

Article

## **THE DIALECTICS OF PRAXIS**

**SARA CARPENTER, GENEVIEVE RITCHIE AND  
SHAHRZAD MOJAB**

OISE/University of Toronto

Correspondence:  
c/o Shahrzad Mojab  
Department of Leadership, Higher, and Adult Education  
OISE/University of Toronto  
7<sup>th</sup> Floor, 252 Bloor Street West  
Toronto, ON M5S 1V6

### **Abstract**

This paper takes up the theorization of the dialectical relationships between consciousness, praxis, and contradiction by drawing primarily on the work of critical feminist and anti-racist scholars Roxana Ng and Paula Allman. Beginning with the important Marxist theorizations of the lives of immigrant women, the state, and community services made by Roxana Ng, we move forward with asserting that Roxana's commitment to making social relations of power and exploitation 'knowable' and 'transformable' is based on a complex and revolutionary articulation of the relationship between thinking and being. This dialectical conceptualization of praxis is necessary for any potentially coherent revolutionary feminist anti-racist project. The challenge posed by Roxana is two-fold: not only how best to 'know' the world, but how to teach this analysis and generate revolutionary practice.

### **Keywords**

Consciousness, praxis, contradiction, learning, pedagogy

### **For Roxana Ng: An unfinished conversation**

Roxana Ng was our friend, colleague, and teacher. She left us unexpectedly on January 12, 2013. We are still trying to come to terms with the huge intellectual and emotional void left after her passing. The hurried urge to engage with aspects of Roxana's work, which has touched us so profoundly, is in part to help us overcome the sorrow of not having her around. However, writing this piece is also an attempt to remind us of her influential and radical scholarship on gender, race, class, state, social relations, and

ideology. Roxana's approach to knowledge was integrative. It crossed the boundaries between academia and activism and body/mind. It was transformative, focused on meticulously articulating ruling relations of power to challenge domination and subordination of marginalized women and men. In this rich body of knowledge, there is much with which we can engage. However, we have decided to focus on one critical issue: the dialectics of praxis. We call it *critical* in order to point out the importance of fully grasping the dialectics of theory/practice and to suggest possibilities for revolutionary social transformation as a conscious act for the emancipation of humanity (Carpenter, 2011; Ritchie, 2013). This ambitious claim requires some contextualization and historicization.

### **Our Standpoint: Revolutionary Feminism**

We are educators. We consider ourselves to be radical/revolutionary educators/activists and we work from the standpoint of the struggle to develop revolutionary feminist praxis. Over the last few years we have immersed ourselves in (re)reading some of the original Marxist texts in order to fully grasp the philosophy and method of historical dialectical materialism, with the aim of deeply connecting this mode of analysis with feminist and anti-racist political projects. In this collective attempt, race and gender constituted the tethered cords to hold social relations together. This reading is a profound expression of the act of weaving. Much like the weaving of fibers, we know that the development of revolutionary feminist praxis requires the re-weaving of the threads of everyday social life. In reading *The German Ideology*, for example, we examined the dialectics of productive and reproductive labour as class relations historically constituted through race and gender relations. We, like Roxana, argue that "contrary to the orthodox Marxist position,... class is not an autonomous phenomenon; it is a tapestry embroidered with gender and race, among other ingredients" (Ng 1996, p. 10).

Our deep and close reading of Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, *Capital*, *Grundrisse*, 'On the Jewish Question,' and of Lenin in *What is to Be Done?*, *State and Revolution*, and *Imperialism*, in conversation with contemporary Marxist-feminist theorists, culminated in the co-edited book *Educating from Marx: Race, Gender and Learning* (Carpenter and Mojab, 2011a). We marked the end of the book with a new beginning by raising the question: How to formulate a theoretical framework, drawing on anti-racism, postcolonial studies, feminism, and dialectical historical materialism, through which we could better understand the particular historical moment in which we live? From this standpoint, how do we make invisible social relations visible? Finally, how do we teach this? Acknowledging the simple but not simplistic nature of these questions, we ended by stating:

In the third chapter of the first volume of *Capital*, Marx demonstrates for us how, theoretically, capital has no limits. It is untrammelled in its ability to expand, enact, confuse, and obfuscate. People, however, have limits; we can become exhausted, physically and spiritually, by the struggle to move, and sometimes even breathe, in the midst of such oppression and despair. Marx, however, quickly moves on and by chapter nine has imposed on capital a colossal, but timid, limit: the power of humanity; the power to work and to learn and to change. Similarly, the social relations of difference we have deemed ‘natural,’ ‘biological,’ and ‘inescapable’ must confront their limit as well: our adherence to their power. Thus, we conclude, this learning is necessarily class struggle (p. 223).

This Marxist, feminist, and anti-racist understanding of class relations and class struggle brought us back to a fuller engagement with Roxana Ng and Paula Allman.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Dialectics of Race, Gender, and Class**

Roxana and Paula insist in their work that we must treat class relations as *social relations*, which is indispensable to any theory of social relations, consciousness, or praxis. Roxana wrote in the conclusion of her study on community services:

Returning to Marx and Engels’s original formulations, the present study insists on treating class as a *social* relation which is fundamental to and permeates capitalist productive and reproductive activities. ... When we take this view of class, we come to see that class relations are embedded in very ordinary features of everyday life (Ng, 1996 p. 84 emphasis in original).

Equally significant is Roxana’s explication that class is also a set of practices that organizes relations among people. This is the profound contribution of Roxana’s empirical work; her extremely meticulous study of the actual human and institutional practices that organize class relations. However, she takes this further by demonstrating that ‘class practices’ are also ‘gendered practices’ and ‘racialized practices,’ illuminating clearly the ways in which class, race, and gender are mutually organizing social relations rather than fragmented social realities that interact upon ‘the body.’ She denoted in her doctoral research, *Immigrant Women and the State: A Study in the Social Organization of*

---

<sup>1</sup> Paula Allman, a Marxist educator who also unexpectedly passed away on November 2, 2011, profoundly influenced us with her seminal discussion on Marx, consciousness, praxis, and learning (1999; 2001; 2007).

*Knowledge* (Ng, 1984) and her seminal book *The Politics of Community Services: Immigrant Women, Class and State* (Ng, 1996), that "...class cannot be understood as a separate phenomenon from gender and race. As my explication of the construction of immigrant women as a labour market category shows, gender and ethnicity/race are essential constituents in the organization of people's class location" (Ng, 1996, p.10). Significantly, present in Roxana's analysis is a theoretical and political commitment to the dialectical explication of social relations that never leans towards or compromises with idealist constructions of 'intersectionality' and 'subjectivity' within feminist theory (Aguilar, 2012; Bannerji, 1995; Ng, 1995).

To make the practices that organize class, gender, and racial divisions visible and 'knowable', Roxana also wrote (Ng, 1996):

To make sense of the tensions and contradictions I witnessed at the employment agency, I followed a line of inquiry in sociology adapted from Marx's method of political economy... This approach has been called "institutional ethnography" by Smith... Unlike standard ethnographic research, which describes a local setting as if it was a self-contained unit of analysis, institutional ethnography seeks to locate the dynamics of a local settling in the complex institutional relations organizing the local dynamics (p. 20).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully develop a critique of Institutional Ethnography (IE) as being practiced today in academia, but we feel an urge to pause, albeit briefly, and provide some preliminary reflection on this important matter. Institutional ethnography, as an approach to research, aims to reorganize 'the social relations of knowledge of the social' (Smith, 2005, p. 29). The goals of institutional ethnography are not simply to produce knowledge on a given subject, but rather to reorient our ways of thinking about social reality and how it can be known. The undisputable power of Institutional Ethnography from the feminist-materialist standpoint is that it is a method of inquiry that actualizes the ontology and epistemology developed by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* (1991) and offers us an empirical method for dis-covering the processes of praxis and consciousness in the everyday organization of learning and social relations. However, to utilize the approach to these ends, as Roxana did in her groundbreaking research, requires what is affectionately referred to amongst institutional ethnographers as 'making the ontological shift' (Smith, 1987). The importance of this shift cannot be underestimated. Without it, IE, like any other qualitative approach to inquiry, will be reduced to a set of interview and textual analysis practices that, at best, can illuminate the workings of bureaucracy and at worst, simply replicate the ideological methods of knowledge production whose ultimate unraveling sits at the heart of the entire project (Carpenter, 2009). Roxana recognized

that institutional ethnography, used in this way, is an empirical approach to exploring the dialectics of race, gender, and class.

In this way, Roxana studied a community employment agency for immigrant women and asked “how immigrant women were organized into the positions they occupied in the labour market hierarchy” (Ng, 1996 p. 13). In the process of observing and documenting ways in which the agency was socially organized, she saw “how ‘immigrant women’ were *produced* as a labour market category, ...[and] saw how class relations were reproduced in the ordinary activities of daily life” (p. 13, emphasis in original). Referencing Mao’s work *On Practice* and *On Contradiction*, she emphasized

...it is precisely out of the process of bringing such contradictions to consciousness and facing up to illogicality or inconsistency, that a person takes a grip on his or her own fate. Politically it is vitally important that we understand how we change (Cockburn, 1983 as cited by Ng, 1996, p. 25).

We are extensively drawing from one of Roxana’s earlier works, first to argue the importance of the reading of Marx that she offered, and second to expand on some notions such as contradictions, practice, experience, and social change which were not fully explicated in her writings, but are essential to her intellectual and political aims. We consider these notions key in understanding the politics and pedagogy of resistance against racist, colonial, and capitalist patriarchies. To do our theorization and show its implications for revolutionary social transformation, we have dedicated our group readings to the topic of Marxist-anti-racist-feminism. This is the conversation that we did not have with Roxana; we regret it.

### **Theorizing Consciousness and Praxis**

Therefore, we would like to take this opportunity and put forward some ideas in order to open up the possibilities for a renewed debate on the dialectics of experience, learning, consciousness and practice in relation to the problematic of revolutionary feminism. The use of the term ‘praxis’ has a long and complicated history within educational theory. While the source of its growth, generation, change, and application are much debated, we have observed a fundamental problem in how the two parts of this relation (theory and practice) are theorized *in relation to each other*. This struggle is in part due to deficits within critical pedagogical theory that do not devote adequate attention to the foundational texts of the Marxist tradition of educational philosophy (Carpenter & Mojab, 2013). Given this struggle, an over-simplification of the concept of praxis is taken by educators from the complex notions articulated by Freire and Gramsci (Allman, 2001; Mayo, 2012). Its most common features are the conception of a linear,

sequential process of praxis, as a pragmatic method in which theory and action impact each other but do not form each other, or as a circular process of reflection that, while appearing different than the sequential linear model, poses no real differences in its conceptions of the relations between theory and practice. In both of these cases theory and practice are analyzed separately from one another as distinct social processes. Not only does such a usage obscure the unity of consciousness and praxis, it also shifts the terrain of what is knowable and ultimately plays a role in crippling the political outcomes of our theorizing work as feminists. In revitalizing the debate on the dialectics of praxis, therefore, we seek to emphasize the unity of theory and practice and so shed light on the significance of Roxana's insight that the mutual constitution of exploitation and racialization is knowable through a dialectical reading of people's practices.

Roxana's work expresses consistently that experiential reality is the starting point for any feminist or anti-racist inquiry and theorization into the constitution of social relations and everyday life. This commitment to 'standpoint' and the everyday as problematic was driven by her profound understanding of the complexity of experiential reality as a multiplicity of moments. Roxana detailed for us how any 'experience' is inseparable from both the social relations and conditions under which such an experience takes place as well as the consciousness and meaning making of the subject. Her rejection of the analytical processes that would pull apart experience in either pragmatic or reductionist directions or through theoretical tools that would fragment self from the social is not only embodied in her scholarship, but in her political activism and pedagogical commitments.

The theorization of experience as the object of critical inquiry and learning is embedded within the largely problematic of praxis (Carpenter, 2012). Within non-dialectical conceptualizations, experience is held at a distance from consciousness, as an object of inquiry that can be 'known' only by being separated from the 'knower.' This formulation obscures experience as an active, sensuous, conscious human activity, by which we mean that experience is always embedded within thinking and being. It is through our experience of thinking and being that we begin to know the social relations in which we live, for example relations of race, gender, and class. However, a second problematic theoretical tendency is to conceptualize experience as an individualized phenomenon. This is in contradiction with the historical and materialist articulation of the everyday present in Roxana's work, which adheres to Marx's argument:

What is to be avoided above all else is the re-establishing of the 'Society' as an abstraction *vis-à-vis* the individual. The individual is *the social being*. His [her] life, even if it may not appear in the direct form of a *communal* life carried out together with others is therefore an expression and

confirmation of *social life*. Man's [woman's] individual and species life are not *different* (1844/1978, p. 86).

If the sensuous practice of daily life is social, it is this practice, in both its individual and social expressions, that is the subject and object of the formation of critical or revolutionary consciousness, a consciousness that seeks a dialectical understanding of contradictions (Allman, 2001; Au 2007; Tse-Tung 2007).

### **The Dialectics of Contradictions**

A central concern to further explicating the notion of praxis is unpacking the problem of contradictions. Roxana's work begins with the important processes of identifying and describing relations in contradiction (Ng, 1996). However, and this is an essential and often overlooked contribution, her work does not end with observing the presence of these contradictions or describing their appearance. Rather, she points out that within each observable contradiction we find, at a deeper level, a more profound contradiction obscured by processes of ideology. Any pedagogical approach to the problems of praxis and contradiction must begin with the understanding that contradictions are not flat. Some are deeper, more essential, than others. Imagine walking along the face of a volcanic rock. In this surface of the earth, a fissure is encountered; the rock has cracked open. While the crack in the surface can be observed in relation to its immediate surroundings (the grain and texture of the rock, the temperature of the air, the winds or tides), these surface appearances do not explain why this fissure has emerged. The rock has cracked because of its own internal pressure; the stress of its own internal force has produced the visible deformation. In order to pry the rock open and understand what has produced this rupture, theory is necessary. Theory, however, can only be built through the continued, unrelenting examination of the rock in relation to its surroundings and its deep essence, what is going on beneath its surface.

There are two essential elements in this example for immediate use by the pedagogue. First, the contradictions are not flat, they relate to one another in specific, historical, and material ways. For example, there is the persistent problem of a mechanical/non-dialectical reading of capital and labour in which labour power, as the core constitute of the contradiction, is undermined by the surface contradiction between these two supposed opposite (Rikowski, 2001). The feminist analysis of labour power in the processes of production and reproduction seeks to undermine this mechanistic approach by highlighting how it is that labour power disappears in this simplistic reading of the capital-labour contradiction (Fortunati, 1995; Federici, 2004). Without reaching for the relationality between contradictions, the value of reproductive labor remains invisible. It can only be known through both a feminist standpoint and a deeper engagement with

gender, race, and class contradictions. Second, returning to our rock metaphor, while we may separate the pieces of the rock into categories for theorization and observation, it is still the *whole earth*. This suggests the ways in which thought and action, praxis and contradiction, relations in unity, are historically co-incident. To argue that arise simultaneously, we are making the point that Mao has made by arguing that only on the plain of epistemology are these relations divisible; ontologically they are whole (Carpenter & Mojab, 2011b).

Thus we arrive at a dialectical conceptualization of praxis, through which we orient our inquiry and action towards the revolutionary transformation of the social whole. We have argued that the social is understood as internal to human practice, or that 'society' and the 'individual' cannot be abstracted from one another. Discursive and situated epistemologies have and do bring important narratives forward, and thus express and inspire the bubbling up of particular fundamental contradictions. For example, the recent incident in Cleveland, resulting in the rescue of three women, has become culturally significant in the United States in part because of the unintentional contributions of Charles Ramsay. Ramsay, an African-American neighbor, upon providing assistance to a white woman to escape her confinement, responded to a reporter by saying, "I knew something was wrong when a little pretty white girl ran to black man's arms." In this way, Ramsay is expressing a deeply situated knowledge of not only race relations in the United States but gender relations as well. Using our previous metaphor, he is, drawing on experiential knowledge, pointing out the crack in the rock. However, to go deeper into what he is alluding to we must overcome the epistemological limitation of experience in order to ontological unite the knowable with the knower. Working dialectically we understand the question of what is knowable as internal to people's practices, and as such cannot be separated from praxis (Allman, 2001). By emphasizing the dialectical motion of contradictions, our discussion challenges the notion that simply identifying contradictions is a sufficient horizon for critical inquiry and education. Rather, we argue that this important process is intimately related to the radical theorization of consciousness and the negation of contradictions through praxis.

## Self and Society

Given this analysis of praxis, the centrality of theorizing consciousness comes clearly into view. Paula Allman has provided the most radical theorization of the relationship between experience, ideology, and practice. In her last short but theoretically dense book, *On Marx: An Introduction to the Revolutionary Intellect of Karl Marx* (2007), she succinctly introduces us to the ideas of Marx on consciousness and praxis. She states: "Marx's theory of consciousness was actually a theory of praxis, i.e., a theory of the inseparable unity of thought and practice rather than a sequential theory of



praxis” (p. 33-34). There is, in this sense, an inseparable unity of thought and action, and thus we are internally related to the objectified world. In short, self and society are mutually constitutive. Allman suggested that Marx’s theory of consciousness and capitalism enables us to critically question existing social relations and the transformation of these relations into two different and opposing forms: “critical/revolutionary praxis” or “uncritical/reproductive praxis” (Allman, 2007 p. 34). Reproductive praxis is simply the active re-making of capitalist social relations, and thus the general reproduction of existing forms of consciousness. As she noted, even when there is a definite interest in progressive social change, ideological explanations (which may insightfully describe the appearance of social relations but also obscure the essence of capital) can orient praxis towards the reproduction of existing social relations and the reform of oppressive social conditions. Critical consciousness and praxis, therefore, require that we struggle to see beyond the current appearance of global capital, and critically question the essence of the mode/relations of production and its associated forms of consciousness. Roxana’s critique of the ideological practices of community services begins from this problematic: the well-meaning provision of social services to marginalized communities that, while providing basic social provisions, also reproduces the relations that constitute their exploitation. Allman’s articulation of consciousness and praxis provides the grounds from which we can describe and problematize the unfolding of our current relations and struggles.

Central to Allman’s reading of Marx is the point that consciousness is social *and* individual as well as materially situated, and thus objective, but not static. She postulated that Marx’s dialectical-historical-materialist philosophy formulates a theory of consciousness that is not based on a dichotomy or binary separation between consciousness and reality. In fact, “...reality is conceptualized dynamically, as the sensuous, active experience of human beings in the material world. Therefore, at any one moment in time, consciousness is comprised of thoughts that arise from each human being’s sensuous activity,” and “the consciousness of any human being will also include thoughts that have arisen external to the individual’s own sensuous activity, i.e., from other people’s sensuous activity both historically and contemporaneously” (Allman, 2007 p. 32). There is a dialectical movement to consciousness that emphasizes its unity with praxis, and as such the unfolding of social relations is understood here as rooted in the dynamism of human activity.

As a point of departure for research and analysis, consciousness is a framework from which we can bring into view the individual’s experience of social relations without fragmenting the social or reifying individualism. The unity of consciousness and praxis, moreover, means that human agency and social struggle are the forces behind societal change and the unfolding of history. In this sense, our individual and collective consciousness and praxis are at the heart of material social relations. For the purposes of developing revolutionary feminist praxis, we must take up the problematic of

consciousness and praxis. For this reason, Allman's work has been important to each of our respective areas of study because it provides a clear framework for expressing and fleshing out some of the important tensions between forms of resistance and the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Her explication aims to critically engage with the ways in which consciousness is oriented away from critical praxis by the social processes and ideologies that have developed as part of the capitalist mode of production. Her argument, however, is hinged upon the capacity of people to choose revolutionary praxis.

For Allman, critical consciousness begins when we choose to question the material relations in existence and work towards altering them so that life is better for *all* people (Allman, 2007). In Allman's words, "Neither critical/revolutionary praxis nor authentic revolution can be imposed on people; both must be chosen on the basis of a critical understanding of capitalism and a deeply integrated desire to begin the process of shaping our own and thus humanity's future..." (p. 34). To be clear, we do not mean to suggest that people cannot freely make this choice. Rather, there is a subtle circularity to Allman's point that requires further critical reflection. People begin the process of struggling for critical consciousness and praxis when they choose to understand how to critically engage with the essence and appearance of capital, that is, whether or not to dig into the rock. However, this consciousness emerges out of the process of struggle.

### **The Dialectics of Contradictions in Social Struggle**

In numerous readings of Paula Allman's work and through contemplation on her insights, we think we have finally been able to identify the additional work that we, as revolutionary educators, need to use in order to fully grasp the depth of Marx's theory of consciousness. Before explicating this claim further, let us outline one observation that we think will make the task of elaborating this point easier. With the rise of social movements globally, from the "Arab Uprising", the "Occupy Movement", the Chilean and Québec student movements and most recently the Indigenous led movement "Idle No More" in Canada, a range of debates on these movements have emerged. However, the range of debates has embedded within, certain assumptions about the methods for emerging critical praxis. It is our argument that the lens of contradiction would bring a much needed dimension to the discussion of the generation of critical praxis. For example, what *contradictions* are these movements identifying? How do they envision tackling these *contradictions*? Finally, what methods would they use to resolve these *contradictions*? We have intentionally highlighted the notion of *contradictions* in order to emphasize the fact that we have failed to assess the practice of these movements within the framework of what Allman calls "critical/revolutionary praxis" or "uncritical/reproductive praxis." In other words, these debates, often and at best, has been

limited to labeling the practice and consciousness of today's social activists as 'centrist,' 'reformist' or 'liberal.' Our argument is not that the naming is incorrect; rather the naming does not specify the theoretical slippages of non-dialectical modes of analysis of consciousness and praxis that lead to 'centrist,' 'reformist,' or 'liberal' social movements. The lenses of contradiction and revolutionary praxis are invaluable tools to resolve the fragmented landscape of social movements and the seemingly unresolvable and unbridgeable divides between 'the local' and 'the global' (Choudry & Kapoor, 2010; Choudry, et al, 2012).

Therefore, returning to an earlier point, we intend to expand Allman's insights on Marx's theory of consciousness and praxis by introducing Mao's dialectical and materialist analysis of 'contradictions' and 'practice'. Allman writes,

As always, with Marx, his conceptualization of ontology and epistemology is relational. His relational conceptualization of ontology leads to a theory of social 'being' and 'becoming', which is based on the internal relation between our individuality and our collectivity, rather than one that focuses solely on individuals. In addition, Marx's conceptualization of epistemology pertains not just to the relational origin, constitution and nature of knowledges but also to our relation with knowledge (2007, p. 52).

Mao contends that knowledge begins with a dialectical conceptualization of experience, understood as ontology and subjectivity, and that there is a dialectical and materialist relationship between knowledge and knowability or epistemology and objectivity. While praxis is, for Allman, "a theory of the inseparable unity of thought and practice," for Mao, the relationship between thought and practice, as well as thinking and social being, is one of the "unity and struggle of opposites," a relationship in which one always divides into two, where consciousness transforms into matter and matter into consciousness. We contend that Mao's dialectical approach deepens our understanding of the theory of practice and activism. He stated (1973),

According to dialectical materialism, contradiction is present in all processes of objectively existing things and of subjective thought and permeates all these processes from beginning to end; this is the universality and absoluteness of contradiction. Each contradiction and each of its aspects have their respective characteristics; this is the particularity and relativity of contradiction. In given conditions, opposites possess identity, and consequently can coexist in a single entity and can transform themselves into each other; this again is the particularity and relativity of contradiction. But the struggle of opposites is ceaseless, it goes

on both when the opposites are coexisting and when they are transforming themselves into each other, and becomes especially conspicuous when they are transforming themselves into one another; this again is the universality and absoluteness of contradiction (p. 101).

If we undertook the project of collectively mapping the ‘universality’ of these contradictions, the ‘particularity’ of the contradictions, the relations between contradictions, the ‘identity and struggle of the aspects of contradictions,’ we would dig substantially deeper into the cracks in the rock.

Given this critique, we have flagged the limitations of social movements built upon non-dialectical modes of thinking, specifically, their failure to see contradictions, internal relations, universality and particularity, or the local and the global. These movements are diverse and contested social forms, driven by competing forms of analysis, practice-based knowledge, and many ‘ways of saying’ what exactly is going on. However, we argue that our historical moment calls us to bring a sense of universality to our movement building. As much as we must pay attention to and appreciate the particularity of struggle at the local level, we must, in a very sophisticated and dialectical way, connect these struggles to universal social relations through a passionate engagement with contradictions.. If we seek to overcome the limits of reform, these limits can only be understood through the ongoing struggle to not just change the world but understand it, meaning that this project can be driven to higher levels through a ceaseless push to revolutionize praxis (Tse-Tung, 1997). We can then return to Allman, where she concludes, “[T]herefore, Marx’s theory of consciousness involves not only the dialectical, or internal relations between consciousness and material practice but also, by logical extension, an internal relation between human objectivity and subjectivity” (Allman, 2007, p. 33).

What we have argued in this paper manifests our deep theoretical curiosity on how to understand and change the world, an undertaking that presents us daily with more complex challenges and has the propensity to fragment mind/body or society/self. Let us take a moment and think about local and global conditions which (re)produce poverty, war, violence against women and youth, slavery, occupation, dispossession, environmental destruction, displacement of communities, and other devastations. Let us also think about modes of resistance in prisons, on the street, in unions, in universities and schools, in workplaces, and other imaginative spaces of arts and social media. Do we need more evidence and ingenuity to declare that we do not deserve injustice and inequality? Shouldn’t we instead think through *subversive* pedagogical possibilities that can draw attention to the local and global material and historical reality of lives of women and men? At the core of the subversive pedagogy should be the understanding that people live in relations, the state is the structure to arbitrate ruling relations, and it is the totality of the capitalist relations of power that should be dismantled. Roxana (1995) thought this

through in her chapter "Teaching against the grains: Contradictions and possibilities," where she discussed sexism, racism, and power relations in the classroom and addressed, albeit briefly, the relationship between consciousness and contradiction. In our classroom dialogues, we have consistently noticed the disappearance of *relations* and the *state* from participants' analysis. Individuals' 'agency' and the processes of being 'empowered' through civil society, market or state mechanisms are instead presented as 'oppositional' to the status quo. This seemingly 'oppositional' stance confuses the freedom of personhood with human emancipation. Marx labeled freedom of personhood as 'political emancipation' in contrast to 'human emancipation' to specify the possibilities and limits of bourgeois/liberal democracy. In liberal democracy we become equal to one another, formally, before the law, and in the market. In other words, "[T]he freedom to be *unfree* characterizes our daily existence" (Carpenter & Mojab 2011, p. 221, emphasis in original). It takes enormous intellectual energy and courage to suggest, as Marx did, that "men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living" (Marx, 1852/1978 p. 437). This pre-existing condition is called *necessity*, that is, the conditions and structures that constitute the social relations that we are born into and we inherit from the past. As we have argued previously,

Only through the collective will to transform such necessity will any real freedom be achieved. Only by working to change such necessity, to transform the materiality of daily life, can consciousness of freedom be changed. This is where democracy can be achieved not only in appearance, but in essence as well. To put it differently, this is where bourgeois democracy and its notions of freedom will be confronted as ideology and can be transformed by revolutionary democracy (Carpenter & Mojab 2011a, p. 221).

Dismantling such structures cannot be realized without understanding them. For example, without feminist knowledge, it will not be possible to dismantle patriarchy or without anti-racist knowledge, racism will not be eradicated. As colleagues and students of Roxana, we know well her deep understanding of this proposition and her commitment to the classroom as a cite of 'undoing' these relations. However, her informed perspective on how to 'undo' was constantly engaged with the realities of social reproduction. Her attempts to revolutionize learning were drawn from and in opposition to the easy options to simply reform such as a space. In other words, she knew that she could not theorize a revolutionary space without a deep understanding of its contradictions and its propensities towards reproducing racialized patriarchal capitalist social relations (Ng, 1993).

Roxana bravely led the way in embodied learning, a pedagogical approach where mind and body are understood and treated as an integrative whole. In this approach, she effectively and powerfully covered the impact of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy on body, mind, consciousness, and ideology. We know that she did not exchange materiality for emotionality, or thoughts for emotions. She remained committed to the interconnectedness of thought/body/action; surely it is recognizable that Roxana's exploration of embodied learning was itself an exploration of contradictions. She herself argued, that any kind of activist or critical learning or research requires the unearthing of contradiction.

As I see it, the analyst's responsibility is to make visible the structural constraints within which groups have to operate. In identifying existing sources of contradictions, the analyst can help groups to develop an ongoing analysis of new areas of struggles and change...Ultimately, analysis of these contradictory processes enable us to discover how the state works to constrain and limit the actions of working people. Importantly, they can help us to assess the strengths and weakness of various community actions and movements, so that we may work more effectively to transform the conditions of our lives (p. 95)

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Elaine Coburn for her editorial comments.

### References

- Aguilar, D. (2012). From triple jeopardy to intersectionality: The feminist perplex. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, 32(2), 415–428.
- Allman, P. (1999). *Revolutionary Social Transformation: Democratic Hopes, Political Possibilities and Critical Education*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Allman, P. (2001). *Critical education against global capitalism: Karl Marx and revolutionary critical education* (1<sup>st</sup> ed). Westport, CT, USA: Begin & Garvey.
- Allman, Paula (2007) *On Marx: An Introduction to the Revolutionary Intellect of Karl Marx*. Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

- Au, W. (2007). Vygotsky and Lenin on Learning: The Parallel Structures of Individual and Social Development. *Science & Society*, 71(3), 273–298. doi:10.1521/siso.2007.71.3.273
- Bannerji, H. (1995). *Thinking through: essays on feminism, Marxism and anti-racism*. Toronto: Women's Press.
- Carpenter, S. (2009). Interrogating the call to service: The social relations of learning citizenship. In P. Coare & L. Cecil (Eds.), *Really useful research* (pp. 81-88). Presented at the SCUTREA, Cambridge, UK: University of Sussex.
- Carpenter, S. (2011). *Theorizing praxis in citizenship learning: Civic engagement and the democratic management of inequality in AmeriCorps* (Doctoral Thesis). University of Toronto, Toronto, ON.
- Carpenter, S. (2012). 'Centering Marxist-feminist theory in adult learning,' *Adult Education Quarterly*, 62, 12, 19-35.
- Carpenter, S. & Mojab, S. (Eds) (2011a). *Educating from Marx: Race, Gender, and Learning*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Carpenter, S., & Mojab, S. (2011b). Adult education and the "matter" of consciousness in Marxist-feminism. In P. Jones (Ed.), *Marxism and education: Renewing the dialogue, pedagogy, and culture* (pp. 117–140). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Carpenter, S. & Mojab, S. (2013). 'What is 'critical' about critical adult education?' in T. Nesbit, S. Brigham, N. Taber, & T. Gibb (Eds.), *Building on critical traditions: Adult education and learning in Canada* (pp. 144-153). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Choudry, A., & Kapoor, D. (2010). *Learning from the Ground Up: Global Perspectives on Social Movements and Knowledge Production*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Choudry, A. A., Hanley, J., & Shragge, E. (2012). *Organize!: Building from the local for global justice*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Federici, S. (2004). *Caliban and the Witch*. New York: Autonomedia.

- Fortunati, L. (1995). *The arcane of reproduction: housework, prostitution, labor and capital*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia.
- Knight, Nick (2005) *Marxist Philosophy in China: From Qu Quibai to Mao Zedong, 1923-1945*. The Netherlands: Springer.
- Marx, K. (1844/1978). Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844. In R. C. Tucker (Ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (2nd ed., pp. 66-125). New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Marx, K. (1852/1972) *The eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton).
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1932/1991). The German ideology: Part one. In C. J. Arthur (Ed.), *The German ideology* (2nd ed., pp. 35-95). New York: International Publishers.
- Mayo, P. (2012). *Echoes from Freire for a critically engaged pedagogy*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Ng, R. (1984). *Immigrant women and the state: A study in the social organization of knowledge* (Doctoral Thesis). Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto.
- Ng, R. (1995). Teaching against the grain: Contradictions and possibilities. In R. Ng, P. Staton, & J. Scane (Eds.), *Anti-racism, feminism, and critical approaches to education* (pp. 129–152). Toronto: OISE Press.
- Ng, R. (1996). *The politics of community services: Immigrant women, class, and state* (2nd ed.). Halifax: Fernwood.
- Ng, R. (1993). “A woman out of control”: Deconstructing sexism and racism in the University. *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue canadienne de l'éducation*, 18(3), 189–205. doi:10.2307/1495382
- Rikowski, G. (2001). After the manuscript broke off: thoughts on Marx, social class and education. In *Education Study Group*. Presented at the British Sociological Association, London. Retrieved from <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00001931.htm>



- Ritchie, G. (2013). *Consciousness and praxis: Informal learning in social movements* (Master's Thesis). University of Toronto, Toronto.
- Smith, D. E. (1987). *The Everyday World As Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Smith, D. E. (2005). *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*. Lanham, MD, USA: AltaMira.
- Tse-Tung, Mao (2007) *On Practice and Contradiction* [originally published in 1937], introduction by Slavoj Žižek. London: Verso.
- Vazquez, A.S. (1977). *The Philosophy of Praxis*. Translated by Mike Gonzalez. London: Merlin Press.