

Activism and activating regressive/progressive research methodology in education

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

The proposed paper is an overview and initial findings of a professional doctorate in Education (Ed. D).

The paper considers current challenges facing trade-union-focussed education activism in UK Higher Education, taking a Marxist feminist position to consider activism as a form of invisible reproductive labour: both social reproduction and an arena for challenge to existing power relations.

The research uses Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis, operationalising the regressive-progressive method to access possibilities of social transformation through a three-step process. Firstly, describing the present using experience and theory; secondly, interrogating repetitions and disruptions of the past underlying the present, and thirdly, returning to consider the problems initially identified in relation to the underlying past. Using this method, two key points of historic interest are considered: the 1910 Chainmakers strike and the 1920-1961 breakaway of the National Union of Women Teachers (NUWT) from the National Union of Teachers (NUT) on the issue of equal pay.

Full paper

Introduction:

My research aims to analyse the challenges posed for education activism in contemporary UK higher education using two mechanisms. I am a doctoral candidate, currently at the data analysis stage of a professional doctorate in Education (Ed. D).

First, I consider education activism to be a form of reproductive labour. Education is both the central site of reproduction of society and therefore power relations, and also a key site for the development of critique and the dismantling of society and power relations through this. Activism within education is channelled through trade unions, which act to both amplify and manage dissent.

As such, education activism can be understood within the broader Marxist feminist project of making reproductive labour visible as key to analysis of and resistance to capitalism.

Secondly, to enable this process of making visible the reproductive labour of education activism, I am utilising Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis, aiming to pay attention to rhythms of activism to detect the presence of absence (the invisible reproductive labour on which education activism rests). Methodologically I am specifically seeking to access rhythms through operationalising his regressive-progressive method. This aims to expose possibilities of social transformation through a three-step process of firstly describing the present, drawing on experience and theory; secondly, the analytic-regressive phase, which interrogates the cycles, repetitions and disruptions of the past underlying the current moment, and thirdly, the historical-genetic phase, which attempts to return to consider the problems initially identified but elucidated through being classified in relation to the underlying past.

Literature review

In the literature review I have sought to interrogate the broader field of education activism, social reproduction and reproductive labour. My analysis has identified two key challenges for contemporary education activism. Firstly, with a focus on the organising terrain, a lens which views education activism as reproductive labour positions this labour as taking place alongside a crowding of multiple forms of competing labour, in increasingly isolated and atomising conditions. Secondly, as a vehicle for education activism, trade unions are identified as conflicted spaces, requiring navigation of pressure to fulfil dissent-management, as well as giving opportunity for collectivism and resistance. The review concludes with the following two research questions:

Methodology

The methodology combines the Marxist feminist over-arching project of exposure of hidden reproductive labour, and Lefebvre's specific attention to rhythm as a process of both understanding reproduction and of making explicit the invisible. It takes the focus of two historical moments of relevance to the challenges identified:

Firstly, the 1910 Cradley Heath Chainmakers' strike has been identified as of relevance due to the atomised and crowded nature of labour in the organising terrain, and the relevance this has in an understanding of activism as a form of reproductive labour. Secondly, the split of the National Union of Women Teachers (NUWT) from the National Union of Teachers (NUT) between 1920 and 1961 has been identified as of relevance due to its central exposure of conflict within the labour movement in relation to issues of equality, and therefore recreation of or challenge to social power structures.

The regressive-progressive method has been operationalised using three research methods which have contributed to a form of archive activism emerging from Lefebvre:

- Archival research encompassing the digital archive of the Chainmakers' strike, and the digital and material archives of the NUWT.

- Walking interviews with individuals of personal and contextual relevance to the historical points of disruption in scope: Tony Barnsley, a trade union organiser in the Cradley Heath area who has both researched the Chainmaker's strike and organised contemporary disputes in the area, and my father, whose great aunt Emily Thomas was a founding member and activist in the NUWT.
- Narrative episodic self-interview to provide a bounded point of analysis to revisit the challenges of the present, resituated as sited as emerging from the rhythms and disruptions of the past.

Initial findings:

Initial analysis has exposed some key recurring themes including:

- Leisure and freedom: activism (and in the case of the Chainmakers' children proximity to activism) as an entry point for leisure and agency, in opposition to the everyday of multiple simultaneous forms of labour
- Silences: silence of the illiterate Chainmaker voices within the archive, and processes of silencing within the bureaucratic functioning of unions
- The repeated conversation as a key organising rhythm, both in the recruitment of members and building of action, and in the more ceremonial conversation of the union conference as an act of recommitment to values and goals

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