

Antonio Gramsci and Feminism: The elusive nature of power

MARGARET LEDWITH

School of Applied Social Sciences, Cumbria University

Abstract

From a feminist perspective, I am interested in ‘women’s ways of knowing’ (Belenky et al., 1997) and the relationship between knowledge, difference and power (Goldberger et al., 1996). Here I trace the relevance of Gramsci to my own feminist consciousness, and the part he played in my journey to praxis. I also address feminism’s intellectual debts, most particularly in relation to the concept of hegemony. The intellectual context has shifted in emphasis from macro- to micro-narratives which reject Marxism as masculinist and dichotomous. The dilemma has been an overemphasis on the personal-cultural at the expense of the collective-political, distracting us from action for social justice at the same time as globalisation is creating escalating world crises of justice and sustainability. In conclusion, I advocate a re-reading of Gramsci in the light of key feminist critiques of class and patriarchy in order to develop i) analyses based on multiple sites of oppression and ii) action which reaches from local to global through alliances to achieve a more integrated feminist praxis. Throughout, I use ‘dis’ability and ‘race’ to denote the socially constructed nature of these concepts.

Keywords: difference, patriarchy, social justice, global action, alliance

My Journey to Praxis

Seamus Milne, in the 1980s, described Gramsci as ‘the greatest intellectual influence on the British Left’ in a decade (Milne, undated). During that period of rediscovery of Gramsci, I was on my own parallel journey to praxis. Here, I want to trace that journey in its political context before exploring my central, burning question:

What relevance have the ideas of Gramsci, forged by Sardism, poverty, ‘dis’ability and the masculinity of his culture in the early 20th century, to my critical pedagogy as a White British woman today?

True to a philosophy of praxis, as well as to feminist pedagogy, I begin my inquiry in experience. It is short but apt, and traces the role of Gramsci in the development of my own political consciousness. My drive for consciousness came from dissonance in my practice; an inner discomfort that the reality I witnessed around me was not founded on justice and democracy. At that time, I was a classroom teacher who felt a certain discomfort at the young lives acted out before my eyes. I could see that

the life chances of the children I taught were determined by their early experience far more than the innate 'cleverness' by which they were judged for academic success by the state. I could also see that the competitive nature of education reinforced a sense of failure in those whose self-esteem already faltered in the face of the harshness of their lives.

Take, for instance, the life of Jennifer O'Leary. Jennifer was a shy, slightly built 10-year-old when I met her. Her father had left the family, and she had lived in the local children's home together with her two brothers since her mother's new partner had made it clear that he did not want the children. In the same schoolroom, Paula Jones assumed superiority. She, by comparison, was the daughter of the house parents in the children's home in which Jennifer was cast into the role of 'orphan', and in that sense had status above Jennifer. Paula needed that status to survive her own oppressions. She was a girl child of mixed heritage in a racist society. Jennifer's brothers, Dermot and Devlin, were in classes older and younger than Jennifer. Every Friday, Dermot would stand on the outer step of the classroom anxiously looking for his mother who had told him that one weekend she would come and get them back. When his classmates taunted him, he screamed abuse, 'You *****, I know she'll come today!'

As a young teacher, in these ways, I witnessed hegemonic forces reaching into my classroom to construct personal lives. Yet, my teacher education had told me that this was an apolitical space, decontextualised from the real world. Jack, a colleague, rubbed his hands together in the staff room at the beginning of each new academic year proclaiming, 'Well that's got that lot sorted out: these will make it, and those don't stand a chance'. Life chances dichotomously reinforced by an agent of the state, acted out unconsciously; Jack played his part well. His words resonated inside me, and my discomfort grew. Teacher education had not provided me with any answers, so I got involved in the beginning of the national adult literacy campaign seeking to address the damage done by schooling (Ledwith, 2005).

Later, I found myself in Scotland working with Vietnamese refugees traumatised by the rejection of the Western world as they floated adrift on the South China Sea. They changed my worldview with their stories of giving birth on rusty landing craft, of being separated from their children, of hope and hopelessness. In my heart, I was desolate in the knowledge that they would be at the bottom of an unjust system, their hopes dashed. As they taught me more about life than I could ever teach them, my search led me to Edinburgh University and a master's degree in community development. It was David Alexander, the adult educator, whose passion in relation to Gramsci and Freire had a profound impact on me. My engagement with both these thinkers touched me on an intellectual and emotional level. What Peter Mayo calls the 'fusion of reason and emotion' (Mayo, 2004, p. 10) contained in Freire touches people in a holistic way that reaches beyond the limitations of the intellect. At this point, I moved closer to a synthesis of action and reflection, of theory and practice, that gave me a glimpse of the potential of praxis to identify the forces of power and disempowerment. The hegemonic function of schooling, which had for so long eluded me, sat in stark relief. My naïveté shocked me; these ideas were so obvious I could not believe that false consciousness had stripped my mind of critical insight.

Of course, it is not quite as simple as that. Gramsci emphasised the centrality of popular education in raising consciousness. He recognised that critical consciousness would not erupt spontaneously; false consciousness initially needs an external element to demystify the prevailing hegemony. David Alexander had played that role for me. This not only changed the nature of my understanding of the insidious nature of power, but it changed the nature of my engagement with the world. It was a powerful epistemological-ontological shift. From this point, my involvement in community development and in second-wave feminism expressed a greater unity of praxis (Ledwith, 2005).

The Concept of a Male Hegemony in Relation to Patriarchy

Here I want to acknowledge feminism's intellectual debt to Gramsci. He made an immense contribution to feminism without 'getting it'; such is the elusive nature of power and domination. His insightful analysis of *hegemony*, and the subtle nature of *consent*, offered feminists a conceptual lead on the *personal as political*.

After the Second World War, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, with its thrust on woman as Other, heralded what many feminists see as the real arrival of second-wave feminism in the 1960s, the decade of civil rights and student activism. 1968 saw a watershed in feminist consciousness and activism, which resonated, in my experience, into the early 1990s. In the UK, 'interest in Gramsci emphasized the need for ideological struggle to challenge ruling class hegemony' (Coole, 1993, p. 179) at the same time as Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, with its Gramscian influence, brought inspiration to critical consciousness. Freire, on his return to Brazil from exile in 1979, 'began "relearning Brazil" by reading Gramsci and also "listening to the popular Gramsci in the favelas" ' [Brazilian shantytowns] (Torres, 1993, p. 135 in Ledwith, 2005). The two offered a powerful combination which Paula Allman saw at its most complementary in 'Freire's consideration of the political nature of education and in Gramsci's consideration of the educational nature of politics' (Allman, 1988, p. 92). But as the 1980s progressed, a powerful tide of neo-liberalism, together with feminism's and postmodernism's critiques of metanarratives with their masculinist bias, led Gramsci to fall out of favour. This marked an important shift in which debates around class and patriarchy eventually swayed in favour of feminism's emphasis on cultural identity and difference. Contradictorily, in relation to my debate on Gramsci and feminism, this neglected to integrate the economic nature of gender politics. In the UK, feminism's lack of political vigilance provided a smokescreen for Thatcherism's ideology of individualism, resulting in children and lone mothers imperceptibly replacing older people as most at risk of poverty (Oppenheim & Harker, 1996). Child poverty escalated from 14 per cent in 1979 to 34 per cent by 1996/7 (Flaherty *et al.*, 2004, p. 145), leaving the UK with one of the highest rates of child poverty compared with other countries facing similar economic trends—a situation which persists despite a raft of policies founded on the Blair/Brown government's political commitment to ending child poverty by 2020.

Clearly, there was a need for a more complex analysis which embraced difference but which did not reduce this to a single source of oppression, one which operated

from multiple intersecting bases. During the 1970s, Juliet Mitchell began this process by identifying key structures for women's oppression: production, reproduction, sexuality and the socialisation of children.

By arguing that each structure within the family has a certain autonomy in its capacity to subject women and that these structures themselves rebound on the economy, Mitchell was able to show that women's entry into the workforce would be insufficient to emancipate them since gains (such as working or controlling fertility) are compensated by losses elsewhere (such as renewed emphasis on mothers' socializing role)'. (Coole 1993, p. 180)

By the 1980s, Arnot was arguing that male hegemony consists of a multiplicity of moments which have persuaded women to accept a male dominated culture and their subordination within it (Kenway, 2001). The result is a constructed reality which is qualitatively different from that of men, in which women are diminished and exploited within a *common sense* patriarchal view of the world. Gramsci turned the key to the personal as political with his reinterpretation of the traditional Marxist concept of *hegemony*, opening our consciousness to the public/private divide and the way that domination permeates the most intimate aspects of our being through our interactions in civil society, for example, the family, community, schools and formal religions which remain key sites of male domination. This is the basis for Gramsci's acknowledged contribution to feminist thought which has provided a tool of analysis for understanding the sites of gendered oppression in society. By exploring the nature of consent, we come to see that hegemony is always in process, in continuous struggle, and we begin to see that feminist consciousness is the beginning of questioning the nature of that consent in relation to patriarchy.

These were the ideas that we were working with in community development practice in that period.

Hattersley Women for Change

The 1980s saw my own activism and professional practice informed by both feminism and Freirean-Gramscian thought in relation to popular education. It was a time of grassroots activism in which women came together in leaderless groups to explore consciousness from lived experience. We translated this into collective action for change based on a vision of social justice for all. For instance, in August 1981, a group of women who had never before been involved in political action, marched from Cardiff to Greenham to protest against the siting of cruise missiles in Britain. This was the start of the Greenham Women's Peace Movement, which 'highlighted the development of a new strand of community action' (Dominelli, 1990, p. 119). A praxis began to evolve with emphasis on lived experience as the basis of theoretical understanding.

In praxis, as a community worker, I worked in partnership with Wendy, a Hattersley woman and community activist. We had many discussions about Freire and Gramsci, and likened our roles in Hattersley to that of the *organic* and *traditional intellectual*. She lived the harsh reality of poverty pre-ordained by her working-class roots. Poverty

had touched my life in many ways, and as women we shared many life themes, but I had been protected in the long term by my class privilege. Through experiences held in common, differentiated by class, we found a bond and shared a commitment to develop popular education for women in Hattersley. This was the mid-1980s, when the political context in the UK was being dramatically reshaped by New Right ideology under Thatcherism, at the same time as new social movements, and second-wave feminism in particular, articulated a politics of difference. It was a time of activism and alliance, when the Women of Greenham Common and Women Against Pit Closures were supported by a network of local Greenham Support Groups and Miners' Support Groups. It was a time when, on a mission of solidarity, I travelled in Nicaragua, experiencing participatory democracy in action and linking community groups across our different continents. I still feel the fear as I remember being caught up in a Contra raid, where women had been abducted and men were left injured; I still feel the tears of the mothers whose sons and daughters were missing, abducted from their activism in the outstanding literacy and health campaigns inspired by Freire; I still remember the shock of the sonic boom set off by American aircraft every evening over Managua in an attempt to assert the might of capitalism over this little country's bid for true participatory democracy. It was a time of hope and inspiration when Nicaragua and Nelson Mandela were symbolic of peace and justice in the dawning of a wider political consciousness.

In communities like Hattersley, marked by a *culture of silence*, there was no tradition of meeting in groups. We waded through the apathy and disillusionment of local women. In this predominantly White, working-class community, we were faced with overt sexism, covert racism and vehement homophobia. Culturally, there was immense pressure to conform to working-class norms, which resulted in a denial of difference, at the same time as working-class solidarity was being eroded by individualism. People were pre-occupied with day-to-day survival of the harshness of their lives as poverty increased under high unemployment and the reactionary welfare policies implemented by the Thatcher government.

Wendy began the process by personally approaching women on the streets to set up a writing group as a route to critical consciousness. Local women slowly became more involved in community groups; problematising their everyday reality through a diversity of projects from Hattersley Women Writing to Woodwork for Women, they began to question from a more critical perspective. This was a triumph, but, as Freire (1972) would say, could not claim true critical consciousness unless it emerged as collective action. Moving from successful projects to a coherent movement for change was more problematic. Hattersley Forum, a democratic platform for debate in the community, provided an umbrella organisation for determining action for change. It occurred to me that Gramsci's notion of the *factory council* could be replaced by the community forum as a site of intervention where women could be central to the process of change. Key women activists had positioned themselves on the forum executive, but the forum meeting itself remained a male-dominated context where women in general felt intimidated by male power. We needed a space where women could start from the stories of their lived experience and examine the social, historical and cultural shaping of these narratives.

Gradually, we hit upon the idea of identifying a group of women who were already involved in community projects and inviting them to form a core group at the heart of Hattersley Women for Change. At the initial meeting, ten of us sat round tentatively sharing ideas. Of these, eight decided to meet weekly to explore the issues which were affecting women's lives through a local history project. From this, we would plan a popular education programme for local women. Ages ranged from twenty-three to sixty-eight, and amongst us there were varying differences of ability and ethnicity. At the same time as we were seeking answers to our questions, we were also seeking a strategy for developing critical consciousness on a level which had the potential for releasing the energy for collective change. We negotiated with Hattersley Forum to create Hattersley Women's Room in the community centre. This was a space where women could meet in a women-only environment in *culture circles*. We went out on the streets talking to women wherever they gathered in their community and eventually launched our programme in fine style with food and wine, inviting all women to come and celebrate, which they did! The response was encouraging. By the following week, I faced the realisation that it was not going to be that easy. No new faces had appeared inside the room, despite the fact that many peered in curiously from outside in the community centre snack bar.

As my hopes evaporated, Wendy, in her infinite wisdom, reminded me of the length of the process, of the fact that this sort of coming together was culturally outside their experience, of the need to reflect and perhaps reorganise. She was right of course! Things did not change until there was a critical incident. One morning I had a complaint that the children, left unsupervised, were using the enormous hall, the focal point of the community centre, as a race track, careering into the elderly, sight-impaired residents who were meeting that day. The tedium of yet another conflict situation in a community which raged *horizontal violence* at every tip and turn, exasperated me. As manager of the community centre, I had the responsibility to oversee these incidents, and I strode across determined to restore peace. The group of young mothers who spent most of their days in the centre's snack bar escaping from the harsh reality of their lives were either oblivious to or did not care about the havoc their children wreaked around them. Carole, angered by my perceived power and authority, screamed at her son as I approached, 'Freeze, Anthony, here she comes!'. Furious, and failing in the heat of the moment to locate my actions as political rather than personal, I rose to my full power and delivered a pronouncement about parental responsibility. A hush descended over every corner of this enormous space, and in that silence I pivoted in as dignified a way as I could muster, and left.

That afternoon, Carole appeared in my office for the first time. We talked on a personal level for the first time, sharing our feelings, our hopes, our despair, listening from the heart and soul. She told me that the incident that morning was the first time she had seen my calm exterior ruffled, that it broke the ice and made me human in a way that she understood. We parted friends. So, when I was approached by the local health visitor about concerns that women would not use the local clinic for ante-natal care, the first thought I had was to involve Carole. In dialogue, across barriers, we developed a health project in the community centre where Carole worked in partnership with the midwife. This encounter gave the Women's Room the seal

of approval from local women. In relation to Hattersley Women for Change and wider collective action, it took a year to get the breakthrough we wanted. By then, many new women were getting involved in the administration and decision-making. This was just the beginning of women coming together to explore their consciousness through a wide range of activities and projects; a moving out from a core of women activists to extend confidence and understanding on a broader scale in the community. The aim was that, in time, these women would be taking action collectively and linking with others in communities everywhere through the credit union movement, the 'grey power' movement and women's networks. We witnessed the way in which men asserted power over this process using invasion of our women-only space, humiliation and ridicule. We also witnessed the hegemonic ways in which women's lives were put at risk by the public/private divide allowing domestic violence to be beyond the remit of police protection, exacerbated by class prejudice. Hattersley was a place where women 'got what they deserved' in the words of the police. Insight into *ideological persuasion*, and the way in which the dominant ideology reaches through the institutions of civil society into the minds of local people helped me to make sense of what often felt futile.

Patti Lather in her work, at this time in the mid-1980s, drew on Gramsci's notion of a *war of position* and the role of the *intellectuals* in relation to feminist political action. Lather takes Gramsci's emphasis on everyone's innate capacity to be philosophers and considers this in relation to the way that women have documented experience-based knowledge and acted to become prominent in all social institutions, claiming that this constitutes a *war of position*: 'many small revolutions ... many small changes in relationships, behaviors, attitudes and experiences' (Kenway, 2001, p. 59). She places particular emphasis on the role of women as intellectuals in the tide of developing critical consciousness. In Hattersley, we recognised that we were part of women's knowledge in the making, of *women's ways of knowing* (Belenky *et al.*, 1997).

The Changing Theoretical and Political Context

In this section, I move into the changing intellectual and political context which accelerated from the 1980s into the new millenium.

This interdependent world system is based on the exploitation of oppressed groups, but the system at the same time calls forth oppositional cultural forms that give voice to the conditions of these groups. White male bourgeois dominance is being challenged by Black people, women and other oppressed groups, who assert the validity of their own knowledge and demand social justice and equality in numerous political and cultural struggles ... A major theoretical challenge to traditional Western knowledge systems is emerging from feminist theory, like other contemporary approaches, validates difference, challenges universal claims to truth, and seeks to create social transformation in a world of shifting and uncertain meanings. (Weiler in Holland & Blair, 1995, p. 23)

Paradoxically, the post-structuralist critiques of class metanarratives which laid the foundations for postmodernism from the mid-1980s, dislocated Gramsci in favour of 'mini-narratives rather than metanarratives, multiple identities rather than political identities, positioning rather than repositioning, discourse rather than the politics of discourse, performance rather than poverty, inscription rather than political mobilization, and deconstruction rather than reconstruction' (Kenway, 2001, p. 60). The paradox here is that Gramsci helped to provide the conceptual tools by which this became possible. Here I am mindful of bell hooks' acknowledgment of Freire. She found that Freire offered a structure within which she could define her experience of racism on a global level, when the radical struggle of Black women was not welcomed in the early, White, bourgeois feminist frame (hooks, 1993, p. 151). hooks refers to Freire's 'blind spot' to questions of gender, but acknowledges the ways in which his pedagogy gave her the conceptual tools that offered her insight into the nature of her own oppression as a Black American woman, helping her to see herself as a subject in resistance, thus locating a contradiction between White women and a third-world man (hooks, 1993, p. 150).

In much the same way as metanarratives were derided by White feminists as obscuring male domination, early, White, second-wave feminists were in turn challenged by Black women on grounds of difference. In other words, White feminists stood accused of defining 'woman' from a White perspective, exposing a White power which has the arrogance to overlook other aspects of difference. This is a consequence of what bell hooks (1984) attributes to the either/or dichotomous thinking so central to Western ideological thought, where a concept is only definable in relation to its perceived Other. Early second-wave feminists had defined 'woman' in relation to 'man' overlooking the ways in which 'race', class and gender intersect. These images are 'key in maintaining interlocking systems of race, class and gender oppression' (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 68).

The tide of neoliberalism that engulfed us in the 1980s provided a hothouse for germinating globalisation. Neoliberal globalisation is the 'market-organized and imposed expansion of production that emphasizes comparative advantage, free trade, export orientations, the social and spatial divisions of labour, and the absolute mobility of corporations' (Fisher & Ponniah, 2003, p. 28). This form of corporate capitalism, where the most powerful systems of the West dominate the world economically, invades other cultures with a Western worldview which works on political, cultural, racial, gendered, sexual, ecological and epistemological differences. In other words, in the name of a free market economy not only is labour exploited in the interests of capital (class), but the same structures of oppression which subordinate groups of people according to 'race', gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity, 'dis'ability are being reproduced on a global level.

Neoliberal globalization is not simply economic domination of the world but also the imposition of a monolithic thought (*pensamento unico*) that consolidates vertical forms of difference and prohibits the public from imagining diversity in egalitarian, horizontal terms. Capitalism, imperialism, monoculturalism, patriarchy, white supremacism and the domination of biodiversity have coalesced under the current form of globalization
(Fisher and Ponniah 2003, p. 10)

Wealth is increasingly transferred from poor to rich countries by exploiting the labour and resources of developing countries in order to feed the consumerist greed of the West. The consequences are increased social divisions both within and between countries. This has resulted in complex, convoluted, interlinking and overlapping oppressions which are poorly understood and therefore infrequently challenged. Yet, it is a fragile system, open to abuse as witnessed by the current crisis of capitalism triggered by banking practices, resulting in recession, and maybe full depression.

Clearly critical consciousness which solely looks to class is founded on Western cultural assumptions that subordinate indigenous belief systems. This reflects the cultural dominance that gave moral legitimacy to capitalism and continues to give economic superiority in the process of globalisation. Conversely, ecological thought acknowledges the way that cultures are founded on natural systems, and emphasises that diverse indigenous cultures have evolved in harmony with their natural environments. Cultural diversity thus becomes essential for biological diversity and histories based on local economic development offer alternatives for a future which reflects values other than consumer lifestyles: a harmonious co-existence between social justice and environmental justice.

Eco-feminism's embrace of the environment and sustainability arises from a critical connection between 'death of nature' and the rise of patriarchy, and can be explored through the work of such people as Charlene Spretnak, Carolyn Merchant and Vandana Shiva. The central argument from eco-feminism is that 'a historical, symbolic and political relationship exists between the denigration of nature and the female in Western cultures' (Spretnak, 1997, p. 181). Eco-feminism is rooted in principles of 'harmony, co-operation and interconnection' which challenge the perceived male principles of competition, 'discrimination, extremism and conflict' (Young, 1990, p. 33). This reaches beyond simple ideas of reformism to profoundly challenge capital's competitive worldview; exposing it as a system which elevates men over women and the natural world in ranked order importance, and, as such, is fundamentally corrupt. Eco-feminism calls for an alternative worldview based on harmony and cooperation, non-violence and dignity, a view which embraces both public and private, local and global, humanity and the natural world in equal measure. It reflects women's concerns for preserving harmonious life on earth over time and space. Crescy Cannan stresses that not only is the environmental crisis a crisis for us all, but it disproportionately affects both the poor and the South and so 'intensifies forms of inequality and threatens collective goods—thus it is a human crisis as well as a threat to the entire planet' (2000, p. 365).

In this respect, Fisher and Ponniah (2003) suggest that any counter-hegemony must tread that fine line of embracing a respect for difference at the same time as being able to create a common vision: 'If the global movements are to prosper, they have to produce a vision that allows them to maintain simultaneously both their convergence and their difference' (2003, p. 13).

Gramsci's Continuing Relevance to Feminism

The debate that centres on a view that 'Marxism and feminism are one, and that one is Marxism' has been problematic for feminism (Hartmann, 1981, p. 2). The

relationship between capitalism and patriarchy as separate but interrelated systems in which dominant groups have a material interest began in the 1980s and still rages (Ferguson & Folbre, 1981, p. 314). The view that feminism is less important than class or even divisive of class is still argued by Marxists and has risen as a backlash against postmodernism arguing the primacy of class (Allman, 1999, 2001; Hill *et al.*, 1999). Paula Allman (1999), for example, draws attention to the complex ways that global capitalism simultaneously cleaves divisions of poverty and wealth within and between countries and uses individualism as a smokescreen for its necessary illusion of progress, giving legitimacy to this juxtaposition of extremes of wealth and poverty.

In these times when private patriarchy has transcended the divide to public patriarchy giving a distorted vision of equality, Ferguson and Folbre argue: 'as historical factors change the rewards from and opportunities to control these goods and services, men's motives and abilities to control women vary, and the character and degree of patriarchal domination is modified' (1981, pp. 316–326). The contradiction between women's paid and unpaid work remains: 'the way the domestic sphere, the world of work and the state are interrelated dictate a battle on all fronts, a war of position in Gramsci's terms' (Showstack Sassoon, 1987a, p. 174).

Returning to Arnot, 'male hegemony, [she] argues, should be perceived "as a whole series of separate moments through which women have come to accept a male dominated culture, its legality, and their subordination to it and in it ... [which] together ... comprise a pattern of female experience which is qualitatively different from that of men"' (Arnot, 1984, p. 64 in Kenway, 2001, p. 57).

Sylvia Walby (1992, 1994), in this same vein, argues the dangers of rejecting the centrality of patriarchy. In line with my focus on Gramsci, she sees the limitations of poststructuralism and postmodernism as 'a neglect of the social context of power relations' (1992, p. 16). Her position is that postmodernism has gone too far in fragmenting concepts of gender, 'race' and class, thereby overlooking structures which cleave these divisions. Marxism may have subsumed all forms of discrimination under class, but postmodernists stand accused of fragmenting overarching concepts. Walby emphasises three important issues raised by Black women: racist structures within the labour market; ethnic experience and racism; and locating the intersection of ethnicity and gender as an alternative site of analysis, both culturally and historically.

Walby (1994) offers six causal bases from which to analyse patriarchy: paid work, housework, sexuality, culture, violence and the state. By addressing the interrelationships between these structures, we avoid the trap of reductionism or essentialism. She warns that if we focus on disintegration, we are in danger of missing other patterns of re-organisation which offer insights into new forms of gender, ethnicity and class from a global dimension. For instance, the feminisation of labour in the UK is not only the result of industrial restructuring here, but the British economy depends on the exploitation of Third World women, thus 'there is a strong case for the interconnectedness of the exploitation of First and Third World women by patriarchal capitalism' (1994, p. 232). She cites Swasti Mitter's (1986) case for a 'common bond for women in the newly globalised economy' (Walby, 1994, p. 234) within a recognition of difference.

Peter Mayo points out that 'one has to go beyond Gramsci to avoid Eurocentrism and beyond both Gramsci and Freire to avoid patriarchal bias' (Mayo, 1999, p. 146).

In this respect, Weiler refers to Gloria Anzaldúa's conception of the *new mestiza* as a postcolonial feminist, warning that feminism can be an invasion of the self, unless patriarchy is critiqued from Western conceptions of *linear rationality*, *white privilege*, and *assumptions of universal truths*. Antiracist feminist educators have 'stressed that critical and feminist pedagogies, whilst claiming an opposition to oppression, are in danger of taking a kind of imperial and totalizing stance of knowing and "speaking for" those who are to be educated into truth' (Weiler, 2001, p. 72). Weiler rightly raises caution around concepts of *social identity* and *authority* in speaking for silenced others, and this is clearly an issue for global feminism.

In these times of globalisation, in order to avoid falling into a trap of what could be termed 'postcolonial feminism', we need more than ever to develop analyses of the interlocking oppressions of difference, context and level. Based on Walby's (1992, 1994) argument, I put the case for a three-dimensional model through which we can explore the intersections of oppressions, thereby identifying potential sites of liberation. These three dimensions are: i) **difference**: age, 'race', class, gender, sexual identity, 'dis'ability, ethnicity; ii) **contexts**: economic, cultural, intellectual, physical, environmental, historical, emotional, spiritual on another, and iii) **levels**: local, national, regional and global which form a complex set of interrelationships which not only interweave between axes, but which also intertwine on any one axis. (Ledwith, 2001, 2005). The basis of my argument relates to Gramsci's emphasis on critical education, history and culture, knowing who we are and what has shaped our reality on a multiplicity of dimensions in order to act together for change.

A transformative reach, from personal empowerment to collective global action, is vital to any critical analysis. 'The starting point of critical elaboration is knowing what one really is ... as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 324). In this respect, Mo Griffiths' talks about the 'little stories' that link voice to narrative making that vital connection between the deeply personal and the profoundly political ... 'by taking the particular perspective of an individual seriously; that is, the individual as situated in particular circumstances in all their complexity [and linking this] to grander concerns like education, social justice and power' (Griffiths, 2003, p. 81). Griffiths supports the idea that 'little stories' restore self-respect through dignity, mutuality and conviviality—but stresses that this is not transformative until it becomes a collective process.

Similarly, Darder talks about the way she provides learning contexts in which she resists giving answers, but encourages people 'to reach into themselves and back to their histories' (2002, p. 233). Using reflective writing to explore the inner depths of memory and history, she works with her students to analyse these from theoretical perspectives. This offers a past-present-future dynamic, 'moving between present and past with a view to contributing towards a transformed future' (Peter Mayo, 1999, p. 147). At the same time, it offers personal/political and local/global dynamics, such as the complexity of the power that we are struggling to identify and transform.

It is imperative that this inner-outer movement links people in alliance. My own research with Paula Asgill indicated that autonomy is a precursor of sustainable alliances across difference, in this case between Black and White women (Ledwith

& Asgill, 2000, 2007). Without this understanding of who we are and what has shaped our reality, there is no basis for sustained action across difference. This, in turn, links to Doyal and Gough's (1991) notion of personal autonomy as a human need, and as a precursor of critical autonomy and collective action. This thinking connects with Gramsci's *war of position*, moving from personal to critical levels of consciousness and linking a diversity of social groups and organisations in alliance as a collective force for change.

To Return to My Original Question: What Relevance Have Gramsci's Ideas to Feminist Pedagogy Today?

Gramsci's impact on my own political consciousness, most particularly through the concept of hegemony, was profound in its analysis of the insidious nature of power and the role of consent. Retrospectively, I was able to understand schooling as hegemonic, and to see my own role as a young teacher as complicit in this process. Teacher education is conservative, and works well, albeit 'unconsciously', in training agents of the state to maintain the *status quo*. There are many 'Jacks' that it sends out into the formative lives of children. When I eventually discovered Gramsci, he gave me the conceptual tools to make sense of my own life and the experiences which had shaped me and those around me. He triggered my feminist consciousness.

Gramsci provided feminism with the tools with which to make sense of the personal as political through the concept of *hegemony* and female-specific forms of coercion and consent. Ironically, feminism turned on him as metanarrative and dichotomous in thought, provoking major debates between the relationship of patriarchy and capital. But, the insights that postmodern feminism contributed to an understanding of difference holds a tension for transformative action in times when we need to go beyond the self and engage in political action.

We face 'twin global crises of justice and sustainability' (Reason, 2002, p. 3), a context within which action is imperative. A rereading of Gramsci in relation to an analysis of power and difference could contribute to the theoretical foundation for a new-world view. The top-downness of our current system is, I believe, essentially corrupt and incapable of reform. We need to refocus our attention on a horizontal axis, one in which superiority and inferiority are replaced by difference and diversity, and in which humanity and the natural world can co-exist symbiotically.

The enriched insights into difference offered by postmodernism, reconsidered in the context of globalisation, offer immense potential for strategic change with critical education at its heart. This needs to be seen on an inner/outer continuum, which extends from personal to political in analysis, and from local to global in action.

Capital's transition from an industrial to a post-industrial global economy calls for a strongly defined self within a cultural-historical-political analysis which attends to difference and power. I see this as a form of critical autoethnography which locates the person within the power structures which shape experience, and which provokes consciousness of self as the basis of critical consciousness. It is a process which engages with personal autonomy as a precursor of critical, collective autonomy, thus bridging the individual and collective (Doyal & Gough, 1991). Doniger (1998)

describes it as looking through the microscope at the thousands of details that bring our stories to life, and through the telescope to see the unifying themes. This was the nature of the identity politics which engaged me with Hattersley women as the basis of wider action for change.

It requires a fundamental shift of analysis to address the complex interconnectedness of a loci of oppressions (Ledwith, 2001, 2005). In these ways, a multiplicity of hegemonies is understood within the complex interrelatedness of oppressions. This not only offers insight into sites of intervention, but offer strategies for uniting ‘social agents of unequal power’ (Kenway, 2001, p. 58); a *war of position* in which the concept of alliance across difference get us beyond a simplistic structural analysis. In this way, the capital/labour contradiction which Gramsci extended to a ‘national-popular’, oppressor/oppressed dichotomy is extended to a local/global analysis, but within an analysis of difference which addresses the reach of global power into a diversity of personal lives.

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