

**External Examiner's Report of Phd Thesis Entitled:  
'Social learning for critical global citizenship. An ethnographic research of  
selected social movements in Poland'**

**Author:** Marta Gontarska

**Institution/Faculty:** University of Lower Silesia, Faculty of Applied Studies

**Supervisors:** Prof. Ewa Kurantowicz, University of Lower Silesia and Prof. Paula Guimarães, University of Lisbon

**Examiner:** Fergal Finnegan, Senior Lecturer, Department of Adult Education, National University of Ireland

**General assessment of the thesis**

Marta Gontarska's thesis deals with an important topic - social movement learning in contemporary Poland. Drawing on critical theory, research on social movements in sociology and adult education and a theory of social learning the author explores the activity of Extinction Rebellion Poland, Nyeleni Poland - Movement for Food Sovereignty, and Action Democracy through a form of critical ethnography which combines interviews, observation and documentary analysis. She examines the practices of these three movement organisations, how and what activists learn in these groups, and identifies key dimensions of these learning processes. Gontarska also evaluates the wider significance of this learning and the contribution these movements make to civil society in tackling global issues such as the climate crisis.

The thesis does an excellent job of describing the work of Extinction Rebellion Poland, Nyeleni Poland, and Action Democracy and contextualising this nationally and makes very useful connection to wider international trends. Given the importance of social movements in modern Polish history and the increased level of oppositional social movement activity in recent years Poland the topic has empirical significance for the national and international field. Social movement learning has garnered a lot of attention in recent years and is a growing area of research in adult education and sociology, but it remains empirically uneven and theoretically undeveloped in many respects (Atta & Holst, in press; see also Choudry, 2015; Hall & Turray, 2006) and this thesis certainly adds to our knowledge of social movement learning in the Polish context (see also Szczygiel, 2022; Kowzan, in press). The specific focus on democracy and the environment is highly topical and will be of keen interest to adult education researchers concerned with these 'wicked problems' such as Walter, Bowl, Von Kotze, Mayo and Lange. I would be keen to hear how the candidate intends to disseminate the findings and ensure she is in contact with like-minded scholars.

It is an explicitly engaged piece of research in which Gontarska builds on her extensive experience as an activist and seeks to develop 'really useful knowledge' for movements as well as producing new scholarly knowledge. The theories drawn upon and the methodology used for conducting the research by Gontarska are well-selected for this type of committed

research. Her experience as an activist, her positioning as an 'insider researcher', means she is deeply familiar with the context and practices of movements and this part of the reason why the research does such a good job contextualizing and describing the groups. It also prompts an interesting and important set of reflections about the challenges and dilemmas of being a 'citizen researcher' in academia. As Bourdieu (2000) notes there is strong, often unreflective tendency, to take a highly scholastic rather than fully critical approach to knowledge in the university. Working against this tendency requires enormous collective effort and the struggles and issues detailed by Gontarski are valuable as a reflection on these tensions and as a prompt and resource for other researchers in the field.

A wide range of literature is engaged with in the thesis, and it makes valuable connection between parallel but largely separate research traditions (social movement learning and social learning theory). This is a noteworthy contribution because the specific dimensions of learning are not given close enough attention in some of the most influential iterations of research on social movement learning (Finnegan & Cox, forthcoming) and this synthesis offer a way of overcoming this moving beyo. Gontarska's reflections are about the implications of the research for a radical approach to lifelong learning are interesting and suggestive for future research.

On an empirical level, as already noted, the material is detailed and very interesting and the scope meets the expectations of doctoral research.

On a formal level the thesis is clearly structured. As I have noted it deals with a substantive and significant topic, offers novel content relevant to the national and international field, is based upon a coherent theoretical perspective, is of the necessary empirical scope and uses an appropriate methodology. My view is that the thesis therefore deserves to be advanced to a public defense. However, there are a number of areas which I think need discussion and further attention namely- the writing, the use of theory and the extent of researcher reflexivity in certain respects. I will expand on the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis in a chapter-by-chapter assessment in the following section.

### **Individual chapter review**

The first chapter<sup>1</sup> offers a useful, well-developed overview of the research which makes a persuasive case for the significance and need for the research in a Polish context. While it is free of typographical errors the writing style in English is uneven. I am fully cognizant of the effort that it takes to write a thesis in a second language, and we have to make allowances for this in examining and publishing work but there are nevertheless words, phrases and even occasionally sentences that need further attention in terms of readability, clarity and precision. This is the case throughout the thesis and does has a cumulative impact.

The second chapter discusses the theoretical perspective underpinning the thesis alongside the research design (my opinion is that this double focus should be more clearly reflected in the chapter title). It begins with a broad overview of critical theory and critical pedagogy

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<sup>1</sup> The introduction is usually a numbered chapter but this is not done in this case and for the purpose of the report I will simple describe the chapters in sequence.

which discusses power, knowledge and the struggle for social justice. This is followed by an overview of the methodology- critical ethnography and then a discussion of the stages of research which is clear and concise (pp. 21-22) as well as grounded and convincing account of conduct of the interviews as well of the dilemmas of being a citizen researcher. Gontarska also offers persuasive and engaging account of the criteria for sampling based on extensive research of 'new' social movements. The contextual description of Extinction Rebellion Poland, Nyeleni Poland - Movement for Food Sovereignty, and Action Democracy given in this chapter are very good. The chapter indicates that the thesis is underpinned by a coherent theoretical and well-chosen methodology. However, the theoretical discussion is comparatively brief and loosely structured and central concepts such as knowledge and critique would ideally have been discussed in greater depth. Other terms used briefly -such as negative dialectic (p.17) - cannot be deployed without an extended engagement with this idea. There is also not a great deal of systematic discussion of epistemology and research paradigms and as a result I have some questions for Gontarska on how she views critical knowledge and the role the reflexive reconstruction of concepts does, or should play, in critical research

The sampling procedures appear to be robust and carefully considered but I would like to have heard more about potential groups and movements that were or might have been considered. More needs to be known about how organisations within movements were viewed for the purposes of design, sampling and analysis. While the dynamics of being a citizen researcher in the university are articulated clearly and convincingly – and as I have already mentioned I regard this as part of the contribution of the thesis- how this positioning was handled reflexively through the research and the holding of multiple roles is not discussed, nor are the ethical dilemmas. It is my view that one of the greatest challenges for critical research is ensuring reflexive *practice* is described in ways that allow for this to be evaluated and developed collectively is enormously important. I am curious about how this is understood by Gontarska and would like to find out how she worked with the various data and how on a personal and relational level the commitment to movement relevant research was honoured.

The third chapter is entitled 'Theoretical Framework' but reads more like a literature review in which the theoretical perspective outlined in the previous chapter is further developed. It demonstrates that the author explored a wide range of material related to her theoretical and empirical concerns (adult learning theories, research on lifelong learning, critical theory critical pedagogy, international development literature etc.). The author uses the literature review to map out major themes in social movement learning and adult education research. It is very broadly framed, and the rationale for the selection of the literature needs elaboration and a much clearer justification, but it is well informed and the focus on social learning anchors it well. I think the articulation of the role of critical theory *pace* Brookfield is good and in fact much more persuasive than the previous chapter. Gontarska also further advances arguments about the present conjuncture and neoliberalism that are important for the study. The material on learning is supplemented by a selective presentation on research on social movements. The framing arguments on social movements (pp.64-66) is undeveloped but most of the use of Buechler and the arguments made later in the thesis that draw on Cox and Choudry, and the material from Wildemeersch, means there is a solid basis for thinking critically and even creatively across social movement research and adult

education scholarship. The chapter indicates care has been taken to review existing material on Polish social movements. The discussion of Andreotti and citizenship education is informed but in many respects, this covers similar material to the other parts of the chapter from a different discipline. At points the author's perspective is made somewhat hazy by her ambition to work across so many and varied areas of research. I am mindful of different academic traditions in how literature reviews are approached but I would suggest weaving the earlier strands (critical theory, learning theory and social movement research) more tightly together and explicitly bridging these through a more systematic account of Choudry. As with the previous chapter I think the main question this prompts me to ask at the Viva defence is about the use of theory (descriptive, explanatory, emancipatory etc.) and how this relates to the mode of writing.

The fourth chapter is entitled 'data analysis' and describe the findings divided into four sections. This chapter is full of interesting material and I was especially struck by the findings about values, care and regeneration, conflict in movements, and the material on movement repertoires. The remarks about how skills are deployed across work and movement setting are very thought-provoking as are the way this is mediated by neoliberal culture (although I think the question of efficacy and goals needs to be disentangled from this see p. 114). The interview material is rich and the quotes indicate that Gontarska built up relationships of trust with participants. Taken as a whole the chapter is very informative and illuminates the dialectic between local and global issues and internal and external dynamics in movement building.

The framing at the beginning of the chapter (p.89) requires more detail to my mind and further bridging between sections and segments would make it easier to follow the lines of argument. This is especially true for the first set of findings (3.1) which is a little more uncertain than the other than the three sections that follow this and I found this section loosely structured and occasionally unclear. At the very least it needs a more detailed introduction and I would strongly recommend the use of more subheadings in the findings chapters.

The fifth chapter is a discussion of the findings linking to a conception of lifelong learning, social capital and briefly global/local movements. The tone of this chapter is slightly different from earlier pieces and there's a much firmer sense of the author's perspective and a greater degree of boldness and ambition. It is fascinating in what is said about the value of movements to rethinking lifelong learning and for me this was one of the most engaging and novel aspects of the thesis. I would very much like to hear about how on the basis of her research and experience Gontarska might envisage this being implemented (vis a vis alliance building, institutional reform and overcoming socio-political barriers etc. The material on social capital and activism is less convincing. The thesis would benefit from a more explicit theorization of social capital and I want to know more about the empirical basis and the rationale for the claims made in this section. The issues raised- the relationship between collective and individuals and between background and strategies of distinction – are very important but as Gontarska acknowledges her research is not designed to fully answer these questions. As noted above the material on care in movements is excellent but would like to hear more on the limits and contradictions the author discerned through her research.

The concluding chapter is a brief and well-articulated summary of the research.

I am not certain which style guide was used by the candidate, but it also appears there are also some minor mistakes in the use of academic conventions (in particular I would ask the candidate to look at how names are used in citation inside and outside brackets the use of ampersands outside in text references and the indentation of quotes). There are a small number of typographical errors in the bibliography. I also strongly suggest the data analysis diagrams in the appendices is reformatted,

### **Final summary**

This is an engaging and interesting study on a significant topic. The committed, 'insider' nature of the research, and its discussion of dilemmas that follow from taking this approach, is key to its value. Gontarska has approached the research a coherent and thoughtful way and has generated rich findings on social movement learning. The scope of the research meets doctoral standards. Gontarska has generated new knowledge through the project and the use of social learning theory in tandem with social movement research and critical pedagogy will be of interest to the field and has considerable potential for future development. For these reasons I believe means the thesis merits going forward to a defense. However, I wish to note the writing is uneven and at times problematic and needs attention. I look forward to discussing this interesting research with the candidate. I want to acknowledge the strengths of the piece but also have questions. In particular, I would like to explore how critical knowledge and theory is understood by Gontarska and how reflexivity was practiced over the course of the research project and to explore the basis and movement relevance of some of the findings.

Fergal Finnegan, Maynooth University, 3/9/22

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Fergal Finnegan".