoronto.ca

between the ideal and the material. For adult educators these conversations have important implications for how we conceptualize several core elements of learning theory, particularly the individual, the social, and experience. The purposes of this article are to consider these core relations of learning from a Marxist-feminist perspective and to chart a feminist direction for the Marxist theorization of adult learning.

Situating Marxist-Feminism in Adult Education

Feminist scholars in adult education have made important and expansive critiques of the presuppositions of the field. These interrogations have ranged from the questioning of patriarchal biases in the practices and theory of adult learning (Burke & Jackson, 2007; Flannery & Hayes, 2001; Hart, 1992; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Sandlin, 1995; Thompson, 1983) to the development of feminist epistemologies, pedagogies, and forms of resistance (Barr, 1999; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; English, 2005, 2006; Ryan, 2001; Tisdell, 1993; Walters, 1996; Walters & Manicom, 1996). Over the past 25 years, the theoretical trends within feminist theory have turned toward poststructural theories emphasizing difference, identity, corporeality, and hybridity. However, the realities of mobile capital, punitive social welfare policy, and imperialist war, much of which has been the subject of recent research by feminist adult educators, have increasingly spurred feminists to debate the role of the “material” in our theorizations of various forms of social difference, oppression, and knowledge (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Ebert, 2005; Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997). This demand for a rearticulation of the relations of class, race, and gender, presciently made by adult educator Mechtilda Hart (1992), has found expression by feminist educators marrying traditional political economy with feminist notions of difference (Butterwick, 2008, 2009; Gouthro, 2005; Gouthro, Miles, Butterwick, Fenwick, & Mojab, 2002).

These contributions have greatly expanded our understanding of how the social relations of gender, race, class, age, ability, nation, and language form and inform the experiences of adult learners in a variety of social contexts. I want to argue, however, that a feminist-materialist framework, one which is explicitly a Marxist-feminist approach, adds a necessary dimension to ongoing debates concerning the individual, the social, experience, learning, and consciousness—debates that remain active in our field as we struggle against a pervasive, psychologized focus on the individual in the face of neoliberal reforms and the advance of an imperialist stage of capitalist development (Martin 2008; Mojab, 2006). It is my belief that a solution to this problem lies in using theoretical tools that neither entrench the individual in abstract universalism nor detach the individual from the material relations of cultural life.

Historically, Marxist theorizing in adult education has been mired in debates concerning determination between the base and the superstructure and the relationships between material life, consciousness, and human agency (Au, 2010; Rikowski, 1997). In embracing the analytic foundations of Marx, I argue that adult educators should work from a particular strain of Marxist theorizing, typically known as dialectical

historical materialism. In adult education, Paula Allman (1999, 2001, 2007) has thoroughly articulated this recent renewal of dialectical conceptualization among Marxist theorists and its application to understanding social relations, ideology, and praxis. This strain of Marxist theorizing has a long history in adult education, notably in the foundational work of Freire and Vygotsky (Au, 2007a, 2007b) and is cropping up in renewed discussions concerning the uses of dialectics in Gramsci's theorization of hegemony and civil society (Thomas, 2009). What readers will find qualitatively different in dialectical readings of Marx is a deviation from the determinism of positivist political economy toward an emphasis on Marx's method. This emphasis on the philosophy of internal relations forms the foundation of current Marxist-feminist scholarship, which seeks to explain the experience of not just capitalism but racism and patriarchy as well.

Dialectical conceptualization revisits Marx and Engels's argument concerning the dangers of dichotomizing the ideal (our consciousness) and the material (our everyday existence). Understood dialectically, the ideal and the material exist in a mutually determining relation. This leads to a method of seeing social relationships as composed of mutually determining forces; "opposites" not necessarily in "conflict" per se, but which cannot develop outside their relation to one another, a relation based on struggle and negation (Allman, 2001). This notion of dialectics is embedded in the Marxist-feminist argument that social reality is not a structure or system but is human activity and forms of consciousness, intricate forms of human social relations. In this way, we foreground Marx and Engels's (1932/1991) emphasis on "the material world" as a focus on the relations through which we produce and reproduce not just our physical existence but our entire "mode of life" (p. 42) or the intercourse of human relations. This "mode of life" encompasses not just economic production but the ways in which we organize social relations to create that production and mediate our lives to reproduce them. This is the important differentiation between "materiality" and "matterism" made by Teresa Ebert (1996) and recently extended into educational theorization (McLaren & Jaramillo, 2010). In this way, "the material" is understood by Marxist-feminists to be socially organized through the social relations of gender and race. Race and gender are not just cultural discourses but "no less than active social organization" (Bannerji, 2005, p. 149). Bannerji argues that race and gender are logics we use to organize our world, the ideas and knowledge we circulate, the ways in which we labor and produce. However, they are also actual human active sensuous practices, made objective and concrete in our activity and consciousness through ongoing *acts* of racialization and gendering.

From this perspective, the social formations of race, gender, and class are dialectically related social phenomena and cannot be disarticulated from one another but rather continually shape and influence how our behavior and consciousness of each develops and changes. Leopoldina Fortunati (1995) and Silvia Federici's (2004) extensive analyses of the historical development of capitalism demonstrate how social practices of gendering and "othering" are both *preconditions* to the development of the capitalist mode of production and *results*. They argue that the "material" base of

capitalism developed because of its ability to take hold of and transform and exploit already existing social practices of difference and that these social relations constitute the social organization of the accumulation of capital. In this way, I understand sexism, racism, and others forms of difference to be social practices historically specific to capitalism and, thus, dialectically determined with modes of consciousness that are historically specific as well. These forms of consciousness specific to capitalism are characterized by the predominance of an epistemology of ideology (Allman, 2007) as well as objectification and bifurcation (Smith, 1988). Dialectical conceptualization of the ideal and the material gives rise to a critique of ideology as a method of thought, based in particular forms of abstraction that reifies the social world outside human activity, distorting our understanding of the relations of domination and exploitation that characterize our everyday lives (Smith, 1990, 2004). Ideology presents our everyday experience in an “upside down” fashion, making reality appear as if meaning, language, and materiality are divorced from one another rather than dialectically related and manifested in definite historical social relations. This separation is a central focus of Marxist-feminist critique.

Marxist-feminist theory offers a radically different articulation of difference and experience than the notions of “interlocking” or “intersecting” forms of oppression, which unfortunately characterizes the recent application of Marxist-feminism in the field of adult education (Gouin, 2009), hollowed of its foundations in dialectical historical materialism. Marxist-feminists, such as Bannerji, Smith, Ebert, and Mojab, begin their scholarship with a rejection of the separation between the realm of ideas and the world of the material and the autonomizing of social relations into externally related phenomena. At the center of this dialectical formulation of difference is a retheorization of the material as a necessarily sexed and differenced human phenomena existing in a dialectical relationship with forms of consciousness. From the perspective of Marxist-feminist educators we study the social world as an active human project of historically organized social practices, relations, and forms of consciousness. Feminist scholars in our field are already developing this analysis by examining educational practices such as lifelong and workplace learning (Colley, 2002, 2010; Mojab, 2009), informal learning (Gorman, 2007), citizenship learning (Carpenter, 2009), and learning in Diaspora and under conditions of war (Gorman & Mojab, 2008; Mojab & Gorman, 2003).

Feminist Readings of the Individual–Social–Experience Relation

The discipline of education has struggled for many years to establish the nature of the relationship between the individual and the social that is realized in the act of “learning.” Although early scholarship relied on an overly psychological focus on the individual, particularly through the tradition of behaviorism, the role of social relations, socialization, and culture have been strongly investigated, thanks in no small

part to the intervention of feminist scholars (Elias & Merriam, 2005). The question of what is “individual” and what is “social” in learning is an ontological and epistemological question. At the center, it requires an understanding of what constitutes social reality, what the relation is between an individual and that reality, and how that reality comes to be “known.” Obviously, these questions constitute a vast philosophical debate.

In what follows, I want to briefly outline these questions from a Marxist-feminist perspective to argue that the theoretical engagements of Marxist-feminism deeply disturb the traditional assumptions in education concerning the individual–social–learning relation. However, the epistemology and ontology of Marxist-feminism, which draws heavily from Marx’s early works, is notoriously difficult to articulate and is subject to vast misreading. To better explain this position I have provided a brief discussion of an ontological assumption within poststructuralism feminism. This example is meant to serve merely as that—an example posited for contrast and clarification. I do not purport to summarize and criticize the terrain of poststructural feminism, which has been undertaken elsewhere (Ebert, 1996). Rather, I am merely illuminating one theoretical argument by showing how it differs from another. Some readers may find this engagement with poststructural feminism dissatisfying. I would encourage those readers, however, not to be mired in the theoretical antagonism but to try and understand how the arguments of Marxist-feminists differ from poststructuralists and how these theoretical positions lead to different assumptions concerning learning and pedagogy.

An important part of the theoretical base of poststructural feminism is the notion of discursive construction. In this framework, what is of the utmost importance is the deconstruction, often through historical inquiry, of the various representations, discourses, and signifiers that characterize our social practices, consciousness, and history, and which find their realization in language (Palmer, 1990). With this project in mind, poststructural theory compels us to interact with the social world as a historical arrangement of discursive representations in which the individual, the subject, is “caught up” in a process of making and unmaking, domination and resistance, “othering,” defining, and constant change (Ebert, 2005). Translated back into the practice of adult education, the individual, as subject, is in fact “positioned” within these overlapping and contradictory discourses. Individual identity is constructed and named through these discourses and the work of adult education is then to deconstruct and rename; thus a pedagogical emphasis on naming identities, opposing binaries and essentialization, and claiming knowledge from these previously, and contemporarily, marginalized locations.

Mojab (2009) has argued that this process of naming only partially explains the social reality confronted by adult learners. I would argue that this partiality is rooted in the ontological assumptions of poststructural thought. The social is theorized as a cadre of complicated discursive constructions whereas the individual is the subject whose identity is determined, resisted, and negated within those discourses. This notion of the social rests on collective, socially constructed hermeneutic processes that

characterize the nature of experience. Joan Scott (1992), in a popular argument, encapsulated the position in this way:

Subjects are constituted discursively, but there are conflicts among discursive systems, contradictions within any one of them, multiple meanings possible for the concepts they deploy. And subjects have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred to them. Being a subject means being “subject to definite conditions of existence, conditions of endowment of agents and conditions of exercise.” . . . Subjects are constituted discursively, experience is a linguistic event (it doesn’t happen outside established meanings), but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning. Since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual. Experience is a subject’s history. Language is the site of history’s enactment. Historical explanation cannot, therefore, separate the two. The question then becomes how to analyze language. (p. 34)

An important point made here is the notion that experience does not “happen outside established meanings.” This is an embodiment of the essentially postmodern notion that reality, or objectivity, does not exist outside individual interpretive processes or rather that “there is no escaping what theorists call the hermeneutic circle” (Michelson, 1996, p. 190). Following Scott’s argument, if the individual is a discursively constituted subject, the social is the circulation of discourses, and experience is constituted through our shared meanings, representations, and discourses, then we arrive at the question of language. Feminist pedagogy then becomes the interrogation of discourses, the reflection and projection of meanings onto the subject. It also becomes an epistemological claim of access to those discourses and the experiences that are constituted through them. From the perspective of poststructural feminism, these are the experiences that sit at the center of feminist pedagogical praxis.

To flesh out this position, let us take, for example, the proposal for “situated knowledge” as an epistemological basis for a feminist adult education theory and practice (Michelson, 1996). To clarify, “situated knowledge” is not the same thing as “situated cognition” or “situated learning.” These terms are familiar to adult educators and are typically used to refer to sociocultural theories of context-based learning and “communities of practice.” For feminist adult educators, however, situated knowledge is offered as a theoretical tool for addressing the question of the relationship between the individual and the social in learning and knowledge production (Haraway, 1988). The central argument is that knowledge is based on positionality and that the knowledge of the subjugated, produced through experiences of oppression, is privileged in its ability to unmask the relations of domination that characterize society and to see beyond the infinite vision, “the god trick,” of the objectified universal subject. The claim made is that all knowledge, all “seeing,” is partial, local, grounded, subjective, and specific.

Experience in this arrangement is the position from which the subjugated “see,” remembering that experience is discursively organized and mediated.

Haraway (1988) makes two important and interrelated caveats to the argument of situated knowledge. First, the “positionality” of knowledge means that one must be very careful not to attempt a false embodiment of the subjugated in claiming to “see” from “their” position; hence, Tisdell’s (1998) important emphasis on positionality in the classroom and voice and perspective in research. Second, the danger remains that the subjugated can be romanticized, and her “sight” digested uncritically. Haraway argued that “the positions of the subjugated are not exempt from critical reexamination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation: that is, from both *semiological and hermeneutic* modes of critical inquiry” (p. 584, italics added). At this point, we can see that the argument for situated knowledge enacts an ontology and epistemology of discourse. The knowing subject produces knowledge from her position, through critical interrogation, about the discursive constructions of her own subject position. That knowledge is then subjected to modes of inquiry that deconstruct the discourses and knowledge that frame the hermeneutic of experience in the first place. Armed with new knowledge of the discursive construction of her subject position, the knowing subject is now able to resist “othering” subjectivities and the institutionalized cultural signifiers of various forms of oppression.

This battle is an important political project. The problem for critical adult educators is that the aspirations of adult education are not just changed consciousness or new modes of interpretation but the radical and revolutionary reorganization of the social relations of production. The goal extends beyond resisting representation and toward its material transformation. The disagreement, however, is not just about what should be the outcomes of feminist education. The argument I am making is that analytical tools help us see different political possibilities through the ways in which those tools describe and explain our daily lives. For me, the political aspirations of poststructural feminism are necessary and have played an important part in my own feminist development, but they are not adequate. As Bannerji (2001) has argued, it is true that the history and experience of domination creates the need to negate the identity it forms. However, resistance to that imposition implies more than the negation of discursive constructions. It also projects a new history. What is compelling about an argument such as situated knowledge is the kind of power, authority, and voice that can be claimed through such a position. However, knowledge that is local and partial, shaped by its particular discursive constellation, is unable to articulate a common materiality to its formation. Is power condemned to these limits as well? Capital most certainly is not. As identified by many critical feminist educators, here the politics of poststructuralism come to a crossroad with critical adult education. How can we craft a basis for mobilization if experience is understood as local and knowledge is privileged to situated subject positions? It is for this reason that Marxist-feminist scholars and educators have attempted to chart a reimagined notion of experience, one that places active social relations at its center.

For Marx, the problem of the individual and the social is cast in the debate between idealism and various forms of materialism as philosophical frameworks. Briefly, Marx rejected idealism, which posits that human consciousness dictates social reality. Stated another way, he objected to the notion that the world we live in is exclusively the product of the ideas we have, the language we use to describe it, or the meaning we attribute to it or, in other words, discourses that circulate above the ground. The genius of *The German Ideology* is the proof that the exact opposite of idealism, a deterministic materialist philosophy that argues that reality dictates consciousness, is in fact a repetition of idealism. For both these perspectives, reality was only considered as “*the object of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively” (Marx, 1888/1991, p. 121). Marx and Engels argued that their peers were thinking about social reality only as forms of consciousness that exist outside of people, or in the language of adult educators, as knowledge or culture that is objectified outside the learner or as “social forces” that condition or contextualize learning. Marx argued that social reality is human activity; the social world is made up of all the labors we perform in cooperation with one another *and* the way we think and make meaning of this work. The relationship between reality and consciousness is not linear, but dialectic, and thus the relationship between the individual and the social is not static or external but internal (Allman, 2001).

If the social world is composed of our activity, then we cannot be separated from it. This is not a rejection of discourse per se; rather, this is a rejection of the artificial separation of discourse and human activity, whereas discourse, objectified human consciousness, is theorized as having an independent existence from active human material practice. If this were the case we would only “have to fight against these illusions of consciousness. Since according to their fantasy, the relationships of men [sic], all their doings, their chains and their limitations are products of consciousness” (Marx & Engels, 1932/1991, p. 41). As adult educators, we know that this is not the case. As feminists, we struggle to reconcile the deconstruction of the discourses of gender and the resistance of “micro-powers” with the continued violent exploitation and dispossession of women by capital. This moment of atrophy can be found in the explanatory limits of a theoretical framework that disarticulates people from their own labor, their own thinking, their own messy, convoluted lives and excises ideology as not just though content, but the mode of knowledge production in capitalist social relations.

Marx’s notion of the social is very clearly the total relations and organizations of collective life. Often this notion of the social is translated as “material” and is reduced to the economic. Marx and Engels’s (1932/1991) explicitly counter this interpretation when they argue,

This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. (p. 42)

For Marx and Engels, the ways in which we organize our collective life to produce the world are bound up in complex forms of human relations. It is particularly crucial that feminist adult educators understand that the notion of social and material relations expressed by Marx and Engels is not an argument for the centrality or determinism of “the economic” or even of production. This is because the social and the material are also historical.

This notion has been more clearly fleshed out by Bannerji (2005), who has also complicated the notion of “social relations” of capitalism by demonstrating how these relations are necessarily gendered and “othered.” The social, contrary to the notion of discursive circulation, is understood as a mass of complex, complicated, and dialectical relations:

I assume “the social” to mean a complex socioeconomic and cultural formation, brought to life through myriad finite and specific social and historical relations, organizations, and institutions. It involves living and conscious human agents in what Marx called their “sensuous, practical human activity.” (p. 146)

Emerging here is a picture of the social world in which we act *within meaning* in very specific ways: a relationship in which meaning and organization mutually determine one another. Furthermore, we can see that individuals are understood here not just as agents of discursive relations alone but as “conscious human agents” and organizers of social life. There is an important difference between conceiving of the world as solely forms of consciousness that dictate social practice and pursuing a notion of the dialectical relationships of consciousness and practice, otherwise known as praxis, and of the individual and social. The difference is the distance between being able to describe conditions of exploitation, domination, and oppression and being able to explain them as mutually determining relations between how we think about something and how we act. For example, we know that the condition of women in low-wage work around the world is an actual practice of labor exploitation that results in a violent experience of poverty and which is necessary to the accumulation of capital. We also know that our understanding, our consciousness, of labor is that women’s labor, specifically the labor of women of color, is less “valuable” in capitalist production. This understanding is not just because we live in patriarchal and colonial discourses but also because we practice a patriarchal, imperialist organization of the accumulation of capital. This is the mutually determining, dialectical relation of praxis.

A Marxist-feminist approach to the dialectical relation of the individual and the social world implies a radically different notion of experience. Feminist adult educators critique traditional theorizations of experience in adult education for their reliance on masculinist notions of rationality (Michelson, 1996; Thompson, 2000). These critiques of the limitations of Enlightenment epistemologies are important, but I want to propose that something deeper is occurring, which has gone unaddressed by the notion of experience as a linguistic and hermeneutic event. I want to propose that in the field

of adult education we have largely relied on a reified notion of experience as the basis for learning theory. By reification I do not mean commodification; this is a relationship that has been profoundly misunderstood in our field. By reification I mean, simply, “mistaking abstract concepts for real entities” (Sayer, 1987, p. 54). This is part of the epistemological process Marx identified as ideology, which is often taken to simply mean a system of ideas or that knowledge is produced through abstraction. In this mistake lies the feminist critique of Marx’s epistemic rationality. It is worth pointing out that the fact that all knowledge relies on abstraction does not, in turn, mean that all abstractions are based on reason or even on science or any sense of objectivity or subjectivity. Even the deconstruction of discourse relies on abstraction. Abstraction itself is not necessarily the enemy, rather the manner of the abstraction, which is coupled with the realization that the method of abstraction is a political project. In this way, adult educators have reified experience because we have theorized it as an abstraction from an abstraction; we have posited it as a static entity that is an experience *of* the world and not *in* the world, certainly not in a world of our own historical making. It is for this reason that Marx and Engels’s (1932/1991) argue that

the premises from which we being are not arbitrary ones . . . they are real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. (p. 42)

If we follow a Marxist-feminist ontology, then “experience” is our participation in disjointed social relations and our moment of pedagogical movement is the “fault line” of dissonance in praxis (Smith, 1988). This means we do not attempt to understand experience as a prereflective, sensory-driven phenomenon or only as the movement of meanings. Instead, we focus on the “particular historical forms of social relations that determine that experience” (Smith, 1988, p. 49). In this way, we move beyond understanding “the ideas, images, and symbols in which our experience is given social form as that neutral floating thing called culture” (Smith, 1988, p. 54). Instead, we focus on how we construct knowledge from our experience in relation to delineating the historical and material relations that condition it and which constitute our social world. From a Marxist-feminist perspective, the notion of experience must consider the complexity of these material appearances and forms. As Bannerji (2001) has argued, the self is not a “found object on the ground of ontology, nor are they to be seen only as functions of discourses” (p. 3). By this Bannerji is referring to the Marxist epistemological notion that individuals and their practice in the world are the embodiment of the dialectical relationship between forms of consciousness and the active human social relations that make up our everyday experience. Furthermore, these social relations are understood to have both a universal and particular character. This is contrary to the notion that all experience, and thus all knowledge, is local and partial. Although I am not arguing that knowledge is infinite, I am agreeing with these Marxist-feminist scholars who search for a base in theory to describe, explain, and transform the experiences of oppression that drive critical learning in the first place. For these scholars, the interrogation of

experience must be situated with a historical analysis of capitalist social relations to engage in resistance and transformation.

To make the claim that our experiences take place within definite historical social relations is to claim a kind of universality to them. By that I mean that we all live within the historical relations of the capitalist mode of production. Even those of us who live on the periphery of that form of production act within a world characterized by its inner logic. This claim, however, is not the same thing as the long history of economic determinism associated with positivist forms of political economy. I am rejecting any notion that “class,” understood mechanistically or simply, is the vulgar base of all forms of oppression. Determinism, either of the economic or cultural sort, will not do, although it is an extremely seductive position. Even the most sophisticated of Marxist-feminist scholars, such as Ebert (1996, 2005), struggle to theorize their way out of a rigid reading of materialism. To substitute one for the other seems a false direction.

Rather, as a Marxist-feminist, I understand forms of oppression to be bound up with each other and mutually determined with the social relations of capitalism. This is not to say that patriarchy or racism did not exist before capitalism. Rather, history conditions our experience of these forms of oppression. In advanced capitalist democracies, we do not experience patriarchy as women did under feudalism, although feudal and capitalist forms of patriarchy exist in many societies today (Bannerji, Mojab, & Whitehead, 2001). Colonialism, the historical period of capitalist expansion, and imperialism, its current period of development, characterize our understandings of racial difference. By this I mean that race is sexed and classed, class is sexed and raced, sex is classed and raced, and so on. This understanding of difference is necessary to a Marxist-feminist understanding of experience. Haraway (1988) has argued that

there is no way to “be” simultaneously in all, or wholly in any, of the privileged (i.e. subjugated) positions structured by gender, race, nation, and class. . . . The search for such a “full” and total position is the search for the fetishized perfect subject of oppositional history. (p. 586)

Bannerji (1995) has argued the opposite. It is impossible to disarticulate these social relations from one another without objectifying the social and artificially separating relations of oppression from one another through a cultural logic that segments race and gender from capital and class and reformulates them as autonomous and “intersecting” phenomena. Again, we return to the problem of theorizing the social as something other than historically subjective human practice.

Advancing a Marxist-Feminist Theory of Learning and Praxis

Advancing a theory of learning from a Marxist-feminist position requires three inter-related intellectual projects. The first is to contribute to the continued development of a rigorous, historical, and scientific understanding of the circulation and accumulation

of capital and its constituent social relations that compose the daily experience of adult learners. Second, to understand these relations, our experience and forms of consciousness and their transformation, we must deeply explore Marxist notions of dialectics, contradiction, and negation. Third, we must continue the work of multiple scholars who have engaged the question of ideology but expand this work by not only discussing ideology as content but as an epistemology and, thus, a pedagogical practice.

Feminist scholars in adult education have taken great and extensive pains to document the many different ways in which women learn in varied social and political contexts. What we often neglect in this documentation is that the learning we are describing in feminist accounts is not “learning” per se, learning abstracted, learning differentiated, although this is how we name it. This “learning” is a historically specific mode of coming to know the world around you based on the ideological forms and appearances of capitalist social relations. We experience the world as fractured, disconnected, and nonlinear: the ways in which we (un)learn this world appear to be the same. This is not evidence of what “learning” is; this is evidence of “learning” in a capitalist, patriarchal, racist, heterosexist world. The efforts by Marxist-feminist educators to revise our notion of adult learning are not limited to reworking our theoretical paradigms for the purposes of new descriptions of social phenomenon. Rather, a Marxist-feminist notion of adult learning pushes us to consider the relationship between active social organization, reorganization, and learning; while consciousness moves in unconscious ways, the outcome of educational efforts will not be just new ways to make meaning but transformed human relations and practice.

The critique of ideology as pedagogical practice begs the question of Marxist-feminist methods of practice. At this point in the development of Marxist-feminist theory in adult education, it would be premature to be prescriptive about pedagogical methods. It is apparent that the argument I have made here implies a strong role for the educator and for understanding education as a purposeful, intentional pedagogic intervention. I have always gravitated to the notion of the two-eyed teacher found in Myles Horton’s (1990) work and to his articulation of the dual character of teaching. As an educator, I begin with everyday experience and consciousness; for lack of better language, I work from where the learner is “at.” At the same time, my role as educator is to challenge, interrogate, and make sure that learning is an active process of change and negation, corresponding to the actual forms and practices of social life. Only in this way can the potential of Marx’s humanism be fulfilled.

Moving forward it is important to develop Marxist-feminist pedagogy through the theory of revolutionary praxis. Although there is much overlap and similarity in intent and processes across feminist pedagogical projects and the interrogation of experience remains the central epistemological project of adult education, the revolutionary notion of praxis implies a few reorientations on the part of adult educators. Reflection cannot stop at the acknowledgment of shared experience and cannot fast forward to political action. Analysis has to go beyond experience itself and into the social conditions that determine experience and the forms of consciousness we use to interpret our

experience. These conditions and our relation to them have to be interrogated as a source of knowledge and the conditions have to be historicized and understood as relations. If race is the salient characteristic of an experience, our reflection must expand beyond race to “race in relation.” This means that Marxist-feminist educators have to reject the antitheory orientation of pragmatism. Critical praxis requires abstraction of not just what we think but how we think. This is the intellectual method of revolutionary praxis—the critical theorization of the social self.

In conclusion, and to summarize, a Marxist-feminist theory of adult learning will begin with a completely revised notion of the individual, the social, and experience drawn from a feminist and antiracist extension of dialectical historical materialism. This ontology is a dialectical historical materialism in which the social is posited as sensuous human practice and people as the historical agents of their own world. I want to emphasize in advancing a Marxist-feminist theory of adult learning that it is just as important to pay attention to forms of consciousness as social organization and practice. Discourse is important. It is important to recognize that our attractions to this notion of the social, particularly as educators, are understandable. We want to embrace these ideas because they provide us with some kind of validity for the very visceral experience of oppression. However, in embracing them, we cross ourselves. We undermine our own ability to go beyond and outside, to “split open” the world we have received from the past. We deny history, our own imaginative capacities, and the possibility of an active reorganization of both our consciousness and our collective social life.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the reviewers and editors of *Adult Education Quarterly* for their efforts and contributions to this work. I would like to thank the organizers of the 2009 Adult Education Research Conference and the 2010 Pennsylvania State University Women’s Studies Graduate Organization Conference for their inclusion of this work and the conference participants for their critical and invaluable feedback. I would like to acknowledge that this work is the product of 3 years of scholarly collaboration with feminist adult educators, including Shahrzad Mojab, Paula Allman, Helen Colley, Nadeen El-Kassem, Sheila Wilmot, Sheila Gruner, Bethany Osborne, Bahar Biazar, and Bonnie Slade. My profound thanks to Shahrzad Mojab and Sarah O’Sullivan for their close editorial comments.

Author’s Note

Previous iterations of this article were presented, under the title “Experience, Learning, and Consciousness: Advancing a Feminist-Materialist Theory of Adult Learning,” at the 2009 Adult Education Research Conference and the 2010 Pennsylvania State University Women’s Studies Graduate Organization Conference.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

References

- Alaimo, S., & Hekman, S. J. (Eds.). (2008). *Material feminisms*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Allman, P. (1999). *Revolutionary social transformation: Democratic hopes, political possibilities and critical education* (Critical Studies in Education and Culture Series). Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Allman, P. (2001). *Critical education against global capitalism: Karl Marx and revolutionary critical education* (Critical Studies in Education and Culture Series). Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Allman, P. (2007). *On Marx*. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense.
- Au, W. (2007a). Epistemology of the oppressed: The dialectics of Paulo Freire's theory of knowledge. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 5(2). Retrieved from <http://www.jceps.com/index.php?pageID=article&articleID=100>
- Au, W. (2007b). Vygotsky and Lenin on learning: The parallel structures of individual and social development. *Science & Society*, 71, 273-298.
- Au, W. (2010). Defending dialectics: Rethinking the neo-Marxist turn in critical education theory. In S. Macrine, P. McLaren, & D. Hill (Eds.), *Revolutionizing pedagogy: Education for social justice within and beyond global neo-liberalism, Marxism and education* (pp. 145-165). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bannerji, H. (1995). *Thinking through: Essays on feminism, Marxism, and anti-racism*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Women's Press.
- Bannerji, H. (2001). *Inventing subjects: Studies in hegemony, patriarchy, and colonialism*. New Delhi, India: Tulika.
- Bannerji, H. (2005). Building from Marx: Reflections on class and race. *Social Justice*, 32(4), 144-160.
- Bannerji, H., Mojab, S., & Whitehead, J. (Eds.). (2001). *Of property and propriety: The role of gender and class in imperialism and nationalism*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Barr, J. (1999). *Liberating knowledge: Research, feminism, and adult education*. Leicester, England: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.
- Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1997). *Women's ways of knowing* (Rev. ed.). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Burke, P. J., & Jackson, S. (2007). *Reconceptualising lifelong learning*. London, England: Routledge.
- Butterwick, S. (2008). Lessons of gender politics from the centre and the fringes of the knowledge-based society. In D. Livingstone, K. Mirchandani, & P. Sawchuk (Eds.), *The future of lifelong learning and work: Critical perspectives* (pp. 107-118). Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense.
- Butterwick, S. (2009). Really useful research and social justice: Exploring a feminist community-based and participatory action research project. In P. Coare & L. Cecil (Eds.), *Proceedings*

- of the 39th Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA): *Really useful research* (pp. 65-72). Brighton, England: University of Sussex.
- Carpenter, S. (2009). Interrogating the call to service: The social relations of learning citizenship. In P. Coare & L. Cecil (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 39th Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA): Really useful research* (pp. 81-88). Brighton, England: University of Sussex.
- Colley, H. (2002). A "rough guide" to the history of mentoring from a Marxist feminist perspective. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 28, 257-273. doi:10.1080/0260747022000021403
- Colley, H. (2010, May). *Communities of practice: Reinscribing globalized labour in workplace learning*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, Concordia University, Montreal.
- Ebert, T. L. (1996). *Ludic feminism and after: Postmodernism, desire, and labor in late capitalism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Ebert, T. L. (2005). Rematerializing feminism. *Science & Society*, 69, 33-55.
- Elias, J. L., & Merriam, S. B. (2005). *Philosophical foundations of adult education* (3rd ed.). Malabar, FL: Krieger.
- English, L. M. (2005). Third-space practitioners: Women educating for justice in the Global South. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 55, 85-100. doi:10.1177/0741713604271851
- English, L. M. (2006). A Foucauldian reading of learning in feminist, nonprofit organizations. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 56, 85-101. doi:10.1177/0741713605283429
- Federici, S. (2004). *Caliban and the witch: Women, the body, and primitive accumulation*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.
- Flannery, D. D., & Hayes, E. (2001). Challenging adult learning: A feminist perspective. In V. Sheard & P. Sissel (Eds.), *Making space: Merging theory and practice in adult education* (pp. 29-41). Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood.
- Fortunati, L. (1995). *The arcane of reproduction: Housework, prostitution, labor, and capital* (H. Creek, Trans.). Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.
- Gorman, R. (2007). The feminist standpoint and the trouble with "informal learning": A way forwards for Marxist-feminist educational research. In A. Green, G. Rikowski, & H. Raduntz (Eds.), *Renewing dialogues in Marxism and education: Openings* (pp. 183-199). New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Gorman, R., & Mojab, S. (2008). War, diaspora, learning, and women's standpoint. In M. Hajdukowski-Ahmed, N. Khanlou, & H. Moussa (Eds.), *Not born a refugee woman: Contesting identities, rethinking practices* (Studies in Forced Migration, Vol. 24, pp. 135-149). New York, NY: Berghahn Books.
- Gouin, R. (2009). An antiracist feminist analysis for the study of learning in social struggle. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 59, 158-175.
- Gouthro, P. (2005). A critical feminist analysis of the homeplace as learning site: Expanding the discourse of lifelong learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 24, 5-19.
- Gouthro, P., Miles, A., Butterwick, S., Fenwick, T., & Mojab, S. (2002). Five feminists: Perspectives on public policy and adult education. In S. Mojab & W. McQueen (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education:*

- Adult education and the contested terrain of public policy* (Vol. 21, pp. 408-414). Toronto, Ontario, Canada: OISE/University of Toronto.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspectives. *Feminist Studies*, 14, 575-599.
- Hart, M. U. (1992). *Working and educating for life: Feminism and international perspectives on adult education*. London, England: Routledge.
- Hayes, E., & Flannery, D. D. (2000). *Women as learners: The significance of gender in adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Hennessy, R., & Ingraham, C. (Eds.). (1997). *Materialist feminism: A reader in class, difference, and women's lives*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Horton, M. (1990). *The long haul: An autobiography*. New York, NY: Teacher's College Press.
- Martin, I. (2008). *Whither adult education in the learning paradigm? Some personal reflections*. Paper presented at the 2008 SCUTREA Conference on Whither Adult Education in the Learning Paradigm? (Plenary address), Edinburgh, England. Retrieved from <http://www.scutrea.ac.uk>
- Marx, K. (1991). Theses on Feuerbach. In C. Arthur (Ed.), *The German ideology* (2nd ed., pp. 121-123). New York, NY: International. (Original work published 1888)
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1991). The German ideology: Part one. In C. Arthur (Ed.), *The German ideology* (2nd ed., pp. 35-95). New York, NY: International. (Original work published 1932)
- McLaren, P., & Jaramillo, N. (2010). Not neo-Marxist, not post-Marxist, not Marxian, not autonomist Marxism: Reflections of a revolutionary (Marxist) critical pedagogy. *Cultural Studies-Critical Methodologies*, 20, 251-262. doi:10.1177/1532708609354317
- Michelson, E. (1996). Beyond Galileo's telescope: Situated knowledge and the assessment of experiential learning. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 46, 185-196.
- Mojab, S. (2006). Adult education without borders. In T. Fenwick, T. Nesbit, & B. Spencer (Eds.), *Contexts of adult education: Canadian perspectives* (pp. 347-355). Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Thompson Educational.
- Mojab, S. (2009). Learning by dispossession: Gender, imperialism, and adult education. In R. P. Lawrence (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 50th Annual Adult Education Research Conference on Honoring Our Past, Embracing Our Future* (Vol. 50, pp. 242-247). Chicago, IL: National-Louis University.
- Mojab, S., & Gorman, R. (2003). Women and consciousness in the "learning organization": Emancipation or exploitation? *Adult Education Quarterly*, 53, 228-241. doi:10.1177/0741713603254026
- Palmer, B. (1990). *Descent into discourse: The reification of language and the writing of social history*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Rikowski, G. (1997). Scorched earth: Prelude to rebuilding Marxist educational theory. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 18, 551-574.
- Rukeyser, M. (2005). Kathe Kollwitz. In J. E. Kaufman & A. F. Herzog (Eds.), *The collected poems of Muriel Rukeyser* (pp. 460-463). Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Ryan, A. B. (2001). *Feminist ways of knowing: Towards theorising the person for radical adult education*. Leicester, England: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

- Sandlin, J. (2005). Andragogy and its discontents: An analysis of andragogy from three critical perspectives. *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 14, 25-42.
- Sayer, D. (1987). *The violence of abstraction: The analytic foundations of historical materialism*. New York, NY: Basil Blackwell.
- Scott, J. W. (1992). Experience. In J. Butler & J. W. Scott (Eds.), *Feminists theorize the political* (pp. 23-40). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Smith, D. E. (1988). *The everyday world as problematic*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Smith, D. E. (1990). *The conceptual practices of power: A feminist sociology of knowledge*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Smith, D. E. (2004). Ideology, science and social relations: A reinterpretation of Marx's epistemology. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 7, 445-462. doi:10.1177/1368431004046702
- Thomas, P. D. (2009). *The Gramscian moment*. Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill.
- Thompson, J. (2000). *Women, class, and education*. London, England: Routledge.
- Thompson, J. L. (1983). *Learning liberation: Women's response to men's education* (Radical Forum on Adult Education). London, England: Croom Helm.
- Tisdell, E. J. (1993). Feminism and adult learning: Power, pedagogy, and praxis. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 57, 91-103.
- Tisdell, E. J. (1998). Poststructural feminist pedagogies: The possibilities and limitations of feminist emancipatory adult learning theory and practice. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48, 139-156. doi:10.1177/074171369804800302
- Walters, S. (1996). Gender and adult education: Training gender-sensitive and feminist adult educators in South Africa-an emerging curriculum. In P. Wangoola & F. Youngman (Eds.), *Towards a transformative political economy of adult education: Theoretical and practical challenges* (pp. 293-320). DeKalb: LEPS Press, Northern Illinois University.
- Walters, S., & Manicom, L. (Eds.). (1996). *Gender in popular education: Methods for empowerment*. London, England: CACE & ZED Books.

Bio

Sara Carpenter is a PhD candidate in the Adult Education and Community Development program in the Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology at OISE/University of Toronto. Carpenter is the editor, with Shahrzad Mojab, of the forthcoming collection *Educating from Marx: Race, Gender, and Learning* (2011) for the Palgrave Macmillan Marxism and Education series.