

Karl Marx and the Paris Commune of 1871: Tracing Traditions of Critical Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

*In 1871, citizens of the war torn arrondissements of Paris, in the face of traumatic political and military turmoil, established a new local form of government. The Paris Commune, as this government became known as in the English world, attracted attention for its alternative political-economic organization. One notable commentator was Karl Marx who, while living in England at the time, commented on the Commune as a test of the burgeoning field of critical theory. This paper traces Marx's work on the Commune, specifically in *The Civil War in France*, to examine how his work on this historical event underpins crucial concepts for critical pedagogy in contemporary adult education. While the trajectory between Marx's writings on the Commune and critical adult education is underrepresented and often unacknowledged, I argue that there is an important connection: *The Civil War in France* revises Marx's theory of dialectics in such a way that it allows us to understand informal learning as a process for possible critique.*

Keywords: Citizens, Commune, France, Karl Marx, Paris

INTRODUCTION: LEARNING AND IDEOLOGIES

In Daniel Bell's (1996) history of American Marxist socialism, he notes that the weekly paper *Appeal to Reason* "was to

become the most fabulous publishing venture in socialist journalism" (p. 58). Published from 1895 until its dissolution in 1922, the paper protested the many inequalities that had manifested themselves in an increasingly industrial

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United States of America. The issues surrounding the inequalities of the time varied greatly between ownership of the means of production, de-skilling of traditional forms of craft-labour, gendered discrimination to opportunity, and racial prejudice, to name just a few. As such, the paper led the challenge of the increasing role of exploitative working conditions that related to these issues.

John Graham's (1990) own book about *Appeal to Reason* is a collection of clippings from the paper that includes a wide variety of debates and historical struggles of the time. Of particular note in the collection is a letter to the paper from a man identified as W.D. Balfor, from Bakersfield, California, and printed November 14th, 1908. In his letter entitled "As a Capitalist Sees It," Balfor conveys that his money has provided him with prestige, and he would rather not give up the social buoyancy of his capital. He explains that, "from my point of view I am better off now than I would be under socialism. I do not want to do compulsory work for even four hours a day. The five or eight thousand a year income would not buy the things I have learned to enjoy" (Balfor, in Graham, p. 81).

Balfor is replying to what he understands as a particular socialist strategy of the context (accurate or not), but he identifies a phenomenon that I would like to focus on: he has *learned* to enjoy the objects of the system of capital. Balfor's statement locates the phenomenon of learning in an intriguing position. While he certainly offers a decisive opinion

on how the nature of political economy should organize, his understanding of how he has come to argue that point is one that may not be recognized in contemporary discourses. That is to say, little consideration is often cast upon the ways in which we learn our way into ideologies.

Because people may not always conceive of their ideas about the world as being learned, this conception of learning may trouble a common use of the term. Notwithstanding, critical adult education literature has attempted to address the fact that we learn ideas, and ideology, that normalize political-economic participation. For example, Bruce Spencer (1998), in a review of the forms of Adult Education, includes the broad societal processes of "experiential learning" (p. 20), as well as "informal learning" (p. 23) – both concepts describing the process of learning broad ideologies of our world. Likewise, Peter Jarvis (2004) and Michael Welton (1991) both provide descriptions of learning that situate it as a powerful formative mechanism in establishing the habits, thoughts, and practices of our lives. In this way, the discourses of critical adult education have established a certain precedence for studying how people learn ideologies of domination and critique.

Likewise, Raymond Williams (2005), himself an adult educator (see, McIlroy & Westwood, 1993), also asserts the importance of learning in his discussion on hegemony and society. Williams was one who sought to undertake a methodological investigation of the

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