

REVIEW OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

“SOCIAL LEARNING FOR CRITICAL GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP.

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH OF SELECTED MOVEMENTS IN POLAND”

by Marta Gontarska, MA

The doctoral dissertation presented by Ms. Marta Gontarska, MA, is based on an empirical study of the phenomenon of activism and related to it learning processes. This is a topic of significant importance for the development of pedagogy, for social movements, especially in their new, networked, global form, play an increasingly important role today both in the lives of individuals (especially adolescents and young adults) and societies, intervening in the dominant worldviews, normative systems, patterns of action and institutions. In Polish pedagogy, however, this topic still seems to be considered relatively uninteresting and/or "risky," and its potential (cognitive and social) is underestimated. The reviewed doctoral dissertation, in my opinion, contributes to changing this situation, which is its most general value.

The dissertation has an appropriate structure, typical of this type of promotion work: it begins with a chapter describing the adopted research perspective and research design (1), followed by a chapter identifying the theoretical framework of the study (2), a chapter containing the results of the study (3), conclusions of the study and their discussion (4). The paper closes with a summary of conclusions, bibliography and appendices.

Referring to the structure of scientific disciplines adopted in Poland, the subject of the research locates the dissertation in the field of pedagogy and its sub-discipline - andragogy, and can be described through its relevant categories, such as informal education, lifelong learning, adult learning. The theoretical perspective adopted in the dissertation is critical in nature, emphasizing the impact of power relations and related ideologies and interests on human action and thinking, and aiming to effect a change in social realities (strengthening democracy, expanding the area of freedom and reducing inequality). The subject of the study is adult learning in social movements, the goal – to identify and explore this phenomenon, and the research problems include the characteristics of the contexts of activist learning in social movements, the meanings given to it by activists, and the links to activist goals. The research endeavor thus outlined is accompanied by a theoretical framework that includes theories of social learning, characteristics of new social movements and the concept of critical global citizenship. The research was carried out in a qualitative methodology, using a critical ethnography variation. The order of my review will reflect the aforementioned contents of the dissertation.

The disciplinary placement of the discussed scientific endeavor in andragogy is completely justified - the Author joins the still small group of Polish researchers (listed on p. 9) who recognize in social movements an area of adult learning with transformative (in individual and collective dimensions) potential. It is to be regretted that the Author does not make a bolder attempt to locate this current of research in the field of andragogy, does not enter into a discussion with its (cited in the work) Polish representatives and does not make broader references to its achievements in other countries (with the exception of the authors cited on p. 9). Research on social movements undertaken in the perspective of adult education has been ongoing since the 1980s. (Finger, 1989), they go in many directions and appear under a variety of names (“learning in social action”, “social movement learning”, “social revolutionary

learning”). Making these phenomena visible, if only “from a bird's eye view”, seems to me to be crucial to the quality of the research efforts undertaken.

The adoption of a critical perspective in the dissertation deserves a separate comment. While I fully sympathize with this choice, I get the impression that it is not clearly justified by the Author. I can guess that the reason is a certain "affinity" of this perspective with the practice of social movements (this is also mentioned by the Author herself) - they often "speak" the language of critical theory, which in turn is often fed by their dynamics (Kosinska, 2020). However, perhaps adopting, for example, an interpretative perspective would allow us to capture a broader spectrum of phenomena? If a critical perspective, then, why? Is it an ontological choice (justified by the belief in the subjective nature of social being), epistemological (e.g., Kincheloe & McLaren argue for "critical postmodernism" in this way), or perhaps axiological?

The adoption of the general assumptions of critical theory (Chapter 1.1.1) leads naturally to the author's indication, as the scientific context of the dissertation, of critical andragogy, which is shown through the prism of the concepts of selected (recognized) authors (S. Brookfield, R. Usher, J. L. Kincheloe, P. Alheit). Here, too, I feel a certain lack – a general "map", which would take into account the diversity of this trend and the discussions taking place within it (including on the tensions between the categories of "self-society", "structure-agency", on the definition of power or "self-criticality of critical theory"). Particularly valuable, it seems to me, would be an introduction to Polish critical andragogy (with the participation of, among others, W. Kruszelnicki, A. Jurgiel-Aleksander and D. Hildebrandt-Wypych) and to show the place the Author sees there for her research.

The theoretical framework of the study is outlined by the Author on the plan of three concepts – social learning, new social movements and critical global citizenship, which corresponds to the key elements of the subject of the study. The Author devotes most attention

to considering adult learning in an activist role, which may not be surprising, given the andragogical profile of the overall research project. Here the choice fell on the concept of D. Wildemeersh, which I consider an apt decision, given the extensive possibilities it offers to the researcher of such complex phenomena as social movement. However, "learning" in the context of activism is the subject of theoretical considerations by other authors as well (e.g. "social revolutionary learning"/"emancipatory praxis" – Welton, 1993; "adult transformation in NSM" – Finger, 1989; "learning in the struggle" – Foley, 1999 ; "collective learning theory" – Kilgore, 1999), which – again – prompts the question of the rationale behind this choice. The theoretical foundation of the work is supplemented by a competent overview of issues concerning the history and contemporaneity of social movements (taking into account the civilizational and technological context, which is expressed in their current "networkedness" and "globalness", as well as the Polish context) and the concept of global citizenship and its impact on contemporary activism. The theoretical basis of the study is, in my opinion, thoroughly thought out and – despite some shortcomings – provides a good starting point for empirical activities.

Moving on to discuss the empirical part of the reviewed dissertation, I will first devote my attention to the research project, a description of which is provided in the first part of the work. I must admit that this displacement in the text of the dissertation gives the impression of a weak connection between the theoretical framework and the empirical project. I found it difficult, for example, to grasp the essence of the subject of the study, since "learning" is a fuzzy category, and its particularizations (present in the theoretical part) are not present here. This is not helped by the formulation of the research objective in the "Introduction": "to identify and explore activists' learning and participation in social movements through active and engaged observation, and to critically reflect on this from an adult education perspective." As I see it, the subject of the study is mixed up here with the research method and method of analysis. More specifically, the main research question is framed in terms of the object ("what") and the

ways ("how") of activist learning. However, the specific questions again introduce ambiguity: what is the "learning context" in Question 1 (in the final section - Chapter 4 - the question takes a different form)? How is the relationship understood to be between "participation" and "learning" in question 2.? Can the question (3.) about contribution to the achievement of goals (through learning) be answered in this type of research? Many of these ambiguities are dispelled when reading the analytical part (Chapter 3), but they were a bit of a barrier for me in receiving the work. I think it would have been served by linking the research project more closely to the theoretical framework (explicit operationalization of the chosen concept of social learning).

I find the choice of research method – critical ethnography in the model of P. F. Carspecken – interesting and also consistent with the chosen perspective of the study. This model, based on a five-stage process of data collection, is relatively little known in Poland (Boryczko, 2015). Its application in the reviewed dissertation, however, provokes me to ask about the degree of "fidelity" to the five-step structure proposed by Carspecken (e.g., the description of step 1 does not indicate that the author kept a diary created on the basis of "dense description"; step 2 includes coding, but not having the character of a hermeneutic, reflective "reconstructive analysis"; in step 4 there are no references to physical places, etc.) and about the possible impact of modifying the method on the results of the study.

The three social movements selected for the study are understood here - following Wildermeersch – as "critical communities or groups working for change, which [...] build their internal culture based on democratic approaches and collective social development [...]." (s. 10). Undoubtedly, they represent examples of activist communities that are interesting and diverse in some respects (if only in terms of their object of action or degree of recognition). This selection also corresponds to the criteria indicated by the Author (p. 26), while – again – I lack justification for the selection of the criteria themselves (why the selection of movements

with a high degree of similarity, and not diverse ones?). A similar question arises with regard to the selection of interview participants.

In the course of the study, the author collected a pool of diverse data, while facing serious difficulties (the need to conduct almost all interviews remotely), which are confronted in detail and convincingly described in the dissertation (Chapter 1.1.4). The chosen model of analysis ("focused on meaning") is unfamiliar to me from practice, but its in-depth characterization made by the author in several different publications (e.g., Kvale, 1996) makes it possible to consider it properly suited to the research project. In reading the dissertation, however, I felt the acute lack of an extended description of the analysis process (only a few lines were devoted to it - p. 25), e.g. how the initial list of codes (categories of analysis derived from theory and research questions) was created, how "meaning condensation" and "meaning interpretation" proceeded. The graphic presentations of categories and codes attached to the paper are, unfortunately, poorly readable (literally and figuratively).

Despite the questions and doubts I have raised, I want to emphasize that the reliability of the author's research technique gains strong confirmation in the section devoted to the analysis of the research material (Chapter 3), presenting the results of the analytical and interpretive work. The narrative is built in a thoughtful manner, forming a complex but coherent whole. It contains many analytical threads of interest to me (including the phenomenon of "activist multitasking" – p. 98, subversion in the use of corporate culture - p. 99, negotiation of values – p. 109, specificity of communication – p. 112, the concept of "sustainable activism" – p. 118, activist creativity – p. 130, flows between movements – p. 152). The voices of the participants in the study (quotes) are rare, but carefully selected and allowing for contextual understanding. On the other hand, a certain shortcoming of this part of the dissertation is its poor structuring (the chapter is divided into only four parts) and references to the theoretical framework and research questions are difficult to grasp. In the content of the analysis, it is also


difficult to see the presence of the material collected during the observation - the activists seem to be shaded and their actions described in a generalized and abstract way; references to the material typical of this space (social media content, photos, recordings) are also not apparent.

The conclusions of the study (Chapter 4) compose a scientifically interesting whole, and the educational dimension of activism acquires a distinct form – inspired by the thought of G. Biesta – a "critical/radical form of lifelong learning." Although the final picture of the studied phenomenon does not correspond in every detail to the research project (research questions) and contains elements that are merely hinted at (e.g., the thread of the historical and cultural background context of activism – the ethos of the "intelligentsia" – p. 153; the revitalization of the concept of "activism" – p. 145; the introduction of the category "forming activism" – p. 150) I have no doubts about its cognitive value, both for the scientific community and for activist circles (not only those participating in the study).

To sum up my review, I conclude that the main scientific contribution of the dissertation is the in-depth reconstruction of activist circles as (new) sites of (critical, reflexive) learning of global citizenship and the processes of activist learning taking place in them as actors motivated by the desire for global social change, aimed at strengthening and developing participatory democracy, reducing social inequalities and stemming the climate crisis. At the same time, it is a contribution to the critical current of andragogy, the lasting expression of which may be the way activist phenomena are described as a "radical form of lifelong learning," with emancipating effects and reconstructing the concept of citizenship. The reservations I have included in the review concern not so much the theoretical-empirical edifice constructed by the Author (the soundness of its theoretical foundations, the coherence of the theoretical and empirical dimensions, the in-depth nature of the analysis), but certain deficiencies (descriptions, justifications, references), which are not only an integral part of learning to "do science", but also to practice it on a regular basis.

of the theoretical and empirical dimensions, the in-depth nature of the analysis), but certain deficiencies (descriptions, justifications, references), which are not only an integral part of learning to "do science", but also to practice it on a regular basis.

Therefore, taking into account the statutory requirements for a doctoral dissertation, including the presentation in it of the candidate's general theoretical knowledge in the field of scientific discipline, the ability to conduct scientific work independently, as well as the original solution of a scientific problem, **I conclude my review of the doctoral dissertation of Marta Gontarska, MA, with the statement that it meets the conditions specified in Article 187 paragraphs 1 and 2 of the Law of July 20, 2018. Law on Higher Education and Science (Dz.U.2021.478 t.j., as amended).**



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