Between Hope and Despair: Social and Political Learning in the Women’s Movement in Chile

Donna M. Chovanec
University of Alberta

Abstract: Through a study of the women’s movement in Chile, I explore the learning dimension of social movements. I document and problematize social and political learning processes and effects, including the role of consciousness and praxis in social movement learning.

Introduction
Within the study of social movements, there is often implicit acknowledgement that social movements are sites of profound learning. However, “learning in such situations is largely informal and often incidental – it is tacit, embedded in action and is often not recognised as learning” (Foley, 1999, p. 3). Chilean women’s movements are an ideal environment for studying learning in social movements. Drawing on a rich historical tradition of social and political struggle, political mobilization of women increased in the 1980s in the midst of Chile’s 17 year military dictatorship (1973-1989). The public protests, popular organizing, clandestine activities, and feminist praxis of the Chilean women’s movements were a powerful force in the eventual downfall of the dictatorship (see for example Gaviola, Largo, & Palestro, 1994; Valdés & Weinstein, 1993).

The content of this paper is a brief summary of a doctoral thesis. The research conducted for this thesis was specifically intended to expose the learning dimension of a social movement. From the mountain of data that I collected on the social and political learning within the women’s movement in Arica, a small city in northern Chile, I focused on a few key areas. The first to be covered in this paper is the collective narrative of the women’s movement in Arica. Next, building on recent social movement theorizing in adult education that argues for a marxist engagement (Allman, 2001a, 2001b; Foley, 1999; Holst, 2002). I analyze two categories (Consciousness and Praxis) that emerged early in the field and subsequently proved to be highly significant for understanding and/or problematizing learning and education within social movements. (A third category, consequences of participation in social movements, is covered in another paper in this volume.) Last, I discuss implications for adult education theory and practice.

Methodology
This research is founded on nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in Arica, Chile. During this time (2001-2002), I was situated in a local feminist NGO, Casa de Encuentro de la Mujer (CEDEMU). The primary objective was to explore the phenomenon of social and political learning in social movements. Using a combination of phenomenology, ethnography and feminist research critique, research methods included cultural immersion, document review, participant observation, and interviews. In total, sixty participants were formally interviewed individually or in small groups. The participants were women active in social/political movements in Arica at some time during the past thirty years. They ranged in age between 25
and 78, and included women from all the left/centre political parties, the Catholic Church, community kitchens, the university, and the popular neighbourhoods.

The Women’s Movement in Arica

The story of the women’s movement in Arica begins long ago within a vibrant history of worker, peasant and miner movements in the northern desert region (la Pampa). In the middle of the 20th century, women fought for the right to vote (which was fully obtained in 1949). Later, the successive presidential campaigns of Salvador Allende, the Catholic Church’s liberation theology, flourishing social and labour organizations, land takeovers, and the growing ascendancy of the left in Arica made significant impacts on the women’s social and political consciousness. Then, on September 11, 1973, “from one day to the next,” life was irrevocably changed by the military coup. Along with death, detention and disappearances, all social and political movements were “disarticulated” due to fear and basic survival needs.

1973 to 1983 was a period of quiet continuity between the legacy of the past and the mobilization of the future. Women sought out the company of others to obtain information, alleviate their fear, and make sense of their experience. University students started to distribute pamphlets against the regime and political parties began to rearticulate. Public activity started to coalesce between 1980 and 1983 with cultural activities, collective kitchens and an association of the relatives of the victims of repression. A Communist Party cell comprised only of women spent a full year studying forbidden political materials.

Then, in 1983, coincident with other mass mobilizations of women throughout the country, two pivotal events occurred in Arica. One was the detention of four Communist male leaders in August. In response, their wives initiated the first public demonstrations in Arica against the dictatorship. The other was the inadvertent introduction of feminist theorizing into the political landscape in Arica prompted by a feminist conference held in Peru that year. These two precipitating events coalesced into a meeting held in October which resulted in the formation of two women’s organizations, CEDEMU and MODEMU. Despite their divergent philosophical stances on feminism and the goals of the women’s movement in Arica, the women in these groups were united in the common objective of the downfall of the dictatorship. Other powerful representations of social movements in Arica with significant participation and leadership by women were: communal survival-oriented activities (e.g. collective kitchens), human rights groups, political parties, labour movements, and the Catholic Church (in the poorer neighbourhoods). The activities in these many groups ranged from open demonstrations to clandestine activities, and from practical support to feminist consciousness-raising. Special demonstrations and cultural events occurred around major dates such as the anniversary of the coup and International Women’s Day.

From 1988 to 1990, social and political movements in Chile were pacified by the beginning of the ‘transition’ process. Movement decline was also fuelled by fear, fatigue, and the return of the traditional political actors. So, “the women went home.” Today, faced with a neoliberal “pseudo-democracy,” the women are cynical and apathetic. They do not feel well represented nor served by the official women’s ministry, SERNAM, which initially grew out of the strength of the Chilean women’s movement. Yet, “spaces of participation” that started in the 80s remain such as Centro de Encuentro de la Mujer (CEDEMU, a clear example of the endurance of a socialist-feminist praxis in Arica) and Mujeres de Luto (an annual event where women stand in black and in silence on the steps of the cathedral for one hour on the anniversary
of the coup). This tension between hope and despair suggests that the women’s movement in Arica may be dormant but by no means dead.

**Critical and Gendered Consciousness in a Social Movement**

The analysis for this analytical category emerged from repeated references to “consciousness” in the women’s narratives. I propose that consciousness is crucial in understanding the relationship between social movements and education, including the challenges of grasping the structure/agency and individual/social dialectics. These dialectics are revealed in the linguistic nuances of the use of the word in Spanish that led me to theorize distinctions between acquiring and taking consciousness.

**ACQUIRING consciousness reflects the pre-eminence of social-structural elements in the early years.** Most women were raised in families and communities that espoused leftist philosophies and were exposed early to socialist or communist political parties. For other women, there was early faith-based learning of values related to fairness, dignity, and community. The idea of ‘acquiring’ critical consciousness suggests a process of passively absorbing elements (e.g., values, philosophies) from the external social structures in which one is embedded (e.g., family, community). While not wholly conscious at the time, these early experiences establish the predisposition for developing a more robust critical consciousness in the future. The precedent of early learning is supported in other studies on social activists.

**TAKING critical consciousness is an act of agency.** The process of developing a critical consciousness cannot stop there. Individual agency must act upon the predispositions and opportunities presented by the structural conditions. Unlike the more passive implication of a word such as ‘acquiring,’ in Spanish it is more common to use the word “tomar” (taking) when referring to consciousness. As such, there is a qualitative difference in the two forms of expression – acquiring vs. taking – that are possibly similar to Freire’s (1990) “distinction between being accessible to consciousness and entering consciousness” (p. 62, italics added). Thus, the idea of ‘taking’ critical consciousness implies maturity, action, engagement, and agency. It suggests an intentional commitment made by women whose own lived experiences resonate with their already acquired consciousness. As Allman (2001a) states, ideas or thoughts can “become part of our consciousness when we receive them from an external source… [but] reception depends upon our active engagement with them” (p. 165-66). Once engaged, this consciousness becomes internalized and subjectified – it is taken into oneself.

As they entered their youth, many women in the study made deliberate choices to act upon their consciousness. Thus, women became party militants themselves or they affiliated themselves with party militants. Some actively participated in the Catholic Church which, at that time, professed a theology of liberation. Prior to the coup, the older participants had worked for Allende’s campaigns, participated in community organizations, and established their homes through land takeovers. So that, in living out their potential consciousness, it was deepened and expanded into a real consciousness. It was brought to a level of awareness and integration that is only possible through action. It is clear in the words of the older participants (those who were adults at the time of the coup), that their consciousness was firmly established, laying a solid foundation for their anti-dictatorship activism. When the women say that they mobilized out of “necessity,” I contend that this could more accurately be understood as the manifestation of a solid critical consciousness.

For most women in this study, socialist consciousness was later coupled with a growing gendered consciousness. This was so across Latin America during the dictatorships of the 1970s.
and 80s. Framing their oppositional activities as an extension of their traditional roles in the care and protection of their families, women made political claims from their position as mothers, redefining what counts as political. This had a powerful impact on the consciousness of the women. I concur with authors who contend that feminist consciousness and feminist engagement were evident even among women who renounced the feminist label.

The sturdy formation of consciousness through early exposure and consolidation acted as a buffer and a foundation upon which the women depended even through the shocking jolt to their consciousness precipitated by the coup, sustained through the seventeen years of dictatorship, and challenged by the rampant disillusionment of the current neo-liberal era.

Developing critical consciousness is a process that must be nurtured over time. Critical consciousness is one part of the action/reflection dialectic that is called revolutionary praxis. In order for its potential to be fully realized and sustained, critical consciousness must be nurtured and cultivated. Older women, already adults during the years of repression and resistance, had benefited from this nurturance as they learned and lived their consciousness over the years in more politically open times. In contrast, the critical consciousness of the younger women participants was more fragile for at least two reasons. First, the material circumstances of their formative years during the dictatorship were contradictory, complicated, and traumatizing. They were simultaneously educated by repression and resistance on an intense and daily basis. Second, there was not enough deliberate, systematic education for critical consciousness to counteract these conflicting realities. Even though most belonged to the Young Communists, they complained about the lack of “ideological formation.” They were initiated into politics by their involvement in actions, such as barricades in their neighbourhood streets or strikes on campus, so were not so strongly situated ideologically as the older women. Thus, for younger women, without adequate political education, consciousness was not yet well grounded.

Notwithstanding my belief that older women were more solidly situated, the lack of attention to ongoing nurturance of critical consciousness had repercussions for the women’s movement as a whole in Arica. Consciousness is not a static phenomenon. It is fragmentary, contradictory, and constantly in the process of becoming. New situations, particularly those as traumatically disjunctive from the past as happened with the coup in Chile, demand that a critical consciousness be constructed and re-constructed through an ongoing and deliberate educational process. The women’s prior (in the case of the older women) or nascent (in the case of the younger women) critical consciousness was not fully realized due to inadequate attention to its central importance in a critical revolutionary praxis.

From this analysis of consciousness, I identify two educational ‘spaces’ that require more deliberate attention from adult educators: (1) Adult educators must seize the opportunity to maximize the potentially radical effects of early learning, particularly from parents. (2) Political parties hold historical promise as institutions of radical adult education.

Social movement praxis: Analyzing action and reflection

Early in the study, my attention was drawn to repeated references to a clandestine meeting of women held in October of 1983. The meeting was initiated by a handful of leftist women who hoped to advance the anti-dictatorship struggle by incorporating feminist analysis and reflection that would simultaneously contribute to women’s advancement in Chilean society. The majority of women, however, prompted by the recent detentions of four prominent Communist Party male leaders, perceived immediate and confrontational action to be the most
urgent need, the single stated objective being to oust the dictatorship. They saw no immediate relevance of either feminism or “study” as proposed by the organizers.

In the first part of my analysis, I identify two results of this meeting: (1) The emergence of the women’s movement in Arica is coincident with the philosophical division of the emerging movement into two women’s organizations. (2) If it is so that revolutionary social change requires a dialectically occurring cycle of both action and reflection, then in Arica, the polarization of the emerging movement polarized also the two elements of praxis. Therefore, the action/reflection dialectic needed for social change was fractured from the outset.

In the second part of my analysis, I reflected upon the words of Antonio Gramsci (Holst, 2002) who tells us that social movements require “the cement of ideology,” that is, socialist ideology. As I mention above, this type of ideology had already been planted among many of the elder women in Arica prior to the coup through the education of families, the Church, and their political parties. However, factors that interrupted the realization of a systematic analysis were, on one hand, the perceived urgency of action held by many women and, on the other hand, the absence of a clear ideology among the younger women.

I propose that ideological formation among the members of a social movement requires a process of critical reflection. I suggest that social movements are more successful when they possess the tools to analyze and understand capitalism. Alongside necessary actions intended to respond to the immediate crisis of capitalism (for example, the dictatorship), people need time and space to reflect upon capitalist relations in their current context and also upon the vision of the society that they wish to create. This is similar to Lange’s (2001) proposition that “critical transformative learning involves a pedagogy of critique (of what is) tempered by a pedagogy of hope (for what could be)” (p. 2).

*Analyze the capitalist relations (critique):* Marx advised us to challenge the relations of capitalism, not the results. Critiqued accordingly, the result (the dictatorship) would not then be the focus of direct attention as it was during those years. Rather, an analysis of the neoliberal project would place the immediate result (i.e., the dictatorship) squarely into the capitalist system of relations, a system of relations based on economic domination, buttressed by other forms of exploitive relationships (e.g., social, cultural, racial, gender). According to Marx, capitalism is marked by inherent crises due to its own internal contradictions. Hence, focusing on the crisis (or symptom) will not fundamentally transform the relations (or cause) from which it emerges. Thus, reform is not possible. I interpret the goal of removing the dictator as one of reform because the system is left completely intact once the objective is achieved – precisely what happened. The crisis of the dictator is gone but the relations of capitalism remain securely in place.

*Clarify the vision (hope):* A socialist process of social transformation demands a common vision that brings us together (Allman, 2001b). Repeatedly, women told me that they fought together to overthrow the military regime without a clear vision of what should follow. One of the underground leaders voiced a regret shared by others: “We committed a grave error. We worked exclusively to overthrow Pinochet. But we didn’t make clear an alternative for afterwards. I believe that this also is the cost we are paying.” Older women envisioned that the socialist project started by President Allende would automatically resume. Younger women did not voice even a shadowy vision of the future. One young woman articulated this comparison: “I lived all my life in the dictatorship… I don’t know how to live in a democracy. [The older women] know the difference between democracy and dictatorship.” The clearest objective was an absence of something (the dictator) rather than a solid notion of the creation of something.
Feeling despair over the current neo-liberal system in Chile, women asked themselves: “Why did we fight so much to have a democracy? For what? For this? Is this what we sought?” Many women recognize the need to have combined a critical analysis of their material reality with a more concrete vision about what the new democracy would like and what would be women’s place in it.

*What is to be done today, sixteen years into the ‘transition’?* The women in Arica have a solid foundation upon which yet to build a revolutionary praxis. It is formed of their critical consciousness, their astute ability to analyze themselves and their world, and a few enduring activities and organizations. Applying these skills to the current material conditions existing in Chile, the women can begin to consider the different manifestations of oppression in the new ‘democracy.’ However, transnational capital, international monetary institutions, and all the other machinations of neo-liberalism are much harder to understand and to resist than the specific ‘enemy’ embodied in one brutal dictator. Yet, it is necessary to develop a shared critique of these capitalist relations and a collective vision of the alternative (i.e., reflection). And simultaneously to combine this with collective resistance to the system (i.e., action). Effectively tackling the more amorphous ‘enemy’ requires the uncomfortable and collective work of dealing with difference and diversity, while at the same time building some kind of ideological unity. Various forms of repression within oppositional struggles are well known. The only way forward is to recognize multiple and intersecting oppressions and contextualize them within broader political, economic, and historical issues and interests. Clearly an educational project.

**Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

This research adds to the limited literature in adult education on what and how people learn in social action, including both processes and effects. Two specific conclusions are:

- Learning and education are *organically* integrated into social movements. In other words, learning and education are occurring continuously and spontaneously within the social movement. Adult educators (whether identified as such or not) are an *inherent* part of social movements and they are embedded *naturally* within the movement.

- Learning and educational processes are most effective when they are explicit, deliberate, and planned. In particular, in the process of learning and education in social movements, neither of the two aspects of a critical praxis can be ignored; neither action, nor reflection.

Thus, the findings from this research challenge adult educators to reposition social movement theorizing and activism from the margins to the centre. The question is not: What is the role of the adult educator in the social movement? Rather, the more appropriate question to ask ourselves is: *What is the role of the social movement in the adult educator?*

**References**


