LOCAL STRUGGLES: WOMEN IN THE HOME AND CRITICAL FEMINIST PEDAGOGY IN IRELAND

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While writing this paper I am filled with the current reality of yesterday's possibilities. Ireland has just elected a new woman president, Mary Robinson, a Labour Party member who has consistently struggled for women's rights, for the unemployed, for the youth forced to immigrate from their home, and for all the underrepresented in my country.[1] The election of President Mary Robinson may or may not have a huge social impact, but it dramatizes the shifting ground of formal politics in Ireland. This development has come about, in part, through concrete political struggle, stemming from yesterday's dreams. These dreams were informed by critical education. Both the dreams and the practical developments were struggled over; they must still be struggled over in order that the changes are carried through to the point of bettering the lot of all people — in short, that they are or become radically democratic.

In this article I want to draw attention to the necessarily pedagogical nature of struggle if it is to contribute to a new politics, to a politics that is new in that it achieves radical democracy. I believe that educators have played, and can continue to play, an important role in the social struggle for justice. Critical educators played a part in the political developments that just happened in Ireland. We must now work to insure that these developments be maintained and grow. This means that our practice must speak to a new politics of radical democracy. In order to draw attention to this pedagogical practice, I would like to describe an adult education process I have engaged in with women homemakers, and the critical feminist pedagogy that informed it. I argue that the pedagogical dimension is crucial to Ireland's new democratic politics. Education can play an important role in the transformation from individual isolation to collective social struggle.

The educational process that I intend to outline articulates on a small scale, but in a direct way, a postmodern resistance and the struggle for radical democracy. The women's personal conscientization described in this paper,

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combined with the resulting actions they take, is directly linked to a radical democratic politics.

Women-in-Waiting

Before coming to the States in late 1989 I worked, over a period of four years, with groups of women who came together in their local adult education centers to study and work for a diploma in social studies.[2] The courses that I worked on were organized by local community adult education committees in conjunction with the Adult and Community Education Department based in St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, a national university of Ireland.[3] The courses were, and still are, run in the morning hours from ten to twelve o'clock, and they primarily attract women who are in the home. If no male unwaged person enrolls in the morning courses a situation arises in which, through the existing division of labor, women find themselves in a classroom with no men present. This happened in the vast majority of the courses I taught. I will address myself for the remainder of this paper to these all-women classrooms; they provided unique learning situations, with unique dynamics, for the women involved.

Let me draw a profile of the women in attendance. Almost without exception they are either married or widowed.[4] They have devoted their lives to the home and the family. Almost all of them gave up paid employment to work in the home either on getting married or just before the birth of their first child. They fall into two categories. The first consists of women who have just finished the nursery-level stage of rearing their children and who can now just about organize two hours for themselves one morning a week while the children are at primary school. Women at this stage are generally very short of free time. The second category consists of women aged between 45 and 60 who have reared their children and now find themselves with much spare time. They live in suburban housing estates, and their husbands usually hold nine-to-five jobs, though some of their husbands are unwaged.

Women in the first category, who have just left their children at primary school, talk about the change of roles they experienced on becoming married. They speak of their last few years with babies and toddlers, of their feelings of isolation in the home. Many of them say they have spoken baby-talk for so many years that they fear they have lost the ability to socialize with adults. They have experienced a loss of their public selves. They speak of having changed from being workers who had weekly paychecks and a social life to being simply wives and mothers. They feel their most pressing requirement is to be reconnected with what they consider the "real world" again. They feel relief that their children are no longer dependent on them, and there is a definite sense of waking up to new possibilities.

Women in the second category, on the other hand, spent their entire married lives in the home.[5] They are older and believe their lives have taken a difficult turn because their families, whom they have serviced all their lives, are now independent of them in the practical sense. These women now feel useless; they feel that there is a vacuum in their lives. They will make comments such as "I've been put out to pasture" or in other ways suggest that their "functional" life is over and they have no direction.

All these women begin the program with a hunger for intellectual stimulation. They are searching for an unspecified development. They experience a strong drive for some sense of "progress" in their life or a sense of fulfillment which they have not quite found. This is particularly noticeable when I compare these women with third-level students, that is, students attending formal university in Ireland. The latter group are more likely to have a career-functionalist view of education, or else their interest in learning has been beaten down by the system. Despite their youth, third-level students express far more cynicism than the adult students. Central to the women's openness for learning and participation is an uneasy lack of assertiveness on their part regarding the worth of their work in the home. This is not to say that they lack a belief in, or loyalty to, their position in the home, but rather that they have internalized the public and private lack of interest shown in their lives and the low status given to their work. Strongest of all is the sense that the lives they live have nothing to offer to the sphere that is "academic," "theoretical," or "philosophical," yet they feel that "academia" has something to offer them. They want to "open their minds," and "become part of the world again."

In general the women speak of a tiredness, not rebelliousness, with the servicing of their families. They all believe that their childrearing work is a good thing and has its genuine rewards, but they are confused by the low status they experience. All are seeking a place or a niche to fit into, since they feel that in the home they are dislocated and severed from the broader society. It is difficult for them to articulate exactly what they want in relation to the broader society. Their decision to come to the class usually came about through a struggle: a struggle over time, a struggle over resources, a struggle for hope and possibilities. Is it just contact, respect, status they need? Why do they decide to come back to what they see as a form of schooling, and why social studies? From my point of view I have come to believe that they are seeking knowledge about society, and their own relation to it. I believe that their very interest in the course arises from a belief that they need knowledge, and from a hope that knowledge is linked to power.

To these women family life is central, because they believe their only status is located within it. Some get on quite well with their husbands while others resent them and the perks that go along with being a husband and

working outside the home. Some are in "unhappy" marriages and are bitter about their married life. Some are just worn out with very little spark left. These are women who have a huge burden of care — who are minding handicapped children, for example, or sick parents or parents-in-law, which is the case with about one third of the group. They come to the class because they need, very badly, to get out of the home, and because they are slowly but surely "going out of their minds."

An Educational Process — Lifting the Lid

In Ireland the social weight of the caring role is ascribed to the woman in the home. Only those who understand the extent to which women in the home have internalized the caring role will understand the need these women feel to do something for themselves. When we break down the amount of time that they are not "on call" it adds up to zero. Coming to the class represents the first step to reclaim some of their time for themselves. This becomes a recurrent theme in the class because I consistently want them to take time. Perhaps this is a bias academia has given me, but in this context the women's reading and writing is a political issue. They need to sit down, think, and generate ideas. They need to write, both for themselves and for the other women in the group. Much more importantly they need to learn that the ideas they generate are as valuable as those of everyone else who writes. Politically, in fact, they are more valuable because women in the home have been the voiceless people.

At the beginning of each year we discuss what each of us wants from the year's course. Each woman talks about why she wants to attain a social studies diploma and describes what area of social studies she is interested in. Sometimes the social issues they want to discuss are topical issues they have heard being discussed on the radio or television — for example, harmful food additives, third-world hunger, damage to the ozone layer, poverty, or unemployment. Always the social issues are fairly abstract, and the women express a careful objectivity toward the subject matter, an attitude they learned in school years earlier. They have a distant view of the social as something that is separate and disconnected from them. Other issues they list which they would like to discuss could be labeled as psychological, such as stress or bereavement. At this point I begin to describe my interests and areas of knowledge and the limitations of my knowledge. We eliminate areas on the basis of group interests and group knowledge.

I begin by pointing out that we have a unique vantage point from which we can study. I explain that this class will be unlike any other educational situation they have found themselves in. I put forward a radical philosophy of adult education and I present the methodology that we will use if it is acceptable to them. In this way I try to make sure that they are not afraid of

conflicting with me as a figure of authority, and that our differences can be aired, listened to, and taken into account. To be more specific I tell them about five grounding principles that we can use as part of our methodology and style of learning if they understand and agree with them. Communicating these general ideas for learning, which they do not expect, usually receives their full enthusiasm and commitment. We take note in advance that we will probably clash on some issues because of our different politics.

A radical philosophy of adult education requires that my political interests be made explicit. I outline my politics using three concepts: critical, feminist, socialist. I tell them that this is essential for them to know from the beginning. They usually think this is an interesting peculiarity and seem to welcome the novelty of these positions, rather than viewing them as a threat to their own worldviews. However, I observe through their silent rather than verbal reactions that it is primarily my position as a feminist that they distrust. I have to struggle in the beginning to convince them that my feminism will not be pedagogically threatening, because politically it has such repercussions for their affective investment in their everyday life. As a teacher I believe the success of the course depends on how I deal with and take into account their resistance to feminism. I usually have to deal with their discomfort straight away and so I start a discussion by expressing that our positions on feminism are polarized, that this is both a political and a personal difference, and that we will discuss these differences openly throughout the course. Their suspicions of feminism are considerable due, in part, to their personal difficulties with aspects of feminism, such as their association of feminism with abortion. Apart from this they are also afraid of feminist politics, since they have witnessed and lived through the severity of the political clashes which have occurred in Ireland over the past decade between feminists and the church, and between feminists and the state. Due to local circumstances of feminist political losses and the dominance of an antifeminist public discourse in Ireland, I find it necessary to assure them that while my politics might be threatening, I will do my best to ensure that my pedagogy will not be intimidating. In order that the focus and onus is not entirely on me in this discussion, I direct the discussion toward their own politics, although many of the women do not immediately acknowledge that they have a politics.

The following are some grounding statements I make in order to form the basis for, and direct, the pedagogical proceedings. These statements are opened up to discussion.

- All education is political. As I have said I outline my politics to the women by describing myself as being critical, socialist, and feminist. I will answer any questions that they care to ask me about this position. I also tell them that any education they have received to date had both a philosophy and a politics behind it, but that it cloaked its politics in a jargon of false

objectivity. I assert that, for me, education is politically committed and that this will affect the course deeply.

- The shortest route to understanding society and how it works is to analyze how our individual selves have been shaped by social forces which have positioned us in our current social status. In other words, the focus of our study will be our social position; in moving toward an understanding of that, we can link up with an understanding of how society operates as a system and how society operates on us.
- The people in the course all have 20 to 40 years more experience than I. Each woman is informed by her experience in the world and her exposure to the media. Throughout the year we will organize and critically analyze what they know.
- In class we will operate along communal lines as opposed to competitive lines, which means that we support each other in our efforts to learn. This means supporting the other women in the group. This does not necessarily mean, however, that we will always agree with one another. Ideas expressed will be viewed critically.
- We will engage in a group project that makes contact politically with some current social issues.

Course Content

Working with these general principles we examine and analyze several institutions, social issues, and social theories of change. Course content, as I mentioned already, is organized around group interest and group knowledge, under the very general subject matter of social studies. They are more comfortable with a format that reflects my formal knowledge and their interests, and they use me as the major resource person in the group. We examine areas not as if they are static, but from a point of view of transformative change. This reflects my politics and to an extent their politics, because it is clear that they are interested in change. Also, however, a focus on transformative change forces us to do more than receive information on how society works. We gain more knowledge and more power through participating in a process of analysis and in working on possibilities of change. We find this focus on change to be a beginning of empowerment.

Typically we examine what might be unethical about the technological project and why societies are moving along a destructive route. We critically examine institutions in Ireland such as the educational system, the institution of the family, the prison system, the class system, and the legal system. We examine who runs the country and in the name of what or whom. We examine the social forces in Irish society, asking who has a social and political project and who has not. We ask which social project becomes implemented and why that particular project? Whom does it serve? We examine our

country in relation to other countries, the development of first world countries and their underdevelopment of countries in the Southern hemisphere.

Throughout the course we help clarify some of the above questions by listening critically to current affairs programs on radio and television and by reading national newspapers. Throughout the analysis we use our position as women as a base point of critique. How are we as women involved in the social process? What role do we play? What needs to be changed? What changes do we need to make? What role can we play in bringing about that change? We also examine our varying class positions and ask where, from these subject positions, we can gain an entry into political processes?

Let me be more specific on this pedagogical process and the role I play in it by taking one institution — the educational system — and elaborating on how we tackle it, break it down, analyze it, critique it, and then develop our own ideas on alternatives. One week in advance I ask that we begin discussing education the next week. I ask that during the week, they think about their own education. I say I will ask at the next class that we all describe three of the best things about our own education and three of the worst. At the beginning of the next class each woman tells us of her schooling. This serves many purposes. Each woman tells part of her own story and each woman talks in front of a group of 20 people. This builds support among the group, because the telling of the personal story always demands a support structure and the women willingly give this. Secondly, it builds the women's confidence. This is important since at least three quarters of the women who have come to the course have no confidence to speak in front of a group. Since they have never been given the authority to speak publicly, they have internalized a fear of doing so. Thirdly, it gives legitimacy to their personal experience as an entry into the understanding of society. This type of pedagogy is not necessarily needed in a privileged setting, but these women need it because they bear the mark of their status. This usually takes the form of being easily intimidated or "too shy" to speak up.

At the beginning of the class, some of the women are visibly nervous because they know they have to speak out and this is an ordeal for them. As the class progresses the stories and shared experiences take over; they forget their fears and talk publicly, many for the first time. They know they will be all right here, that it is safe to speak. This is an important breakthrough. Without first making sure that each woman has talked, there would be no point in continuing: in a class of women, and perhaps in every class, the individual who isn't "the teacher" has to claim her voice so that we are sure that voice will be given to all agreements and disagreements. Initially the women make body language contact with "the teacher" if they disagree with a point rather than speaking out themselves. They expect these "vibes" to be picked up by the teacher and hope that "the teacher" will give voice to their

disagreement. This is perhaps the most striking habit some women have formed, so as not to put their own voice at risk in the arena of argumentation. In the beginning of the course this has to be discussed openly so that they can see what they are doing and analyze why they are doing it. Once the group dynamic of openness, support, and critique is established, the course moves along very productive lines.

After we have given personal voice to our schooling experience we move away from personal, individual interpretations and on to a more social understanding of the various roles of schooling. In the stories the women tell, issues of gender and class oppression emerge.[6] We discuss curriculum and use their stories to uncover the social aspects of schooling. I use my sociological background to provide different sociological readings of schooling. Through a functionalist perspective we view schooling as fulfilling specific functions. Through a Marxist approach we view schooling as reproducing the class system and all its inequalities. We discuss and I clarify or elaborate on anything asked in relation to these theories. There is at this stage a palpable excitement in the classroom because this type of information is so new to them. They really have not looked on schooling in this light before. I ask them then if they would like to consider who benefits from the system and who does not. Enthusiastically the class agree to continue examining these issues.

It proves very difficult to get the balance right between giving input and allowing space for them to develop independently. Pressure is always exercised on me as the "authority," even if that subject is the rearing of their own children. This is part of what must be blocked if they are to build their own confidence. The next week I present a class analysis of the educational system. We discuss this and I ask them to develop a gender analysis of schooling from their own knowledge.

Education as Production as Opposed to Description

Together they begin to understand and I increase my understanding of how social systems operate. We discuss the different axes of power, gender oppression, class oppression, and "first world/third world" oppression. On a national basis we have critically analyzed the formal party politics of our country and highlighted whose interests the parties serve. We have observed church involvement in state decisions and we have looked at the social forces in our state and whose social project is being implemented. We have addressed the conflict in Northern Ireland. We have developed our awareness of the structuring of poverty, crime, and punishment. In short, an understanding about society has unfolded.

One of the women's sons is a priest in Sao Paulo. He is there, she explains to us, working for the people in the shanty towns. She tells us this when the class is dealing with the organization of poverty in the Southern Hemisphere.

From watching her face as she relates what her son has told her, we can see (and we acknowledge) that he learned care and commitment, in part, from her. Such a loving face, but it also holds its marks. Where is her confidence, I ask myself. I feel like shaking her into assertion and confidence. Slowly her hesitancy turns into a form of direction in the context of the group. She decided she wanted to do something with the Travellers.[7] She read and she found out as much as was possible in the peace of the library and through television and newspaper coverage. However, we began to see that she was too used to the shelter of her home. She never got the courage or confidence to talk to formal representatives of the Travellers, though I know she treated with respect and care the Travellers she did come into contact with.

On a more socially productive level, apart from a new social awareness they have developed, each woman has taken concrete actions. Each woman has talked out in front of a group of 20 women. Each one has developed or expressed her understanding of how she has been kept subordinate in the realms of family, community, academia, and politics. Each woman has worked in a cooperative effort to present a project. These projects have been on areas such as marriage separation, childcare, services for women in the home, and even women and mental illness.

We hold two formal evaluations each year, one in the middle of the year and one at the end, though usually evaluations are ongoing. The first evaluation gives us all a chance to discuss the areas in which the course could be improved, and their suggestions can be implemented before the end of the term. I usually ask them to take more time for themselves, to establish the right for maybe one or two hours in which their partner would cover their home duties so that they lay claim to their individual need for time in which to do some reading or writing for themselves. They speak as if the time we spend together as a group has opened their eyes. Their perspectives and their understandings have changed. Their confidence has grown and their sense of worth, self-esteem, and anger against oppression gives them a new sense of agency and direction. Sometimes, of course, there are problems with husbands, even to the extent that some want their wives to drop out of the class. None have. That should give some indication of the struggles being waged on the home front!

The final evaluation speaks to possibilities. As we progressed through each social and personal investigation of power, we tried to think of alternatives. For example, for education we spoke of future adult informal education. Yet we realized that the formal system of education is linked with all the other systems and structures and to the reproduction of a class/gender/subcultural oppression in our country. At the end of the year the group stays together. They as a group get involved in a practical struggle, for example, preschool facility development in the inner city. They form women's groups and meet with other women's groups. They support each other in political struggles

in the home with the family. We have begun a process of education that is organized as a praxis of resistance, struggle, and change.

Conclusion

The productive educational process I describe in this paper conveys a sense of what the practice of critical feminist pedagogy can look like in a local context, and what can be achieved through its practice. In this adult education context the critical pedagogical practice recognizes itself as a political, social, and cultural process. It critiques inequities and forms of subordination and oppression, but with a view toward transformation. It is a form of transformative and engaged education, and operates as such by involving the students and teacher alike in an engaged practice of critique, liberation, and transformation.

A feminist critical pedagogy makes the gendered subjectivities of the teacher and students part of the text or the subject matter. A critical inquiry is grounded in gender subjectivity, using this concrete subjectivity as an example that allows the addressing of, and inquiry into, other axes of oppression such as class, race, and global positioning. The presence of gender difference and consequent gender oppression is a constant reminder of other forms of oppression. A critical feminist pedagogy focuses on pedagogy not merely of the informational kind but of the productive kind. The approach involves politics at a local level. What one learns is learned through a process of engagement. It does not allow for a lack of commitment. In moving along a process of personal conscientization, in conjunction with becoming critically aware of how society differentiates and segregates to oppress certain people, the combination of personal involvement with critical theorizing ensures pedagogy as productive. It is just such a pedagogy I have described in this paper.

Notes

1. Mary Robinson was elected president of Ireland in November of 1990.
2. Students seek this social studies diploma chiefly for its educational and academic prestige; it is not recognized as significant in the commercial sphere, though it may sometimes help in obtaining jobs with local government agencies.
3. Adult education is government-funded and fairly widespread in Ireland, but it does take many diverse forms. Local vocational education committees offer a wide variety of classes, ranging from carpentry and flower arrangement to academic subjects used for attaining formal academic qualifications. I was employed by St. Patrick's College, County Kildare, to teach social studies in various local centers throughout County Kildare and County Dublin.

4. No single mothers seem to have the time to participate in a course like this. One did begin to attend a class, but due to her responsibilities she had to drop out.
5. In Ireland women were forced to give up employment in the public sector on marrying.
6. Race as such is not an issue in Ireland due to a fairly racially homogeneous population, though sectarianism is an issue, particularly in the North of Ireland. Also we have a distinctive subculture of Travellers who are severely oppressed.
7. Travellers are a subculture in Ireland. They are people who were disinherited historically, who travel from place to place in Ireland living in caravans. They in large part live in poverty even though the "head" of the family is entitled to and receives social welfare. Our larger culture is prejudiced against their way of life and seems to try to assimilate them, but the Travellers are organizing to resist this threat.