

## The new right and adult educators: A feminist view

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### ABSTRACT

It is increasingly clear that adult educators cannot ignore the politics, policies and philosophies of the New Right. They permeate the context within which we undertake our theorising, research and practice. The impact of the New Right is far reaching and carries short and long term implications in the public and private spheres. Recently, explorations into the phenomenon and its specific relationship to adult education are emerging. Much of this literature, however is based in patriarchal understandings and analyses. As in many explorations of the state, the 'woman question' is too often "reduced to some other question, instead of being seen as the question, calling for analysis on its own terms" (MacKinnon, 1982: 13). Thus, the purpose of this paper is two fold. First I explore the theoretical implications of the New Right for women. Second, I examine the possible role for adult education within this context.

### Introduction

It is increasingly clear that adult educators cannot ignore the politics, policies and philosophies of the New Right. They permeate the context within which we undertake our theorising, research and practice. The impact of the New Right is far reaching and carries short and long term implications in the public and private spheres. Recently, explorations into the phenomenon and its specific relationship to adult education are emerging (see Collard and Law, 1992; Elsey, 1986; Edwards, 1992; Keddie, 1992; Law, 1991; McIlroy and Spencer, 1988; Wallis, 1992; Westwood, 1990). Much of this literature, however is based in patriarchal understandings and analyses. As in many explorations of the state, the 'woman question' is too often "reduced to some other question, instead of being seen as *the* question, calling for analysis on its own terms" (MacKinnon, 1982: 13).

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I write this paper from a feminist perspective. Among the many feminisms which currently exist, I situate myself as a feminist who acknowledges difference, yet assumes a shared experience among women of some form of patriarchal oppression and of social construction within the patriarchy. It would be naïve to suggest that class, colour, ethnicity, physical ability, or sexual orientation do not cross cut the issue of gender. Indeed, throughout this paper it is difficult to imagine an instance in which women who differ from the dominant group of middle class, white, Anglo/European, able and heterosexual women do not experience double jeopardy in the context of the New Right. Nonetheless, I continue to believe that we share common threads of experience and construction. In keeping with that view, I base this discussion primarily in literature which addresses the role of the New Right in relation to women. Further, although some women who identify as feminists

support the New Right (see Klatch, 1988a, 1988b), I engage the literature of those who have raised critiques against it.

## The new right

There is no single, clearly definable phenomenon called the New Right. Many terms are used interchangeably to identify it. These include neo-liberalism, new libertarianism, neo-conservatism, Rogernomics (in New Zealand), Thatcherism (in the UK), and Reaganomics (in the USA). These terms indicate its dynamic, complex and international nature.

Although each form of the New Right reflects its particular context, the explanations for its ascendancy tend to be similar. For the most part, authors refer to the collapses of communism, of 'the Left', of the 'Welfare state,' and to economic 'crises' of capitalism at a global level.

It is at this early stage, that some feminists' analyses of the New Right diverge from the dominant, mainstream one. Feminists state that these explanations are incomplete and "based on the stereotyping and life cycle of only one [male] section of the population" (Bunkle and Lynch, 1992: 28). Consequently, analyses dependent upon them display a gender bias which "fails to explain (and indeed lacks the analytical tools to be able to explain) the moral/traditional/familial aspects of the [New Right's] ideology and policies" (ten Tusscher, 1986: 67). These feminists offer an alternate reading of the rise of the New Right.

In many respects for these feminists, the New Right simply exhibits the usual characteristics of most state ideologies. There is after all, not much difference between the role of the left in upholding male power over women and the role of the right in upholding male power over women (Dworkin, 1990). The New Right, however, seems particularly virulent and some feminists equate its rise with "unchecked Patriarchy" (Ruth, 1983: 350) and an increased "hostility to feminism" (ten Tusscher, 1986: 72). This hostility relates directly to women's increased power in several areas: in the workforce, in trade unions, in higher education, in reproductive control, in marital property rights and in expression of sexuality. According to this feminist analysis, women's increased authority and control threatened, and continue to threaten, patriarchy's traditional control over women's roles in both the private and public spheres. The moral right arose in response to these threats. It questioned and rejected women's new place in society (see Arnot, 1993; Dworkin, 1983, 1990; Eisenstein, 1982, 1984; ten Tusscher, 1986). The moral right developed in parallel with deepening economic crises. Together, these two elements represent characteristics which are basic to the New Right.

## Basic characteristics of the new right

Examining the basic characteristics of the New Right is not an easy task. Both its moral and economic bases are shaped according to their temporal as well as specific cultural, economic, political and social contexts. Each is expressed in varying intensities and with differing interpretations. As well, the two elements are simultaneously both complementary and contradictory to each other. They exist in harmony and in tension. Nonetheless, both the moral and economic elements are fundamental ingredients in any New Right environment. Thus, the discussion below attempts to untangle the concepts and to highlight their general rather than specific natures.

## Moral base of the new right

Through its moral base, the New Right expresses its ideological beliefs, values and ideals. These are focussed on two domains of concern which mirror and maintain the patriarchal discourse: freedom and family values.

The concept of freedom is basic to the New Right doctrine, and as we will see later in this paper, linked intimately to economic freedom in the marketplace. The focus is on providing an absolute freedom for individuals to develop their full abilities and talents. Unconstrained individual liberty and independence and sovereignty of the individual are stressed.

The realisation of freedom is seen to benefit all equally. It is assumed that we all share an endless human capacity for self-initiative and desire for achievement. There is a sense that individuals' raw hunger for accomplishment and their indefatigable will can conquer most obstacles. Thus individuals can transcend their historical locations as defined by class, colour, ethnicity, physical ability, or sexual orientation.

Complementary to these notions of freedom is the notion of choice. The New Right presumes rational individuals who have the ability "to make choices and enter into contracts and agreements" (Frazer and Lacey, 1993: 45). It envisages the ideal environment as a world without limits and full of options. It is a place of endless opportunities in which we are limited primarily by our lack of creativity and imagination.

Feminists are not particularly comfortable with these kinds of portrayals for women and label them a peculiarly masculine interpretation and desire for freedom, choice and rationality (Frazer and Lacey, 1993). For many feminists, they speak too directly to a rational individualism which ignores the reality of women's day to life experiences in which we have disproportionate responsibility for the care of others placed upon us. The New Right presupposes an autonomous individual who is able-bodied, healthy, rational and fully informed. In its patriarchal way, it negates the necessary inter-dependence of all beings in an increasingly complex world (Bunkle, 1991/2). It ignores preferences for collective, intuitive, passionate and relational responses to the environment - particularly important dismissals, if one is to believe literature on the nature of women's ways of being (see Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1986). Furthermore, it disregards the structural disadvantages within the patriarchal system which women experience when we negotiate from a position which has less power, authority, control and fewer resources. These structural disadvantages are deepened by attitudinal ones which display a "lack of public or social support or encouragement ...." (David, 1986: 141).

Given its philosophical stance relative to absolute freedom, it is not surprising that the New Right is critical of "the statism which has dominated political thought and action in the West since the 1930s" (Green, 1987: 210), that it rejects the role of the "over-mighty state" (ibid.) and that it tries to disentangle the state from the lives of individuals. Thus, it attempts to extricate itself from affirmative action programmes for women, legislation which offers financial parity and protection to women in paid employment, childcare funding, equal employment opportunities, parental leave, women's refuge funding and so on. It seeks to remove state support for the welfarism - a support which it claims destroyed initiative and stifled drive.

These withdrawals are made all the more possible by the promulgation of the second important element of the moral base of the New Right: the family. The revival of the Victorian, Christian family is viewed as a reasoned and ideal response to the presumed disintegration of social and moral order. Conservative reasoning links women's demands for economic, social, political and sexual equality to divorce, single parenthood and increased violence among youth. The family thus is reinstated as a nuclear, heterosexual, monogamous, stable marriage in which motherhood is a central role for the woman while the male is the primary wage earner (David, 1986). Its inherently patriarchal structures create a clear division between public and private spheres. It removes women from the male public sphere of the political, the intellectual and full-time paid employment and confines them to the female private sphere associated with the familial, the domestic, the sensuous and unpaid employment (Stalker, 1996). In sum, the New Right "offers women a simple, fixed, predetermined social, biological and sexual order" (Dworkin, 1983: 22).

Within that order, women play an important role which actually fosters the state's withdrawal from its social responsibilities to individuals. In the New Right scenario, women extend their roles as

the nurturers and carers of the family to become the keepers of the community. They promulgate and practice Christian values of charity, equity and fairness for all. Hence, they provide support for young children, the aged, unemployed and mentally ill-those most effected by the decreasing provision of state welfare. These "remoralising politics" (Ryan, 1988: 56) allow the state to further disengage from social commitments, yet ensure that the groups' needs are met. Social problems which were once deemed to be problems for the state are relegated to the community and in the end become problems for the keepers of the community - women.

Through this process, the New Right relegates women to the area of social rather than economic concerns and policy development. This false division ensures that women are separated from macro-economic, state-sector and industrial relations debates or reforms (Du Plessis Novitz, 1991). Social responsibilities become equated with familial and community responsibilities and thus women's responsibilities. Feminisms and their common concerns for women's oppression, subordination and exploitation (Frazer and Lacey, 1993) are presented as threats to 'real' women who engage in these responsibilities.

Meanwhile, economic responsibilities remain in the public or male domain. In this way, divided by an unsubstantiated logic, the need for an "interplay between social and economic policy-welfare capitalism" (David, 1986: 142) is negated. The family becomes essentially a metaphor for individual freedom. It is treated as an autonomous unit which is free to provide for its basic needs in the manner it chooses. The New Right even goes so far as to argue that this will strengthen the family unit and reduce family breakup as men will return comfortably to their proper roles as key providers for the family (David, 1986).

The scenarios above are not as tidy as they appear at first glance. After all, the New Right is not an even and homogeneous phenomenon. There is an ambivalence of the state toward neglecting women's demands and rights (Arnot, 1992; 1993). It can, for the sake of order, advance political agendas (Du Plessis Novitz, 1991), and manage freedom and family values so they favour women. It can promote social order and authority based on a particular kind of social, religious and moral conservatism at the same time that it values individualism and limited government intervention. Indeed, it can adroitly make the argument that it is not dismantling, but rather reinventing the welfare state, in such a way so that women and other similar groups will benefit. This chameleon-like ability ensures that it can "switch the grounds of its legitimation at will" (Levitas, 1986a: 1) and retain its position of strength and influence.

Nonetheless, although women may be offered "equal opportunities (in the sense of the same options) at a formal or legal level, state apparatuses such as the tax structure, the organisation of work, the lack of good quality, affordable childcare, and the social welfare benefits system" (Middleton, 1990: 71) continue to disadvantage women.

## **Economic base of the new right**

Like its moral base, the economic base is fundamental to the existence of the New Right and illustrates its patriarchal stance. From the complex plethora of literature on the issue, three elements emerge which represent the essential nature of the economic base: market flexibility, consumerism and competition.

The economic policies and practices of the New Right are driven by an insistence on market flexibility. Basically, this means that free market principles rule and that once again the state disengages - this time in an attempt to ensure economic, rather than individual, freedoms. The New Right fosters deregulation of private commercial enterprises and the corporatisation and privatisation of the public service sector. Based on an aggressive, patriarchal model, it seeks to recreate "a new and exciting society where the heroes are entrepreneurs who talk about taking on the world and winning" (Maharey, 1987: 81).

It is perhaps no mistake that this quote refers to heroes and not also to heroines. Flexibility has "never applied to women in the workforce who, generally speaking, have been constrained more than men by educational inadequacy, job ghettoisation and domestic responsibilities" (Bunkle and Lynch, 1992: 24). It has never meant, for example, more flexible work patterns to accommodate women's roles in the family and community. Rather, deregulation, corporatisation and privatisation have depended on women to be a willing pool of flexible reserve labour and also to be home makers who sustain these policies with invisible and unpaid labour. As part time workers, women create minimal threat to the patriarchy because "firstly, the wages are sufficiently low to maintain the woman's dependence on the man's income and secondly, because the woman is still capable of offering the full servicing duties required within patriarchal relationships" (ten Tusscher, 1986: 80). In other words, the restructured labour market uses women to support both economic and social productivity.

Ultimately, the goal for the New Right is what is best for society- prosperity. It assumes that within a new environment the market, unrestrained by government intervention, eventually produces this. More responsive, dynamic, diverse and adaptable systems evolve to better accommodate shifts in the economy and eventually the 'apolitical' free market principles ensure that rewards and resources are allocated to those who best deserve them. Public expenditure is decreased but the more flexible systems supposedly respond to those needs which are real needs in society.

The New Right also assumes that the market is rational, that is, it is motivated by money. Consequently, economic enterprises which are free to negotiate their futures presumably self-regulate and ensure their own efficiency in order to survive. Protection of women's place and position in the workplace and society by unions or legislation thus becomes an issue related to economic efficiency rather than human rights.

In this new order, production, exchange and distribution of goods adapt to market demands. Economic enterprises supposedly satisfy niche markets in ways that mass production did not. Some demands, however, appear to take precedence over others. Women's demands for child care, for example, have yet to be met adequately, despite the economic possibilities.

The notion of market flexibility is important to the economic base of the New Right. It is complemented by consumerism - "a 'possessive individualism' in which the private is more and more privileged and the public realm of cultures and society is denuded" (Westwood, 1988: 446). At the level of the individual, consumerism is driven by "people's needs for pleasure" and "on one level, a wish for some more constant involvement in the making and remaking of our material lives" (Williamson, 1989: 33). Private satisfaction, individual materialism and personal acquisitiveness create a strong base for consumerism.

At a more abstract level, the New Right advocates the importance of the right to own property. This notion incorporates both national and individual perspectives. From the national perspective, there is a need to protect national properties from foreign invasion and conversely, to protect foreign property investments from misadventure.

In terms of the individual, property is interpreted not merely in material ways, but also in terms of owning our labour. This clever transposition of concepts ensures that women can be identified as property holders, equal to men in their ability to market their labours. This is an interesting argument, which detracts from the profound lack of material property which most women possess relative to most men and which fosters the feminisation of property (Scott, 1984). It also ignores the powerful structural forces which ensure that women's work is not counted (Waring, 1988). Finally, the elision of concepts is metaphorically congruent with the New Right's view of women's 'proper' place within the private sphere. Like property, they are "fenced in, guarded, frequently invaded" (Dworkin, 1983: xii).

Consumerism promises quality produce for, according to the New Right, the best products will be delivered to the consumer as private enterprise responds to the market needs (Maharey, 1987). For women, however, it is not quite so straightforward. Business needs, not individuals' needs, drive consumerism. Located in global, as well as national demands, they do not necessarily service the needs of women. In reality, women are often found in low paid, part time, short term, contract work. This may allow businesses to compete at a global level, but it accommodates few of women's financial, personal or professional needs.

Further, consumption is presumed most often to be directed toward housing, education, health, culture, commerce, transport - areas which in reality are often dominated by women's unpaid, domestic labour, rather than by their consumption. To treat them as activities of consumption rather than of production belittles women's contribution to the economy (Walby, 1988). Finally, to be fully functioning consumers, women require access to unbiased information, equal pay packets, and support systems which provide childcare and personal and professional safety.

Competition is the third and final element of the economic base of the New Right. The ideal is that a competitive environment creates a market place in which people can make their own choices about health care, education, communication and transportation providers, for example. The New Right defines the economy as over regulated and over protected and replaces it with freely negotiated competition. The "rugged individualism of enterprise culture" (Westwood, 1988: 444) reigns.

The problem for women of course is that, as individuals, we compete on an uneven playing ground. The sexual division of labour ensures that we are relegated to an area which accumulates less status, power, authority and resources. From this base, we compete at a disadvantage. Perhaps more importantly, although some women have achieved individual success in this competitive milieu, there is no evidence that a competitive, free market environment addresses any of the issues of rape, violence or abuse which continue to face women (Thompson, 1993).

A competitive environment presumably creates a process in which new ideas, products and organisations emerge. Organisations and bureaucracies, driven by the profit motive "search out ways of making a return, either by satisfying a demand or by cutting costs in some existing organisation" (Green, 1987: 197). Simultaneously, a spontaneously occurring "price mechanism coordinates the activities of the many market participants" (ibid.). Government intervention in the form of grants, subsidies or loans are presumed to distort this 'natural' process.

This has had serious implications for women. The assumption that rational yet 'good' means would guide the competitive process toward a profitable end, have proven to be flawed. Instead, the withdrawal of the state to ensure a free market combined with the drive for a competitive edge have allowed employers, for example, to challenge collective arbitration and to modify the working day in ways which are particularly unsuited to women who have family and community obligations. With no, or minimal, collective protection through unions, longer working hours, fragmented shifts, loss of parental leave can more readily be imposed.

As a careful reader of the discussion above might discern, the economic base of the New Right is no more even, nor homogeneous, than its moral base. The state's reluctance to engage in market control is in tension with its desire to ensure economic policies and practices which are congruent with the Christian values it espouses. Its anti-authoritarian stance is in conflict with its desire to control acts of discrimination and to develop employment equity policies. Linear, rational solutions are confused by the fragmented demands of various interest groups from within and outside the New Right. Economic and moral ideals which were assumed to be universal are proving to be diverse and elusive. In sum, the New Right does not seem to be working according to plan. This has important implications for adult educators, for it reveals cracks and spaces within which we can play a meaningful role.

## Role of adult education

In the discussion above, I have attempted to capture the general patriarchal nature of the New Right and some of its implications for women. It is possible of course to dismiss the premises on which this article is based and look optimistically to examples of opposition or of difference and draw comfort from them. That view, however, is "myopic" (Levitas, 1986a: 17) for "the argument here that there is no dominant ideology because it can be demonstrated that different people believe different things, and moreover the same people believe different things in different contexts ... misses the point". After all, "hegemony does not require that all of the people are convinced all of the time, only enough of the people enough of the time" (ibid).

It is also possible to assume that in the face of this hegemonic force adult educators cannot be active agents. This pessimistic and fatalistic evaluation is equally naive however, for it negates the real nature of change. Change is, after all, not self-determined. It requires active agents to shape its direction. Furthermore, the New Right is not a static hegemonic force. Indeed, it is in the process of metamorphosing into a neo-New Right. The internal tensions and contradictions highlighted above are augmented by increasing public resistance, as the privatisation of public services makes its impact felt among the middle classes and we experience reduced services in health, education, communication, protection and transportation; as corruptions within privatised services are revealed daily; as marginal groups use philosophies based on individualism and market freedom to create radical and extreme oppositional groups. The New Right is a phenomenon in flux, in transition.

The question thus becomes, "What are appropriate counter-hegemonic responses to the New Right which can be made by adult educators, that is, by those educators of adults who strive to achieve social justice?" It seems that there are fundamentally three potential responses to this question: outright resistance, creation of alternatives, appropriation. These responses can be enacted through adult educators' involvement with the content, processes and goals of learning activities.

Before examining them, it is important to note the gender neutral nature of the three responses below. Although this may be a 'woman's problem,' it is not a problem for women. In the first instance, both male and female adult educators must claim the problem of a patriarchal social, cultural, economic and political environment. Effective responses require the participation of both genders; those who traditionally have held the power and those who seek to acquire their fair share of it. In the second instance, adult educators must recognise that both men and women may sabotage (and support) feminist agendas. There is no tidy gender division which identifies the enemy conclusively as male-only.

The first counter-hegemonic response in which adult educators can engage and foster is outright resistance. We can participate in politics and political education in order to place 'women's issues' on political, social, cultural and economic agendas. Following the Freirian model (see for example Freire, 1970), we can provide information, problem-pose and foster a critical reflection which leads to social and political action. We can expose injustices and open an intelligent and critical public debate on them. We can foster plans for mass action against the politics, policies and philosophies of the New Right. Simultaneously, we can mobilise support for women's rights.

Such actions are vitally important in two ways. First, they demarcate the power relations which sustain the oppression of women. They expose those who support it, as well as those who remain silent. Second, organised mass action energises opposition. It can revitalise and refocus the movement for change (Gardiner, 1983). Mass action requires, however, a shift in perspective for some adult educators. It requires that we first acknowledge the ongoing power of dominant groups and structural elements. We must rethink our preoccupation with those 'needs' of particular groups which emphasise their deficiencies (Yates, 1993). Rather, we must consciously and overtly connect individualistic notions like motivation, participation, learning and self-direction to broader political

agendas of oppression, power, authority and control as they relate to women. In other words, we must work at a structural level to ensure social justice for women of all classes, colours, ethnicities, abilities and sexual orientations.

In the second instance, adult educators can create alternatives to the New Right. While the end goal of social justice for all women remains the same, this response may have more appeal to many adult educators. The goal of major structural changes is replaced by an examination of relationships. These include knowledge/power as well as gendered relationships. It requires us to "begin a work of excavation in relation to the discourses that construct adult education and place individuals as subjects/objects of knowledge" (Westwood, 1990: 45). It considers men's and women's; women's and women's relationships in the contexts of both the private and public Spheres. This approach recognises differences and operates from a base of co-operation and a sense of creating community. It explores the negotiated meanings which have created the current situation and attempts to renegotiate new unoppressive meanings. It places context in the fore so that we "develop specific practices appropriate to regions as we usually do" (Westwood, 1990: 44).

The third and final response which adult educators can make to the patriarchal New Right is appropriation (Stalker, 1996). This model allows adult educators to accommodate and facilitate positive elements of the New Right, yet to resist negative ones. Unlike the other models, adult educators using it do not assume that the New Right has nothing to offer and is inherently 'bad'. Similarly, we do not locate ourselves outside the New Right environment and presume that resistance is against an external, distanced force.

Rather, we acknowledge women's lived, daily, reality within the patriarchy and the dangers inherent in that position. We build on women's ability to accommodate oppressive individual, organisational and societal systems, but highlight their potential to create change from within - from within, because to some extent for women, there is no position outside patriarchy. Adult educators using this model speak of takeover rather than transformation, capture rather than co-optation. We look for those policies, practices and philosophies which are congruent with our desire for social justice and extend them. We foster women's resistance to patriarchy at many levels and their understanding of the patriarchal system to further their seizure of it. Finally and very importantly, we retain an *urgent* drive toward a society in which resources, power, control and authority are fairly allocated among women and men.

In conclusion, it is clear that the New Right is a patriarchal phenomenon which has a complex moral and economic base. It is full of contradictions, differences and tensions. Its current transitional nature offers us a unique opportunity to realise adult education's potential as vehicle for social justice. What must not be lost to view is the urgency of eliminating the outrageous and indefensible inequalities which exist between men and women in the New Right context.

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