

## Book Reviews/Recensions

### ***BETWEEN HOPE AND DESPAIR: WOMEN LEARNING POLITICS***

**Donna M. Chovanec. Fernwood Publishing, Blackpoint, NS, 2009, 128 pages.**

Donna Chovanec, adult education professor at the University of Alberta, has written about her long-term research connection with women anti-dictatorship activists living in Arica, Chile, the country's most northern coastal city. Early in the book, Chovanec offers a succinct summary of Chile's long history of oppression, also pointing to the equally significant history of resistance and dissent through labour, women's, and indigenous movements. Through interviews, she explores (with depth and great detail) the retrospective reflections of the women of Arica about the past and their contributions to the battle for freedom that took place after the overthrow of Allende's socialist government in 1973, which was followed by a brutal repressive military dictatorship led by General Augusto Pinochet. Thousands were assassinated and exiled. Chovanec reminds us that Pinochet's repressive regime was part of a long-standing process of colonization, which has left its mark throughout Latin America. Forced underground by the military dictatorship, many Chilean citizens lived in fear until the early 1980s, when protests began to reemerge with women at the forefront. This book tells the story of their courage, tactics, and strategies, as well as the long-term impact on these women of their engagement. The book makes a significant contribution to the scholarship of learning in social movements, an important area of inquiry in the field of adult education.

The book is divided into two parts. In Part One, Chovanec focuses on the data, organizing her analysis into four sections, or acts, while in Part Two, she considers the case in light of current theorizing about social movement learning.

In the first act (*Los Antecedentes*) of Part One, Chovanec maps the background and the family and social contexts that influenced the women's activism. Readers will be drawn into the geography of Arica as Chovanec provides a thick description of the setting, giving us a sense of the geography, street scenes, houses, markets, and businesses of the city. We learn how family and, in particular, the democratic and socialist orientations of many in this northern city were significant spheres of learning for these women. Municipal politics, richly informed by leftist approaches, also influenced their activism. The second act (*La Lucha*, or the struggle) outlines the different activities and women's experiences during the anti-dictatorship movement, beginning with the first meeting in 1983 and ending in 1990 when the dictatorship was finally overthrown. We learn there were two women's organizations: MODEMU and CEDEMU. The first was the largest group and oriented to leftist politics, while the second was smaller and more explicitly feminist. At times their activities came together, and in 1984 efforts were made to create a new organization, Women for Democracy, which folded after three years. Along with very public activities such as protests and disruptions of meetings, underground strategies such as creating and distributing anti-dictatorship materials, spray-painting, and bomb-making took place. Many communal survival efforts, such as collective kitchens, were also initiated and were

key to the sustainability of the movement. While some churches were more conservative and aligned with the government, others, as happened in other areas of Latin America, became involved in liberation theology. We learn that the women’s involvement with these various activities came at great cost, as they had to continue to be the core caregivers of their families.

In the third act, Chovanec focuses on the end of the dictatorship and how women’s actions shifted away from public engagement to the domestic sphere. The irony of this retreat to the home is noted by Chovanec and by her interviewees, one of whom is quoted at length, commenting that women were “‘the motor of the social movement in Chile’” (p.51), but that energy and momentum were lost because women’s organizations did not continue to function and engage with the new democracy, most particularly, the economic injustices of neo-liberalism and the oppressive practices of patriarchy. Some of Chovanec’s participants felt that the feminist goals of gender equality had been set aside and regarded as secondary to the primary issue of bringing down the dictatorship. In hindsight, they felt they had not taken full advantage of the power they had. In the fourth act, we learn that in the place of a strong women’s liberation movement, student activism has emerged. Focused on education, students, according to Chovanec, “have stormed onto the political stage in Chile” (p.61).

In Part Two of the book, the case of women in Arica’s activism is considered in light of theories of adult education and social movement learning. Chovanec begins with some detail about her methodology and approach to analysis before turning to theorizing the phenomenon of political learning. Here, Chovanec builds on previous feminist studies of women’s activism that, like her case, illustrate so clearly “the interplay between the social and the personal aspects of political consciousness” (p. 75). She argues that her study shows evidence of the two forms of consciousness that are keys to political learning: accessibility to consciousness (through social structures such as the family) and engagement with consciousness (through political activism). She further challenges the public/private binary, noting that when

the traditional opportunities for men to organize and mobilize during the dictatorship were eliminated, women were thrust to the forefront. Framing their oppositional activities as an extension of their traditional roles in the care and protection of their families, women made political claims from within a “maternalist” discourse. (p. 79)

She then turns her attention to the matter of social movement praxis, noting how in her case study, praxis was not fully achieved. “Praxis was inhibited in this instance by a lack of an ‘explicit curriculum’ that would combine a critical analysis of the relations of capitalism . . . with a concrete vision of the future” (p. 94).

She goes on to discuss the lasting outcomes of women’s involvement with the anti-dictatorship movements in Chile, and how this engagement has profoundly shaped their political consciousness, as well as their marital, childbearing, and work biographies. Chovanec argues that her participants, although they expressed disillusionment and were disengaged with the institutionalized political system, were not apolitical. Instead, they were interacting informally and connecting with elders of CEDEMU and other women who

had been involved with anti-dictatorship activism. Chovanec concludes by commenting on trauma and the emotional and physical tolls the military regime and anti-dictatorship activism has had on the women.

Chovanec's book is a relatively slim volume at 128 pages, a size that belies its substance. It will be a welcome addition to the reading list of many adult education courses, including theories of social movement learning, feminist praxis, community engagement, and adult learning, and should be required reading for others engaging with empirical investigations of activism. A particularly impressive aspect of the book is how it reveals the everyday, in situ, and informal learning that was crucial to women's political engagement. It is well-written and -organized, offering an empirical study of the phenomenon of political learning and providing thick description and extensive quotes from study participants, as well as photographs, giving the reader a vivid sense of the culture of resistance that provided the compost for these women's politicization and courage. The women of Arica have much to teach us about the need for vigilance and praxis—action combined with education—in the current battle with neo-liberal and imperialist agendas. The text offers a compelling case for the need for social justice movements to articulate a clear alternative of the future, in addition to a robust critique of current practices.

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## ***THE ARTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: RE-CRAFTING ADULT EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY CULTURAL LEADERSHIP***

**Darlene E. Clover and Joyce Stalker (Eds.). National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), Leicester, UK, 2007, 188 pages.**

Adult education's rich history of mobilizing communities to engage in grassroots participation is framed by theories and processes generally known as *popular education*. Through the practice of popular education, an outsider—e.g., teacher, animateur, social mediator—helps the community identify the change it desires so it can transform what exists into an alternative vision of its society. The terms *community development* or *engagement* refer to the processes used by popular educators to involve the community in the change it strives to achieve. These terms are now widely understood and popularized under a new umbrella term of *social justice*.

In *The Arts and Social Justice: Re-crafting Adult Education and Community Cultural Leadership*, Darlene E. Clover and Joyce Stalker have attempted to “map some of the innovative and critical arts-based pedagogies” used to facilitate “creative learning” in a complex world (p. 2). The book reminds readers of the importance of the arts as the locus of