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LEARNING ACTIVISM: THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Aziz Choudry. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2015, 199 pages.

In his book *Learning Activism: The Intellectual Life of Contemporary Social Movements*, Aziz Choudry builds a passionate and persuasive case for recognizing everyday forms of social action as profoundly educative. In examining the pedagogical lifeworlds of social movement activists, Choudry shows how activist learning is a deeply embodied experience—one that straddles the ostensible divide between the intellectual development of theory and the sensuousness of experiential activity. Choudry's book convincingly bridges the false disconnect between the brains and the brawn of social struggle, and in so doing offers an important and timely contribution to both social movement theory and the field of critical adult education. By focusing on the behind-the-scenes theorizing, learning, and strategizing involved in social movements, Choudry makes the important point that the academy does not have a monopoly on knowledge and research. On the contrary, with a steadfast dedication to praxis, Choudry takes an impressive personal history of political activism and draws out the significance of informal and experiential learning to the production of critical knowledge in popular struggle.

Learning Activism comprises four chapters and a concluding epilogue. The first chapter provides a comprehensive review of knowledge production and learning in social action. In this chapter, Choudry firmly situates his work in the tradition of critical adult education, drawing inspiration from popular and anti-colonial struggles. Using examples from movements such as the Highlander Folk School, Choudry places front and centre the importance of the informal and incidental learning that takes place when ordinary people come together to share ideas, reflect, and strategize. The overall goal of this chapter is to resist the trend toward professionalization in adult education and re-establish the field's historical roots grounded in social and political transformation. By appealing to such thinkers as Antonio Gramsci and Frantz Fanon, in this chapter Choudry provides a passionate and conceptually robust call to action for adult educators to restore the ideas of “emancipation, decolonization, and freedom” to our scholarship and practice (p. 28). In the second chapter, Choudry offers a critical intervention into the field of social movement studies. Choudry is particularly critical of scholarship that reproduces a colonial anthropological gaze by focusing on outsider observations of movements. In response, Choudry develops a conceptual framework that privileges analytical insights derived from the internal dynamics of social movements in relation to broader historical power relations. Together, these first two chapters provide a sophisticated groundwork for what follows: a spirited empirical examination of learning in action.

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The following two chapters provide a rich portrayal of learning and knowledge production in the context of contemporary social movements. The first of these two chapters is focused on mapping the dynamics of informal learning in activist milieus, such as campaigns and mobilizations. Choudry links emancipatory adult education theory to activists' embodied experiences of political education and struggle. The most significant contribution Choudry makes in this empirical examination is how specific and direct confrontations with political repression and state power can produce a pedagogical rupture in social movements. This rupture can provide critical opportunities for harnessing the power of informal learning to analyze historical power relations and to organize resistance. This chapter is followed by an examination of the specific ways in which knowledge production occurs in social movements. Here, Choudry examines an impressively global array of interviews with activists involved in labour and environmental activism in the Philippines, Canada, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. By bringing activists' voices into dialogue with each other, Choudry illustrates the dialectical relationship between organizing, research, consciousness raising, and social action. The result is an important contribution that sparks a critical discussion on the importance of activist research that broadens our understanding of how and where knowledge production occurs. In so doing, Choudry offers a compelling argument for how research conducted outside of the academy can often be more relevant to developing effective on-the-ground strategies that challenge the interests of capital and states.

Theoretical debates about informal learning and knowledge production often ignore the intellectual lives of grassroots activists. On this front, *Learning Activism* is an innovative, conceptually rich, and empirically grounded intervention. For me, as an adult educator, the most poignant element of this book is Choudry's unwavering goal of moving the field away from the grips of professionalization and toward a commitment to social transformation. This book is an important reminder to adult educators to embrace and take inspiration from our field's rich history of resistance to colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism. In his desire to challenge the professionalization of our field, he provides an invaluable reminder to seek out the "hidden histories" of resistance that lie at the core of our discipline. This book is also an important contribution to social movement theory. By paying meticulous attention to the micro-politics of activists' lifeworlds, Choudry offers a very persuasive illustration of how deep and movement-relevant theoretical thinking occurs in movement contexts. As such, this book is an important call to action to both adult educators and social movement scholars to engage directly with the practical and embodied experiences of learning through social action. I highly recommend this book to all scholars and students in these fields as well as to activists engaged in political struggle.

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