

BEYOND THE CONSTRUCTS OF CITIZENSHIP: “AUTONOMOUS SMITHS,” EXPERIMENTATION & CRITICAL SOCIAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the discourse surrounding citizenship and citizenship education has been politically, economically, socially and culturally transformed generating major points of contestation among social educators. The movement of capital (partly from neo-liberal policies and agendas) across international borders, the displacement of people, along with the resistance against these oppressive circumstances have given way to more complex and reconceptualized understandings of what it means to be a citizen, or in many instances, excluded from differing nation states or bordered regions. This discussion conceptualises and problematizes the identity of “citizen” outside modernist/liberal notions, by experimenting with poststructuralist anarchist understandings of becoming “autonomous smiths” (Day, 2005; Deleuze and Guatarri, 1987). Furthermore, the author describes how autonomous smiths are discovering holes under and within the blanketed and totalising efforts of what is known as market fundamentalism and neo-liberalist policies. Shifts have been created in regards to citizenship and citizenship education from the dominant practices of liberal democratic inclusiveness, to more dynamic, multidimensional and fluid practices in our globalised world. Finally, the intention here is to explore the differing constructs of language and the people who are actively engaged in movements occurring outside traditional citizenship discourse and who are currently experimenting in differing participatory spaces.

Introduction

It is fairly obvious that for the past few decades concepts of citizenship and social studies education have become major points of contestation among social educators, politicians, community members, and political activists. The way in which citizenship is changing is particularly evident within the rapidly changing and oppressive global economic restructuring under neo-liberalism, as well as its haunting undemocratic and privatisation policies that have aggressively displaced populations; leaving major groups of people in geographical, political, economic and social flux (Giroux, 2004; Peters, 2006). It is important to note that I am not singling out individual populations specific to non-industrialized people. Populations in “industrialized” countries including Australia, parts of Europe, Asia and the United States are also concerned with neo-liberalist agendas that are affecting major portions of our public spaces.

In this essay I will discuss how neo-liberalist policies have been influential in the international displacement and oppression of populations. I will then briefly explore how citizenship and social studies education has been transformed through these policies. Furthermore, I will discuss how populations that are affected by these restructuring policies are creating and experimenting with new social movements, becoming active agents outside of national borders and are finding holes within and around repressive systems that enable to become what Richard Day (2005) describes as, “autonomous smiths.” Rather than individuals identifying and surrendering to particular failed nation-states (Chomsky, 2007) or becoming “citizen’s”, people are recognizing, re-organizing and co-constructing spaces where they are able to work in and around these structures or state apparatus. Finally, I want to further contextualize what these new social movements and dynamic participatory spaces mean in terms of our work within the social studies.

Neo-liberalism & the Transformation of Citizenship and Citizenship Education

Before I discuss the transformation of citizenship and social studies education it is important to explore neo-liberalism and its negative impacts on the nation-state and public spaces in general. Moreover, I will discuss neo-liberalism in the contexts of how it promotes extreme individualism, privatisation and market place ideology and what that means for people living under those conditions. I will then continue to argue that neo-liberalism and the people these policies have collided with have altered the way we understand and/or define citizenship.

Neo-liberalism is based on the economic restructuring of nation-states from being somewhat accountable for the welfare of its population, to what Henry Giroux (2004) describes as a “grim alignment with corporate power, transnational corporations, and the forces of militarisation”(p. 45). Throughout the past few decades, neo-liberalism has been touted as a “save all” solution for poorer countries who are, in many cases, forced to compete in the global market. Where the welfare state was once a safety net for communities and society in general, neo-liberalism dismantles this relationship and places the responsibility/accountability of the individual within the marketplace. For example, in 1994 the United States under Bill Clinton and Mexico’s Ernesto Zedillo signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to liberalize trade boundaries between the two countries. Realistically this enabled transnational corporations to take advantage of Mexico’s lower labour costs, poorer environmental protection laws and lesser tariffs. Moreover, NAFTA became the cornerstone for corporate interests and what Giroux (2004; 2005) describes as “market fundamentalism,” which was persistent throughout the later half of the 20th century and now has evolved in the 21st in an attempt to create this notion of a “liberal trade” environment within the larger global context.

Additionally, neo-liberalism and economic restructuring has become more globally expansive and because of this continued restructuring, notions of what it means to be a citizen have also changed or in many cases been blurred. Ironically, since these policies have taken hold in countries like Mexico, the movement of capital has very few borders to cross in terms of the global/international market, but involuntary and voluntary movement of people has had the opposite effect where governments are advocating for larger and strict military boundaries. This has been evident from the impacts that NAFTA has had on Mexico in terms of mass immigration to the United States, the militarisation of the border and the actual continued construction of border walls throughout the Southwest region. Although the move to further militarise borders are considered by both conservatives and liberals as possible deterrents to illegal immigration, the need for cheap and unrepresented labour and relaxed trade conditions continues to usurp these political debates.

What was touted by many neo-conservatives as a way to increase wages and quality of life has now displaced local and regional economies that cannot compete within the global market. In certain instances, this creates situations where smaller cooperative farmers, artisans and other community members are forced to look elsewhere for economic income. With regard NAFTA’s impact, Mexico’s poorer populations have been forced to move to the North (including the United States) where landscapes are dominated by corporate interests and in many cases unwelcoming social conditions.

More importantly, it is important to recognize that these complex conditions are not totalising in nature and according to Aihwa Ong (2006) neo-liberalism has become more of a mutating process where citizens and government are continuously shifting or transforming within these complex restructuring conditions. Unfortunately our current arguments regarding citizenship are still enmeshed within the duality of legal status where inclusion and exclusion are particularly evident within the scope of mass migration. As I mentioned above, working poor are shifting

geographically from Mexico to the United States where they are excluded from participation and gaining privileges of citizenship. Moreover, nation-states are becoming less accountable for even their own national citizens. While nation-states become less liable for its citizens, individuals are considered responsible for their own well being within the marketplace. According to John J. Cogan, David Grossman and Mei-hui-Liu (2000), “as the economic convergence continues, we must ask how relevant the nation-state can be as a force toward civil democracy” (p. 50). The question surrounding whether nation-states are becoming less relevant sparks major issues and concerns with regard to citizenship and citizenship education. Does neo-liberalism “mutate” or “transform” our national borders as well as how we think about citizenship and how people understand and participate/act in the world? I believe the answer is yes in both instances. In order to continue our understanding of what it means to be a citizen and its mutative process, I believe that we must further the discussion regarding citizenship outside the boundaries of the nation-state and liberal democratic practices in order to provide more fluid and complex understandings that utilize critical, postmodern and poststructuralist notions of citizenship and social studies education.

Critical Postmodernism, Global Citizenry & Multidimensional Social Studies

Citizenship and Social Studies Education

I would like to point out that I am not going to elaborate extensively on citizenship and social studies education within the conservative agenda. I believe that many critical scholars have argued against these types of traditional pedagogical approaches (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006, Giroux, 1982; 2004, Kincheloe, 2001; Wayne Ross, 2004; Vinson, 2006). For example, E. Wayne Ross (2000) has argued that traditional social studies education in contemporary classrooms demand that students are more like spectators within the learning process. In many cases, traditional social studies classrooms are inactive and promote a type of submissive citizenry or “citizens as spectators” within “democratic” spaces. More recently, Giroux (2004) has critically examined how neo-liberalism has transformed our public spaces including public schools into privatised entities; leaving these privatised mechanisms to undermine “real” active participation within a democracy. Essentially, under neo-liberal or market driven public school curriculum, “providing space for democracy to grow is not a priority” (p. 18). Furthermore, curriculum and pedagogy under neo-liberalism leaves little room for active student participation in the classroom (due to standardization and homogenisation of the social studies curriculum), as well as the larger society outside of the boundaries of the marketplace.

As a social studies educator, I ask pre-service teachers to construct definitions of their own meanings or understandings of democracy. It is no wonder that traditional social studies practices that embrace free market values initiated a student teacher to define democracy as “the ability to start a business and not have the government interfere” (Haworth, 2007). This is not a surprising response since most of our industrial leaders discuss democracy and free market capitalism as interconnected or in many cases, inseparable. Thus, the language of the marketplace and market place values become normalized within our everyday lived experiences, while liberal democratic processes and spaces are undermined.

Furthermore, I want to acknowledge that neo-liberalism has not been universally accepted throughout the world. Bolivia, Venezuela, parts of Mexico and new social movements throughout the world have been vocal and actively opposed to such economic restructuring. Just as some nation-states have been resistant against such impositions so have many within education and particularly those that are interested in developing a more expansive multidimensionality to social studies education. More recently, critical social studies educators are actively constructing arguments beyond conservative or even liberal perspectives regarding citizenship and social studies

education and are realizing that modernist perspectives are becoming less applicable to our lived realities. For instance, no longer are members of a certain nation-state likely to develop certain “common” political knowledge coinciding with the larger social order. Social contracts or contractual relationships between citizens and the nation-states are more obscure because of the social, political, economic, cultural restructuring and therefore the simplistic modernist approach to understanding citizenship and social education become problematic especially when we begin to take into account issues regarding race, class gender and sexual orientation. Moving beyond modernist binary work of “inclusion” and “exclusion,” critical and postmodernist social educators are concerned with the multifaceted or multidimensional possibilities within citizenship and social studies education.

How might we understand citizenship through a differing critical and postmodernist lens? Does this give us opportunities to discuss and practice citizenship and social studies education through multidimensional frameworks or possibly reconsider the notions of citizenship and political identity within a changing and complex world? If so, what are these changing perspectives regarding our understandings of citizenship and social studies education? From a postmodernist perspective the world is ever changing, transforming and shifting, so as these shifts occur, it is important that social studies education differs in its content and pedagogical practices. In other words, if society and the conditions we live under continue to shift, the notions of citizenship and social studies education in general need reinterpretations. According to Kevin Vinson (2006):

A key argument here is that as society changes social studies/citizenship education must change also, and vice versa. That is, education devoted implicitly and explicitly to the status and understanding of society must vary as society varies; otherwise what we might call ‘appropriate’ or a ‘meaningful’ citizenship education might become inappropriate, meaningless, or outdated. (p. 28)

For the purposes of this essay, Vinson makes extremely important connections between a changing society and how we understand citizenship and social studies education. If our society is shifting directions under neo-liberalism, as well as the larger movements that are actively opposed to its oppressive implications, so should the way we discuss citizenship and its intricate mutations within these conditions.

In the next section I will discuss some of these critical postmodern perspectives in relationship to global citizenship and social studies education. Although these perspectives are important in challenging traditional pedagogical practices, it is equally important to continue with Vinson’s advice to change our understandings of citizenship and social studies education as society changes.

Critical Postmodernism, Global Citizenship and the Developments of Multidimensional Social Studies Education

Discussions surrounding postmodernism, citizenship and social education take into account the building of communities based on difference, as well as argues that citizenship is not, according to Dawn Shinew (2006), a “static, unchallenged, concept.” Rather than viewing individuals within the nation-state who are what Day (2006) describes as an “oedipalized subject,” citizens attempt to develop a more global political identity beyond particular borders or boundaries. As a philosophy, global citizenship attempts to challenge our relationships, as well as our passivity towards individualized nation-states and broadens the discussion to encompass our political, economic, social and cultural imprints from the local context to how those actions affect the larger world community. Unfortunately, modern notions of global citizenship have failed to embrace issues regarding difference and understanding communities that live in and around contemporary nation-states. Advocates of global citizenry prescribe to a certain set of morals and values and many times

believe others should be bound to those set of standards on what it means to be human. A clear example of how this is problematic is looking at the current state of Iraq and Afghanistan. Pedagogically speaking, the idea of “best practices” becomes a failure when we try and replicate the “democratic” or republican ideologies in one country and force them upon another. As Darren J. O’Byrne (2003) suggests;

Global society, bound together by a global sense of belonging, suggests a form of cultural homogenisation, as well as an assumption of rational action. It overlooks the powers of political decision-making that would be required in order to clarify the rules based on the moral consensus, and to maintain order in such a society. It thus overlooks the power exercised by dominant people, bodies or nations to influence these ‘rules.’ It relies upon an idealistic-almost psychological-perspective on human morality, and assumes that conflict between cultures would be subordinate to a ‘higher consciousness’ of humanity. (p. 122)

Byrne’s argument is important particularly when we are viewing citizenship and social education as multidimensional. Attempting to universalise or essentialise issues of morality and what it means to be human in a global context are difficult especially when we are basing these moral judgements upon a determined set of standards or criteria developed primarily by dominant cultural practices. To add to my example above, when certain democratic practices are considered to be essential and imposed on other nation-states for the “global good,” notions of democracy not only become deterministic and stagnate, but are seen as a “common good” for the entire global population. Thus, I would agree with O’Byrne that many of the current arguments surrounding global citizenry are ultimately based in modernity, where we are able to turn away from the difficult work and struggles involved in creating communities of difference.

Although global citizenship has made great strides towards developing critiques and strategic actions towards changing worldviews surrounding consumption, environmentalism, and labour, it is important that we question whether global citizenry as a conceptual framework is enough to explain the continuous re-imagining or experimenting with participatory spaces and confronting power at multiple fronts. This now leads us to discussing the importance of the new social movements and their multifaceted approaches to exposing power and becoming differing individuals in collective practices.

Feminists have argued extensively against modernist perspectives regarding citizenship particularly because of its limitations to incorporate differences outside of patriarchal frameworks. While presenting a need to question women’s participation within patriarchal citizenship, Chantal Mouffe (1993) adheres to a more radical and pluralist approach in developing society. Although she believes (much like other radical feminists) that modern, liberal and masculine approaches to citizenship are problematic, she also embraces the fact that her project still has modernist tendencies;

It is important to stress here that if we hold to the view that the exercise of citizenship consists in identifying with the ethico-political principles of modern democracy, we must also recognize that there can be as many interpretations of those principles, and that a radical democratic interpretation is one among others. A radical democratic interpretation will emphasize the numerous social relations in which situations of domination exist that must be challenged if the principles of liberty and equality are to apply. (p. 84)

The question I have of Mouffe’s conception of citizenship is its relationship to ethics, responsibility and differences. What types of communities do we create when we are imbedded in the state/citizen binary, how might outsiders or what Gert Biesta (2006) describes as “strangers” included within those communities and finally how are voices heard or silenced within these social

structures. Some of these questions are answered in Mouffe's arguments regarding the problems of creating democratic spaces, particularly because of our tendencies to continuously recreate communities of exclusion. I believe this is an important point to discuss since many of our opinions concerning democratic possibilities lie within universalising or placing a singular set of morals and values on other populations (particularly the United States and its interventions around the world) even under the guise of democratic principles. So what happens to certain individuals in democratic spaces if they are considered 'outsiders' or 'strangers?' Additionally, Mouffe describes the impossibilities of creating a complete or fully actualised democratic community.

...Principles are open to many competing interpretations; one has to acknowledge that a fully inclusive political community can never be realized. There will always be a 'constitutive outside', an exterior to the community that is the very condition of its existence. Once it is accepted that there cannot be a 'we' without a 'them' and that all forms of consensus are by necessity based on acts of exclusion, the issue can no longer be the creation of a fully inclusive community where antagonism, division and conflict will have disappeared. Hence, we have to come to terms with the very impossibility of a full realization of democracy. (p. 85)

If democracy cannot be fully realized as Mouffe suggests, then what are the possibilities of creating participatory spaces of difference? Beista (2006) argues that our contemporary view of how communities operate is predominately through rationalist tendencies. Under these "rational communities" individuals and individual voices are "interchangeable," and citizens communicate within the boundaries of that community's discourse. Beista continues to describe how education within these spaces not only provides students with a voice, but it is responsible for creating and reproducing certain voices that delegitimize voices outside of that community; furthering the modernist perceptions of others living outside of that rational community as individuals needing to be excluded.

Intervening in these rational communities is difficult especially when we normalize the silence of certain individuals within those spaces. These specific interventions prescribe an ongoing ethical struggle in creating dialogical processes where differing perspectives are embraced through what Beista describes as "responsivity and responsibility." Responsive and responsible communication is an important endeavour when we are struggling with individuals and differences outside our rational communities. It is our responsibility to acknowledge as Beista maintains, "that the community of those who have nothing in common, the community of strangers, the community without community, is of an ethical nature" (p. 65).

The New Social Movements, Anarchism and Becoming Autonomous Smiths

I believe that the recent movements to resist neo-liberalism and the oppressive economic restructuring under globalisation are part of the ethical struggles Biesta is referring to. Numerous voices are from differing communities that are responding and experimenting with possibilities (even under the most oppressive rational communities) to legitimise the existence of individuals and collective groups living within and around structures of dominance. Currently, many of the communities impacted by neo-liberalism are building responsive and responsible communications; thus, they have begun the difficult work to become active participants with others who, at times, have nothing in common. For example, when labour, environmentalist and other international grassroots organizations converged in Seattle before the turn of the 20th century to stop the World Trade Organization (WTO) from meeting and furthering undemocratic neo-liberal policies. Later this has led to differing movements from around the world who have gathered at the *World Social Forum's* to responsibly listen and strategize politically to counter the many attempts to globalise

these economic restructuring schemes. More importantly, the coming communities acknowledge that many of these individuals are ‘strangers’, but are willing to act or become responsive to the differing needs and concerns of people impacted by undemocratic practices. This should not be seen as a process of solidarity or building a certain vanguardist movement. Quite frankly, this is why the term “new social movements” is plural rather than singular and made up of differing networks rather than a homogeneous front. Rather, from this perspective, the new social movements are challenging power from numerous fronts.

I argue that part of confronting power from multiple fronts, as well as challenging modernist tendencies not only stem from postmodernist and poststructuralism strains of thought, but from what Todd May (1994) terms, *poststructuralist anarchism*. Anarchism has its roots in late 19th century and 20th century political theory. As a theory, anarchism believes in developing a society that is non-authoritarian, non-hierarchical and prescribes to voluntary associations and mutual aid between its members. At first glance many would shy away from this concept, especially when academics and the public in general view anarchism as chaotic and a non-deterministic philosophy (Graeber, 2004). But from a differing viewpoint, I would argue that poststructuralist anarchism enables individuals to move outside the boundaries of binary and deterministic models embraced by modernist thought and view the world as more fluid or non-essentialised. Coincidentally, this is why the new social movements do not always intertwine themselves in attempting to seize power from the state or focus on individual structures. In fact, in many cases, these autonomous groups or collectives are experimenting and acting in participatory spaces outside of the nation-state and creating, as Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (1991) describe, “ a plurality of autonomous struggles waged throughout the microlevels of society” (p. 56). For example, anarchists are interested in exposing illegitimate power produced through various social, political, economic and cultural practices. Anarchism also advocates for dismantling hierarchical and authoritarian practices within our everyday lived experiences and realizing that power manifests itself through multiple spaces and decision-making processes. Day (2005), describes these actions within the new social movements as challenging some of “those practices—anarchist, indigenous, queer, feminist—which have been submerged for several centuries under a complex and ever-changing hegemony of (neo) liberal and (post) Marxist forms, practices which are now re-emerging as the limits of reform and revolution become ever more present” (p. 175). It is no wonder that anarchists are, “heartened to see the critique of domination extend beyond the social relations of capitalism to include the politics of race, gender, culture and nature” (Curran 2006, p. 32). Finally, I would propose that poststructuralist anarchism has potential in enabling the new social movements as well as the differing communities we inhabit the opportunity to expose power at differing points and take into account the more complex relationships we have with others/strangers in differing communities.

In correlation to how these differing social movements and spaces we inhabit are challenging notions of citizenship, Richard Day (2005) has recently argued that the communities that are continuing to resist neo-liberalism are not acting as citizens of certain nation-states or advocating for liberal notions of democratic spaces, but are individuals and collective organizations working together through the process of affinity and acting as “autonomous smiths.” Utilizing Deleuze and Guatarri’s (1987) work surrounding the citizen, nomad and smith, Day (2005) argues that rather than being a citizen who continues to stay on the path, or the nomad who is described as one who destroys all paths, the smith “seeks to innovate by tracking and exploiting opportunities in and around existing structures” (p. 175). What *smiths* demonstrate is a resistance to contemporary modernist understandings of how strangers and communities of difference are developing in and around structures of neo-liberalism. Day continues to describe that,

“...*smiths* show us that no matter how totalising a system may be it will never achieve its ambition of totality—it is impossible to create a system with no outside, even a system that

appears to cover an entire planet. For there will always be holes, even when there are no longer any margins. And out of these holes will spring all manner of subject.” (p. 175)

I agree with Day in that the new social movements are continuing to experiment in spaces “in and around” dominant forces that bind the citizen and nomad. Rather than viewing or limiting these new social movements to homogenous reformist or revolutionary currents, the *smith* navigates through the complex inter-relationships between the citizen and nomad; thus creating a “groundless solidarity...a complex set of (partially) shared experiences of what it means to live under neo-liberal hegemony, what it means to fight it—and create alternatives to it” (p. 202).

In conclusion, just as Day has laid out the foundations for understanding our continued experimentations within participatory spaces, his work is also important in continuing our experimentations particularly in social studies education and our understandings of citizenship. Many of us are attempting to challenge the way we work in social studies classrooms in order to encompass the ever-changing postmodern conditions and its infinite possibilities in acknowledging and acting upon the world outside of the binary citizen/nation-state relationship. Finally, it is not my intentions here to eradicate modernist viewpoints of citizenship and social studies education from the discourse, but to struggle and act upon new and competing concepts outside of our current practices in social education.

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