

ON MARX: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE REVOLUTIONARY INTELLECT OF KARL MARX

Paula Allman. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 2007, 85 pages.

While resources for teaching Marxism in adult education are rather limited, we have seen in the last 15 years a proliferation of literature on Marxism and education, primarily in the U.K. Even as ideology continues to be a major arena of debate in Marxist theory, this literature moves beyond the Althusserian notion of education as an ideological apparatus of the state, and instead examines equally significant questions such as work, labour, capitalism, globalization, and alternative modes of resistance and organizing. The core of this body of literature provides new inroads into the complexities of labour/capital contradiction, which distinguishes Marxist theoretical concerns from mainstream social and educational theory. However, while Marx was interested in replacing capitalism with communism, the alternatives examined in this literature are, for instance, cooperatives, participatory democracy, or civic engagement.

Paula Allman is an outstanding contributor to this surge in Marxist studies of education. Her seminal books *Revolutionary Social Transformation* (1999) and *Critical Education against Global Capitalism* (2001), written more specifically for adult educators, have opened up new spaces for rethinking ways of being, learning, and relating in capitalist social relations. It is, however, *On Marx: An Introduction to the Revolutionary Intellect of Karl Marx* where Allman succinctly presents us with the ideas of Marx on consciousness and praxis.

I have taught Allman's articulation of Marxism in/and adult education for the past several years at master and doctoral levels. It is not an easy undertaking. Students have reacted at two interconnected levels. At one level, they find it a challenging thought process to shift from binary, oppositional, and linear thinking to dialectical thinking and historical materialist understandings of contemporary capitalism. At another level, the notion of Marxism provokes instantaneous imagery of defeated socialist experiments, and students exhibit strong, almost visceral, reactions to the idea of a radical alternative to the status quo. Overcoming these intellectual, political, and historical barriers is not easy in part because of limited educational resources for radical and critical approaches. Filling in this gap is Allman's *On Marx*; a remarkable, simple, but not simplified, teaching tool. She begins with the question of "why educators need to understand Marx," and responds by reminding us that

educators, regardless of the subject/s they teach, need to understand the world in which they are preparing people to live and work. In the 21st century, this world is the world of global capitalism, and Marx understood better than anyone else, to date, how this world works—how it moves and develops according to the inherent laws of capital. (p. 11)

She contends that "far too little effort has been expended in considering how the entirety of Marx's thought might inform educators' efforts to change the world, or

more realistically, to collaboratively prepare themselves and others for self and social transformation” (p. 51). The core ideas of this 85-page book are drawn from Marx’s *Capital*, *Grundrisse*, and *German Ideology*, among other texts—a colossal task, indicative of Allman’s depth of knowledge of Marx’s philosophy and method.

Structurally, the book is organized in three main chapters of Marx on capital/capitalism, Marx on consciousness, and Marx on education. Each chapter is followed by reflective questions, and the book ends with a glossary of terms and additional reading sources. *On Marx*, therefore, accomplishes two purposes: it is both an introductory book on Marxism and adult education and a reference work on core ideas of Marx on dialectical conceptualization, internal relations, essence and appearance, labour/capital contradiction, and the logic of capitalism.

“For Marx, to be fully human, human beings, meant that people would be continuously engaged in a process of becoming, a process of developing all of their potentials,” writes Allman in the chapter on consciousness (p. 31). I consider this chapter pivotal in understanding the role of critical adult education/educators in developing the intellectual tools necessary to grasp the internal relations of capitalism and to struggle against it. The explanatory power of Marx’s theory of consciousness, Allman argues, lies in his dialectical conceptualization of the relationship between consciousness and reality.

Marx conceptualises consciousness and reality as an internally related unity of opposites. Additionally, reality is conceptualised dynamically, as the sensuous, active experience of human beings in the material world. Therefore, at any one moment in time, consciousness is comprised of [*sic*] thoughts that arise from each human being’s sensuous activity. The consciousness of any human being will also include thoughts that have arisen external to the individual’s own sensuous activity, from other people’s sensuous activity both historically and contemporaneously. (p. 32)

This dialectical articulation of the relations between consciousness, sensuous human activity, and social reality posits a theory of praxis as the unity of human thought and practice. Allman suggests that “Marx’s theory of consciousness was actually a theory of praxis, i.e., a theory of the inseparable unity of thought and practice rather than a sequential theory of praxis (a thought-action-thought-action-etc. sequence)” (pp. 33–34). This analysis proposes new ways of understanding choices we are making in our lives; we either are engaged in “critical/revolutionary praxis” or “uncritical/reproductive praxis” (p. 34). With this, Allman suggests that indeed Marx’s theory of consciousness is a theory of praxis.

In the last chapter on Marx and education, Allman explains Marx’s relational conceptualization of ontology (theory of being/becoming) and epistemology (theory of knowledge/knowing). The distinctiveness of this theory is its historicization of knowledge, in which knowledge is historically specific and considers being human as a continuous process of becoming; “humanity’s vocation is becoming” (p. 61). If education aims at helping us recreate the world rather than reproduce it, we need this dialectical understanding of theory and practice and consciousness and reality.

On Marx is a thin book with thick theorization that covers the most emancipatory ideas of our time; it is an essential learning tool for adult educators of all persuasions.

References

- Allman, P. (1999). *Revolutionary social transformation: Democracy, hope, political possibilities and critical education*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
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RESEARCH IS CEREMONY: INDIGENOUS RESEARCH METHODS

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Wilson's work, *Research Is Ceremony*, juxtaposes indigenous thought processes alongside those of the dominant culture. The result is a thesis and story that tells of Wilson's attempt to share an account of developing indigenous research methods in an academic voice that has personal insight. Two voices are used, that of the dominant-culture-thinking academic, and the more casual voice of the indigenous man attempting to explain his difficulties when it comes to shifting his thinking to fit with the expectations of the dominant culture. Despite these challenges and shifts, Wilson manages to develop the grounds of an indigenous research method that takes indigenous ideologies and applies the dominant culture's research method how it best fits.

The two voices are differentiated in the text through different fonts, and this serves as a means to allow the reader to know Wilson intends to present thinking more in line with the ways of the dominant culture or with the indigenous. He uses the two voices as a tool to allow the reader to straddle the two worlds he is caught between. This is explained in the Foreword and Conclusion—a single section at the front of the work that thrusts the reader directly into the cyclic world of indigenous thought and allows the reader to get a feel for the story to come.

Understanding relationships is at the heart of comprehending Wilson's process and work. The entire text is a story that builds relationships with the audience, with researchers, with relatives, and with the greater world. An understanding relationship with Wilson is needed to know his work, and readers need to understand his questions before they can