

TOWARDS A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ADULT EDUCATION AND GLOBALIZATION: THEORETICAL INSIGHTS FOR CONFRONTING WICKED PROBLEMS IN GLOBAL TIMES

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Abstract

Our global times are defined and profoundly shaped by globalization. As adult educators, we need theory to help explain the nature of and paths forward from the devastating social, political, and cultural impacts of globalization. Moreover, when we consider the field beyond academia and include social movement-based adult educators, it is important to understand that not only do we need theory, but some of the best theory we need is developed by social movement-based adult educators. This cross-disciplinary theoretical inquiry presents a political economic framework for understanding adult education and globalization that draws on academic and social movement-based theory.

Keywords: Globalization, political economy, precarity, Marx

The Adult Education in Global Times (AEGT) conference corresponds with a number of important and urgent calls by prominent adult educators. In a recent issue of *Adult Learning*, Thomas Sork (2019) captures the Zeitgeist of our times when he characterizes the “troubled state of the world” as a set of “wicked problems” (p. 143). In 2019, the then outgoing *Adult Education Quarterly* editorial team of Leona English et al. (2019) raised the issue of why our field is not more engaged with social issues and cited globalization as one of the main issues we face today. Patricia Gouthro (2019) has recently challenged us to consider the importance of theory for understanding the “social, political, and cultural contexts within which we work” (p. 65) as adult educators. Inspired by all of these recent calls, the purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the socio-political economic realities that are part and parcel of globalization: the hallmark wicked problem of our messy and chaotic global times.

Review of Literature

It is interesting that the former *AEQ* editors cite globalization as one of the main trends shaping our field now and, in the future, as studies under the moniker of globalization have actually waned in the years since the heyday of globalization scholarship and anti-globalization protests in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Why then, given a shifting away from anti-globalization protest and theory building on globalization should we take up the *AEQ* editors’ call for studies on globalization? What activists were fighting against through anti-globalization protests and what scholars were trying to describe with globalization theory were really the nature and impact of capitalist relations in particular times and spaces. Globalization, a term so important that Waters (2001) described it as “the concept, the key idea by which we understand the transition of human society into the third millennium” (p. 1) was really about the ever-changing social totality of capitalism.

Theories that consider globalization as the contemporary nature of the social totality of capitalism have been much less prominent in our scholarship. The editors of a recent

issue of the *European Journal on the Education and Learning of Adults* make this evident in their introductory essay of a special issue on capitalism and the future of adult education (Milana, Kopecký, & Finnegan, 2021). This is so despite the fact that as early as 1999 Foley argued that adult educators needed to take up precisely this kind of political economic analysis. In this paper, I pick up Foley's call and attempt to provide the kind of analysis of globalization today that English et. al (2019) and Milana, Kopecký, and Finnegan see as lacking and, yet essential to our field.

Method of Inquiry

In making this contribution, I draw on three bodies of literature. First, I draw on the political economy developed by Karl Marx (1967) in the three volumes of his magnum opus *Capital*. Second, I draw on recent political economic theory and empirical studies by political economists demonstrating the permanent crisis endemic to global capitalism around the world (e.g., Carchedi & Roberts, 2018; Kliman, 2012; & Smith, 2010). Third, and perhaps most importantly, I draw on working-class organic intellectuals and scholar-activist popular educators who have been theorizing the growing crisis of capitalism for at least the last three decades (Baptist, 2010; Baptist & Rehman, 2011; Heagerty & Peery, 2000; Katz-Fishman, Scott, & Gomes, 2014; Peery, 1993, 2002); they have actually been considerably ahead of academics in understanding the nature of the crisis we are all coming to realize as wicked problems today.

The method of inquiry is political economy and follows the approach introduced in adult education scholarship by Frank Youngman (2000). Youngman summarizes eight major propositions of a Marxist political economic approach to adult education. I follow these propositions, and build on them, by introducing new political economic theory and perspectives from organic intellectuals, in order to present a theory of globalization relevant for the challenges facing adult educators today. I do this cognizant of the fact that capitalism, while having a general trajectory across the planet, develops unevenly geographically, and therefore, can take on specific characteristics in different parts of the world.

Key Elements of Marx's Analysis of Capitalism as a Global and Globalizing Social Totality

Let's begin where Marx does on page one of Volume I of *Capital* with an analysis of what most immediately appears to be the nature of capitalism, and the immense number of commodities that surround us. Marx argues that a commodity, something produced for the realization of profit in a capitalist society, has a dual nature. It has use-value and exchange value. Use-value, not unique to capitalism, just refers to the fact that the item produced is useful in some way to someone. Exchange value refers to the fact that, in a capitalist society, a commodity can be related to other commodities in terms of a quantity and this quantitative relation usually takes the form of the mediator of money.

The major take-away from this part of *Capital* is how Marx advances, here, and through the text, on the then already existing notion of a labour theory of value to understand the nature of human social relations through the exchange of commodities. The basic point of the labour theory of value is that the value of a commodity is determined by the socially necessary—average productivity of labour in any given place and time—labour time needed to produce it. This labour time is, in a sense, congealed in the commodity and realized through the exchange of commodities. Just think about a sweater you knit to sell at a craft fair. If you are a bad knitter and it takes you three times more to knit a basic sweater than the average craft fair seller, no one who knows anything about knitting will pay three times as much for your sweater. In the back of every buyer's mind at the fair is how time consuming the knitting gone into any given sweater for sale is versus the price. The more

complex and time consuming the knitting, the more willing people are to pay a higher price; the labour theory of value can be empirically proven and is a part of any shopper’s basic common sense.

Money, the universal equivalent that allows for the exchange of commodities with uneven amounts of labour embodied in them, existed long before capitalism. Moreover, the sale or trade of the products of people’s labour also existed before capitalism. For Marx, what distinguishes capitalism from other social totalities is the production of commodities not for their use, but for the realization of their value; this is a fundamental transformation of societies that has happened all over the world. Money that circulates for its increased valorisation is capital; once this form of production and circulation takes hold in a society, it is ever expanding.

Marx introduces some basic formulas to explain the distinction between the production of commodities for use and the production of commodities for profit. I can grow tomatoes in my garden and sell them for money. Then I take that money and buy what I need. For Marx the sale of my tomatoes is: C-M and my purchase of what I need is M-C. Simply commodity production then is C-M-C with the ultimate aim being the use value of the commodity purchased at the end. A general formula for capitalism, however, is M-C-M’. Here the end goal is money prime (') or profit.

One of the great questions of political economists like Adam Smith who preceded Marx was to understand the massive amount of wealth produced in capitalist societies. Armed with the labour theory of value, and seeing this process from the perspective of labour, Marx provided a new answer to this question, based on a fundamentally new way to look at it. In Volume II of *Capital*, Marx provides a more complex formula for capitalism:

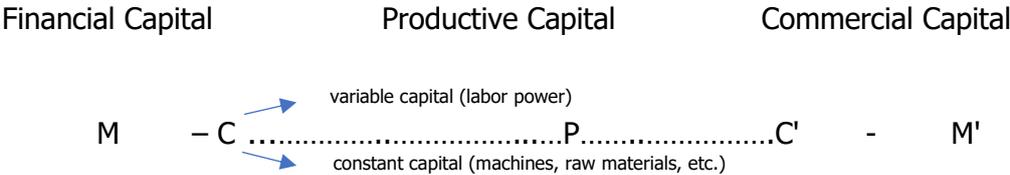


Figure 1: Marx’s Formula for the Circulation of Capital

In other words, a capitalist starts with money (M), often financial capital borrowed from a bank, and buys two major forms of commodities (C). The first commodity is what Marx calls variable capital or hired workers’ labour-power; it is variable because the capitalist can make us work longer or faster. The second commodity is what Marx calls constant capital or means of production such as tools, buildings, machines, raw materials, etc. Capitalists put the labour-power to work to produce commodities for sale or commodities prime (C') that has more value than the capital they put in. To realize this surplus value, they must sell the product (commercial capital) on the market to get money (M').

Where does the prime (') on the C and the M come from? Who produces this surplus value that can be realized via commerce as profit? Based on the labour theory of value, labour-power is the only commodity that creates value; remember, the value of a commodity is based on the amount of labour that went into its production. Machines merely transfer the value they contain—the amount of labour used to produce them—slowly over their lifetime to the products they produce. When living labour (the worker) is made to work beyond the point it creates an equivalent of its cost, it adds value to what it produces.

To elaborate on the source of surplus value or profit, Marx takes us into what he calls the noisy sphere of production. Marx looks at a workday as starting at point A and ending at point C. Point B is the time in the workday when a worker has produced enough that when it

is sold, it will cover the costs of the worker, e.g., salary and benefits (if any). One can make a similar calculation for piecework or salaried workers.

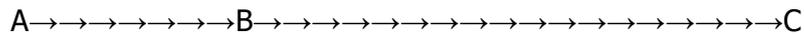


Figure 2: Marx's Depiction of the Workday

Marx calls the work done between A and B necessary labour. He calls the work done between B and C unnecessary or surplus labour or labour that produces surplus value. If you think about the workday, from the standpoint of the employer, the goal is to expand the distance between B and C; to expand the amount of unnecessary labour that produces surplus value that can be realized as profit. There are two ways to do that, and Marx labelled these as two different forms of surplus value.

Making people work well beyond point B in the workday creates absolute surplus value; keep wages the same and lengthen the workday. As workers revolt against this blatant exploitation, the capitalist can increase the distance between B and C by pushing B closer to A. Marx called this intensification of labour productivity via an increasing division of labour or via the introduction of labour-saving, relative surplus value. Historically, as struggles for shorter working hours grew, there was a general shift toward strategies aimed at creating relative surplus value, although there is always a mix of both strategies continuously in play.

The Crux of the Crisis of Capitalism Today

In Volume III of *Capital*, Marx begins to put all of this analysis together to analyse the historic trajectory of capitalism and to explain the crisis prone nature of capitalism. If labour is the only commodity that creates value, and if the historic tendency is to favour relative surplus value over absolute surplus value, that means there is a growing tendency for a reduction of the overall presence of labour in the process of production in favour of a growing presence of constant capital or machinery and technology. Marx used the term organic composition of capital and the ratio c/v to refer to this relationship between variable capital (v) and constant capital (c) in the production process.

Marx argued that the evermore top-heavy c/v ratio meant that there was a historical tendency for there to be a fall in the rate of profit in capitalist production, as the value creating commodity of labour was slowly overtime pushed out of the production process. Since it is only labour or variable capital that produces surplus value, the more constant capital involved, the less profit can be made in production. This process is inevitable, and its magnitude increases.

Political Economists and Empirical Evidence

Among political economists, there is ongoing debate about the importance Marx placed on this tendency of the rate of profit to fall over time. While the debate goes on, the political economists I referenced earlier have empirically shown how the ever-increasing reliance on technology, at the expense of labour, to generate relative surplus value has over the past several decades steadily lowered the rate of profit and created not a crisis in capitalism, but rather a crisis of capitalism itself.

Organic Intellectuals and the Lived Reality of the Crisis

How have US social movement-based organic intellectuals drawn on, interpreted, or affirmed Marx's 19th century analysis in the contemporary US? They have witnessed first-hand the transformation of the production process, through the introduction of labour-saving technology throughout the 20th century, to the introduction of labour-replacing technology beginning in the late 20th century and accelerating in the 21st century. This transformation

has meant a growing precarity of work, a fragmentation of work, lowered standards of living, and, most significantly, the emergence of a growing sector of society that no longer has stable participation in the basic relationship of capitalism: you get a job, to earn a wage or salary, to pay for the things you need to survive.

From revolutionary organic intellectuals and scholar activists we get a vivid picture of what this crisis looks like for the working-class majority (Zweig, 2012). They tell us of the growing precarity, fragmentation, polarization, and inequality plaguing society, and they explain how there is a growing class no longer attached to the basic labour/capital relation; those pushed out of capitalist forms of production by labour replacing technologies. As movement-based intellectuals, and particularly those most based in this growing sector, they demonstrate how this sector has basic demands for survival that cannot be met within the prevailing relations of capitalism. In other words, there is a growing, objectively revolutionary class. A class, whose lived reality, upon which democratic pedagogies can and must be built, demands a reorganization of society outside of the basic dynamics of capitalism. Production with less and less labour and distribution of goods based on the ability to pay, means a growing sector of humanity cannot survive. Distribution based on need, or socialism, is the only practical solution.

Today, change is not a fiery idea confined to 19th century manifestos or 1960s speeches, but the practical resolution of the lived realities of a growing sector of humanity. Our field has a theory and practice of democratic, practical, needs-based pedagogy. What organic intellectuals tell us is that there is a burning need for a way to help people understand what they already know. There is no need to teach people their lives are precarious, that it is getting harder and harder to just get by. What is needed most today, are the kinds of pedagogies we already have, that help people to understand why their circumstances are as such; how their lived realities contain both the problem and the solution to the crisis of capitalism we face today. What is most essential is for there to be a merging of our pedagogical skills and knowledge with the practical work of movement-based organic intellectuals. To solve the wicked problems, will we as a field put our skills to the service to those who most need it? Will we be relevant?

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