

## **Lenin's Lessons on schooling for the left in the UK**

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### **Abstract**

*If the recent revival in academic interest in Lenin's theory has overlooked his few writings on education, this may be because they appear to offer so little. This paper seeks to rectify this oversight. Whilst acknowledging that Lenin's educational offerings are thin, it is proposed that those on the left in the Twenty-First Century might profitably revisit Lenin's arguments regarding the class character of education, and apply the lessons to contemporary conditions. In this regard particular attention will be paid to the UK. That those even on the radical left in Britain who disavow 'political' intervention in schooling might take a lesson from, of all people, Lenin, seems to challenge credulity. But, it is argued, they should, and so might usefully understand Lenin's appreciation of the truth that all education is Political.*

*Taking as a focus, Lenin's pre-1917 critiques of bourgeois education, this paper argues that they constitute a relevant source for discussion of curriculum, 'discipline' and the orientation of schooling towards the workplace. The distinctiveness of Lenin's position within the Bolshevik faction in the wake of 1905 can be seen as in part to do with his approach towards longer term changes in consciousness a propos public pedagogy as much as in relation to revolution. Lenin's materialist realism set him against the educational strategies of the vperedists; yet, in retrospect, was theirs the more realistic view? The lessons of this rift relate to the relative importance of schooling, its content and structures, for the construction of socialism. However, this is not a historical study, but an attempt to reinvigorate Lenin's educational ideas for the current period.*

**Key Words:** *Lenin, Education, Materialist Realism, Socialism, Marxism, Dialectic, Social Class*

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## Introduction

The idea that those on the left should revisit Lenin's ideas on education might until recently have seemed risible. Lenin! Seriously? But the 're-loading' of Lenin's broader theory (Budgen, Kouvelakis & Žižek, 2007) for the twenty-first century raises the question for serious left educators of whether Lenin's educational thought might also warrant revisiting and re-calibrating for the current period.

The foci of this paper are deliberately quite tight. We could discuss at length the extent to which the relationship between the revolutionary vanguard, and the masses is a pedagogical one, and if so, how that crucial dialectic resolves. When Lenin sees the vanguard meet a spontaneous workers' movement which is inchoate and inconsistent, this is in part as a result of its schooling at the hands of the bourgeois ideological apparatuses of the capitalist state. One might consider how the conscious Marxist confronts this situation. To what extent does the Marxist oppose or contradict this spontaneous movement (insofar as it is a product of bourgeois schooling) and to what extent is it shaped by this movement even as it seeks to lead it? Perhaps more importantly for teachers, the question becomes, to what extent can the conscious Marxist intervene in the ideological process early such as to at least offset the full force of ideological reproduction? A subsequent question then becomes, how is it possible in a capitalist or pre-revolutionary situation to effect a fracturing of the apparatuses of capitalist ideological transmission? Lenin actually makes relatively few references to the strategic question of socialists' activity within capitalist educational apparatuses and, as we will see, those he does make are generally rather unfavourable towards any meaningful chance of pedagogical sabotage. So, our question here is necessarily rather limited, and relates to the mundane everyday educational acts which are not *overtly* ideological, but which serve a purpose, which is reproductive of the forces of production. That is, we are not so much discussing Lenin's ideas regarding politics as education (though we will touch on those) as we are concerned with his consideration of everyday education as

political. And we will draw upon Lenin's analysis in this respect to bring out or reveal something of the contradictory class character of education within capitalism.

This paper, then, is not intended as a historical analysis, but rather a disinterring of Lenin's ideas on education and a reworking of his philosophy in relation to current educational practice. The nature of Lenin's writing on schooling is largely very concrete, and immediately responsive to events. It is thus rather difficult to draw from this, a clear and fully elaborated educational philosophy to apply to a particular model of schooling, but it is fair to say that Lenin's writing on this subject is actually remarkably consistent in its themes over roughly quarter of a century (1897-1923 – a period, of course, encompassing events which shook the world, transformed Russia's fortunes and amongst other things put Lenin at the head of an educational apparatus ill equipped for the challenges of building the new socialist state). In the spirit of Lenin's method, the reader will find references in this article to concrete examples of recent developments in UK schooling. Some may consider that the latter half of this piece is indeed over-determined by the UK political nexus. The point, however, is to try to illustrate some of the central themes which emerge across the period of Lenin's educational writing in application to the educational policy of the nation best known to the author. These themes begin and end with class, and with the primacy of the Political. It will be necessary to discuss Lenin's analysis of the inseparability of politics from the educational sphere, before taking as examples, firstly, the orientation of a UK teacher trade union; secondly, the role of knowledge in the curriculum; thirdly, the relationship between the State and schools with a religious or 'national' character; and fourthly, reproduction of the established order through militarily informed schooling, and the 'on-the-job training' of teachers.

Before moving to the main subject of this paper, it is interesting to consider briefly why Lenin was not more passionate about education, and what that tells us about how he regarded its place. He was, after all, the son of a teacher, and, as Vanentinov (Volsky) put it, I.N Ulyanov was "no ordinary *chinovnik* [bureacrat, officious state employee], but an active, sincere, and passionate 'enlightener.' His whole life and thought

centred around bringing literacy to the population as soon as possible... He believed that education is the main force which moves history.” (Valentinov, 1969, p.4) The contrast between Lenin and his teacher father are, as we shall see, stark. Even back in the early 1890's, the young Lenin was dismissive of the impact of his father's and others' literacy campaigns, regarding such reformist efforts to effect the emancipation of the peasantry a “childish fantasy” (Lilge, 1968, p.233). Unlike his father, Lenin himself, of course, had no experience as a formal educator. The distinction has been made by Fredric Lilge between Lenin's own lack of experience of teaching in the conventional sense, and that of his one-time Bolshevik rival Bogdanov who championed a pedagogical route to the new society (Lilge, 1968, p.248). Lenin's life-long dedication to political revolution certainly pushed education, and schooling in particular, into a secondary position, but, as we shall see, not completely to the margins of his political thought. After all, Lenin was without doubt a missionary for Social Democracy, a leader whose zeal for bringing the truth of Marxism to the masses he perceived in terms of ““awakening” (*probuzhdenie*) ...[as well as] “leadership” and “hegemony,” both of which centrally include the idea of being able to inspire people.” (Lih, 2007, p.285)

### **Lenin and the damp gunpowder of today**

Lenin (1975, p. 11) raises the question which has dogged Marxist educators ever since. On the one hand the life of school should be closely related to the life of the community, school work as either a precursor to or a subset of productive labour, this of course representing a reflection of man's productive character. On the other hand, the rather obvious consequence of tying school-work merely to the labour requirements of a capitalist economy is that one simply reproduces the stunted and limited labour capacity of the productive forces required by capital. This broader question is huge and not for this paper. Let it suffice to say that the paradox so constructed within Marxist educational theory hinges on the role of the teacher and curricula in either perpetuating or breaking the cycle of reproduction.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty in applying Lenin's educational thought to the situation in the West today is that, despite the usual and usually

overblown hopes of the radical left regarding the revolutionary upturn which will follow hot on the heels of the latest Eurozone slump, the prospects for widespread radicalisation in the short term are rather slim. Put bluntly, the broad masses of the people are not at a revolutionary tipping point, nor anywhere near it, despite the ongoing politico-financial crisis in Europe. The situation as Lenin perceived it was rather different: one of the factors with which he had to contend in Russia was very widespread illiteracy and deep insularity and ignorance among impoverished peasant populations. Lenin's educational reflections inevitably reflect a period of both profound instability in Russia, and in Europe more widely, and hugely significant potential for change, within which tactical calculations regarding the role of education necessarily sit. For Lenin, the paucity in the cultural condition of the peasantry represented to some degree a limited opportunity in the sense that relatively little access to 'scientific' knowledge could act as a spark to the masses. He writes: "The minister regards the workers as gunpowder, and knowledge and education as the spark... We cannot deny ourselves the pleasure of noting that in this rare instance we totally and unconditionally agree with the views of His Excellency." (Lenin, 1975, p.26)

Today's gunpowder is damp, to be sure. In the West, at least, it is saturated with an excess of information, and ideology, such that access to the truth of the realities of capitalist exploitation seems as elusive as in a period of restricted information and censorship. The repressive tolerance of the current period of western capitalism disinvests information of critical meaning and thus revolutionary potential. But, for all that, schools remain largely places of highly regulated transmission, and, in a sense, then, some of Lenin's analysis here remains peculiarly pertinent. As Mike Cole has observed, the teaching of or indeed even references to socialism as a set of ideas and an alternative to capitalism remain "the last taboo" (Cole, 2009, p.142) in Britain's and America's schools. Whilst children are actively taught – sometimes and in some schools – to challenge racism, homophobia, sexism, transphobia, they are nowhere taught to challenge the logic of capitalism. They are never encouraged to question how and why capitalism works. There is nothing even like the subversive programme to which Lenin refers as operating

among the Sunday school educators of St. Petersburg, one where curriculum themes included “[u]sefulness and wealth. Production, exchange and capital. How wealth is distributed. The pursuit of private interest. Property and the need for it,” (Lenin, 1975, p.27) and such like. In that schooling remains so highly regulated, paradoxically, it represents a vital site for anti-capitalist activity. Ministers are right to be nervous when teachers fail to comply with their edicts regarding some aspect of the manufacture of labour capacity among their pupils, because young people unfit or, more worryingly, unwilling to bend to the demands of capital are an altogether more flammable substance than the ideologically saturated variety. Here, to some extent, Lenin's gunpowder analogy still holds.

Until July 2014, the minister of state responsible for education in the UK was Michael Gove. Whilst, in some ways the individual personalities who represent the face of bourgeois politics are not of primary importance, Gove's own role was significant in the period of the Conservative-Liberal democrat coalition government in Britain insofar as he represented what many saw as a more nakedly ideological figure. Indeed, on the day he was replaced by the relatively little known Nicky Morgan, rather than his more obvious successor, his ‘right-hand woman’, Liz Truss commentators noted that it was helpful for the government to try to re-establish a veneer of ideological ‘neutrality’. Allegra Stratton, a BBC political editor said, “[w]hy Nicky Morgan not Liz Truss to education? Because they don't want an ideologue? They want 'clean skin'? Truss should have been shoo in.” (Stratton, 2014).

Perhaps through once being an active member of the National Union of Journalists, Gove acquired some familiarity with and interest in the revolutionary left in Britain. Indeed in 2002, he produced a piece of attack-dog journalism on the Socialist Alliance which demonstrated some depth of knowledge of the various left organisations involved in the alliance at that time (Gove, 2002). He was keen to associate his opponents as in some way associated with the far left, such as his reference in a 2012 speech to "bizarre NUT conference speakers embracing Trotskyism when even the Communist party of Vietnam operates a market economy" (Gove, 2012b). His hatred of those on the

organised left in Britain was best summed up by that word again: they, not he were the 'ideologues'. For Gove, the idea that one might uphold a principled position in opposition to capitalist ideology is madness - if not wickedness - itself. His claim is the standard one of the bourgeois politician that he occupies not an ideological position, but a neutral standpoint, informed only by 'common sense'. As Gramsci (1999) observed such posturing is a necessary condition for the maintenance of a broad alliance of the conservative and establishment right. The need to maintain the *impression* of standing above private interests may have been why Gove was 'reshuffled'. For few were persuaded by claims such as those made in a much-discussed 2012 speech when Gove proclaimed,

"The Academies programme is not about ideology. It's an evidence-based, practical solution built on by successive governments – both Labour and Conservative. The new ideologues are the enemies of reform, the ones who put doctrine ahead of pupils' interests." (Gove, 2012a)

The 'common sense' in question here is the attempt to restructure UK schooling along market lines, or, as Gove put it, again displaying his familiarity with Marxist phraseology, "the Academy programme is explicitly designed to let a thousand... flowers bloom" (Gove 2012a), that is, to allow contradictions to come to the fore within the system, though not, in the manner of Mao, to enable such dialectics to play out in the reality of the class struggle, but rather to fix them as a 'permanent' diversity of uneven and unequal competitors, whilst forgetting of course that under such conditions, the stronger make the running, and the super-chains of privately sponsored academies eventually become big power brokers or even private monopolies. Importantly, for Gove and his successors, it is not the forces of capital that should be represented as predominant in education, rather, 'common sense' represents itself as opposing a ghostly liberal or indeed socialist establishment which it conjures to act a spectre or bogeyman to be vanquished, "[i]t's the bigoted backward bankrupt ideology of a left wing establishment that perpetuates division and denies opportunity." (Gove, 2012a) Despite his efforts at neutrality, his hatred of the left was manifest in phrase after

phrase of the same speech: they are "the same old ideologues pushing the same old ideology of failure and mediocrity...The same old ideologues who strove mightily to make the world fit their theories - and damaged generations in the process." (Gove, 2012a) For the bourgeois ideologue, it is the Left who see the world through 'theory' whilst his own understanding is merely fact, and common sense, a straightforward codification of the world as it is and should be, a world fit for capital. As regards Gove and his like, Lenin was quite right.

## **Politics and education**

Next, we take some time to examine Lenin's basic position regarding the relationships between politics and education. In essence, his line is quite simple. Obviously, educational work conducted by communists will necessarily be political in the sense that, in every regard, it challenges prevailing bourgeois norms across society; thus Lenin urges, "along the whole line of our educational work we have to abandon the old standpoint that education should be non-political; we cannot conduct educational work in isolation from politics." (Lenin, 1975, p.102) When, in 1905, Lenin warns of the danger of 'Confounding Politics with Pedagogics', he does so not with the intention of disconnecting the two, but of establishing the correct relation. Writing in opposition to the Bogdanovite trend which sought to prioritise pedagogics, Lenin argues that turning this activity into a separate and special branch of communists' work risks the party "descending into demagoguery" (Lenin, 1905a, p. 2). Conversely, without pedagogical work, political organising "would inevitably degenerate into a game"(ibid.) - a self sustaining activity with no meaningful impact upon the masses. Although, on occasion, Lenin does speak of education leading the way to socialism, he does so, as in 1902 within the context of the liberation of the public mind from religious influence, rather than out of real conviction in the force of educational action per se (Lenin, 1961). Lih notes that the Ministry of Public Education in 1887 "felt safer giving its support to obscurantist church parish schools rather than to the village schools to which [Lenin's father] Ilya Ulyanov had devoted his career" (Lih, 2011, p.23) precisely because of the threat it felt any real learning represented to the religious order and the torpid state of the peasant consciousness it maintained.



Some Pedagogical work is overtly counter hegemonic, and designed to inflict the greatest possible damage to the ideological structures of capitalism, and it is thus difficult to see how such processes could operate openly in schools, as we will see later. Rather, this activity is part of the function of the revolutionary party through study groups within branches. However, it is also the case that, for Lenin, all capitalist schooling has a political function in that it is inseparable from the class struggle. Because, within capitalist societies schooling operates in such a way as to foster political opinion favourable to capitalism, it is necessary both to understand this metabolism, and to expose its contradictions. This is largely taken as read. Lenin offers no serious analysis of capitalist curricula, though he does express a particular concern with the transmission of 'national culture', to which we will return later. In short, his position is that "[i]t is primarily in the economic and political sphere that a serious class struggle is waged in any capitalist country. To separate the sphere of education from this is... absurdly utopian, because schools (like "national culture" in general) cannot be separated from economics and politics..." (Lenin, 1975, p. 55) The part played by educational reform in effecting cultural development of the working class as a whole will always be limited as compared with the revolutionary changes associated with the wider reorganisation of the economy<sup>i</sup> because ultimately, the "education, training, and rallying of the masses of the proletariat are inconceivable without political freedom". (Lenin, 1962c, p.511)

So, to be clear, communists do not wish to *make education political*: as Marx stated back in 1848 regarding capitalist education – "[a]nd your education! Is not that also social, and determined by the social conditions under which you educate, by the intervention direct or indirect, of society, by means of schools, &c.? The Communists have not invented the intervention of society in education; they do but seek to alter the character of that intervention, and to rescue education from the influence of the ruling class." (Marx & Engels, 1978, p.487) Lenin merely seeks in the first instance to make that which is political in schooling and education more broadly, visibly so. By contrast, the task of the traditional intellectual is to present school education as *neutral*, even as it serves

the interests of the dominant class. When Michael Gove or some other education minister, validates some secondary-level (high school) subjects and relegates others, which he excludes from his vaunted English Baccalaureate, he acts politically to promote some knowledge as economically necessary and other knowledge as economically marginal. When he or she prescribes a single approach to the teaching of reading, they do so politically in a way, which they wrongly imagine will maximise the efficiency with which children will acquire the rudiments of the capacity to labour in an advanced economy. In principle, there is nothing wrong with ministers making these political choices, indeed it is necessary for them to do so; but their choices are made within the parameters of bourgeois education, and to defend and uphold a vision of society, which maintains and protects privilege and class power. Their proclamations never come anywhere near shaking that basic structure, and one should not expect them to. Yet ministers of state for education across the developed world maintain the pretense of class neutrality and common sense, and indeed sometimes claim to be promoting policies, which benefit the society as a whole. But, on Lenin's analysis, the prospects of education ministers of any bourgeois party genuinely encouraging the acquisition by the working class of both the knowledge and the means to affect their liberation are absolutely non-existent.

So, ministers of state for education actively seek to perpetuate a myth of class neutrality as a necessary feature of the function of strengthening the hegemony of bourgeois ideology in education. The intellectual credibility of stratification and market-strategies relies upon the absence of counter-hegemonic alternatives, which would reveal their class character. Lenin is clear that "the very term "apolitical" or "non-political" education is a piece of bourgeois hypocrisy, nothing but humbuggy practiced on the masses." (Lenin, 1975, p. 102) It is, then perhaps more surprising that even elements among the most advanced part of the teacher trade union movement sometimes fall into the trap of repeating the myth of a "non-political" 'ideal' in schools policy. Let us look at an example of one such case.

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) is the largest and most progressive of the three main teacher trade unions in England and Wales - and for that reason, smeared by Michael Gove as 'ideological'. As a strong, campaigning union, it is very used to making political interventions in debates ranging widely across education and education-related questions. Both the tone and content of many motions passed at recent national conferences places the political centre of gravity among NUT conference delegates well to the left of that of any of the three main political parties in the UK. Yet the analysis of the character of education offered by the union remains inconsistent, and here the words of Lenin prove instructive. Take, for example, a motion on government and its role passed by a large majority at the 2012 NUT annual conference. Delegates voted to instruct the union's executive to launch a "far-reaching campaign to stop political interference in education in both England and Wales" (NUT, 2012, p. 64). Set against a backdrop of savage austerity and a government intent on engineering an internal market in state schooling as a prelude to opening up opportunities for private profit making, one can appreciate the deep concerns felt by NUT members regarding the nature of recent political intervention. However, the motion, which was passed implies the fiction which Lenin so derides - an "apolitical" or "non-political" education - to contrast with the 'interference' of the current government. It is certainly true, as the motion states, that successive governments have rapidly changed policies in this area in ways, which have "adversely affected education" (NUT, 2012, p.64). On any Marxist analysis, that is not at issue. However, the claim that education might somehow be 'left alone' by government unfortunately feeds the myth that capitalist schooling can somehow acquire autonomy from the capitalist economy and its imperative to constantly revolutionise the means by which labour capacity is generated, fashioned and maintained.

Learning the lessons of Lenin, the strategic question for conscious teachers should be, how can schools be politicised not in order to oppose all state 'interference' in education, but to turn that intervention towards transformative ends. In this respect however, neither Lenin nor Krupskaya evince much optimism. For Krupskaya the anti-capitalist school, the school which would prepare children for a full life of

intellectual and physical labour free from dependence on bureaucracy and able to take control of their own lives, is a product of a non-capitalist society; "Socialist schools are conceivable only in specific social conditions, for they are made socialist not by the fact that they are directed by socialists but by the fact that their objectives correspond to the needs of a socialist society." (Krupskaya, 1985, p.52)<sup>ii</sup> Krupskaya writes "in individual cases schools could emerge in a capitalist society that also set as their goal the education of comprehensively developed people with pronounced individualities and social instincts. But in a capitalist system, such schools could only be isolated, hardly viable phenomena." (Krupskaya, 1985, p. 52) For those schools under the control of the bourgeois state, it is of course, far harder to attempt those radical measures which would open up deep contradictions within that system where, on the one hand, the state invests in the school in the expectation a return, and, on the other, the individual school uses that investment to bite the hands that feed it by challenging bourgeois norms. It is precisely the trouble that bourgeois politicians go to in attempting to demonstrate the neutrality of their educational policies which indicate the importance of their operation to the smooth running of capitalist society: "the greater the importance of a political apparatus in such countries, the less its independence of capital" (Lenin, 1975, p. 102) says Lenin; and no apparatus of the state exceeds the educational one in importance. But, as we have seen, although "in all bourgeois states the connection between the political apparatus and education is very strong...[b]ourgeois society cannot frankly acknowledge it" (Lenin, 1975, p. 102): educational reproduction of the forces of production remains shrouded in an ideological veil. As such, it continues to function all the more effectively as an instrument for the production of "bourgeois truth" (Lenin, 1975, p.102). This is the central message that generations of educationalists have taken from Lenin's writing on education. From Lenin's few terse words grow Althusser's ideological state apparatuses, and, indirectly, the standard model Bowles and Gintis account of allocation.

The development of the analysis of left educators including, crucially, those involved in organised educational labour in the form the ILO and its national affiliates such as the aforementioned NUT would be aided by

a reminder of the lessons of Lenin. This is not to say that teachers will flock to read Lenin's 1920 speech to the All-Russia Conference of Political Education Workers of Gubernia and Uyezds Education Departments. I hardly think this likely. But the left within education must be bold in its assertion of the truth, that schooling is and must be political, and that whilst there is a State, there will be intervention. The task is not the attainment of autonomy by the educational apparatuses, but their reorientation along democratic socialist lines as part of a broader societal transformation. There are, of course, Marxists within unions such as the NUT who recognise this, and there are others whose 'trade union consciousness' does not extend beyond the more immediate task of repelling some of the most damaging political interventions dreamt up by bourgeois politicians. This latter position, though understandable, can all too easily tend towards the erroneous belief in professional 'independence', rather than an assertion of worker resistance (or worker compliance).

### **Knowledge and pedagogy**

I have said that Lenin spends little time discussing school curricula, but he does dedicate greater attention to the place of knowledge in general within syllabi. In this regard, we see Lenin's educational traditionalism emerging. In contrast with many progressive educators both before and since, Lenin places huge value in knowledge per se. In the clearest expression of his educational philosophy he offers a defense of knowledge, which is similar to that of the British democratic socialist H.G. Wells writing at the same time<sup>iii</sup>. Both men claim there exists a body of shared knowledge amassed by the humanity of all countries and to which all people should be granted access insofar as they are able to assimilate it. Indeed Lenin goes so far as to say one cannot be a communist if one does not endeavour to acquire as much as possible this great mass of human knowledge.

Such a claim may seem quaint in the current period, suggesting a bygone age of sure, foundational knowledge. It speaks to a politics of truth and of certainty. Here also Lenin parts company decisively with Lunarcharsky and those who would uphold a version of proletarian culture counter-posed to the cultural legacy of capitalism. For Lenin,

such a vision is utopian. New forms of knowledge born of proletarian culture are not Lenin's concern - what would such a claim even mean? For him, this was the myth building of Bogdanov, the new social democratic religion, deriving in part from that proposed by Dietzgen. Lunarcharsky, Bogdanov, Gorky (for a while) and others associated with what I identify elsewhere (Boxley, 2012) as a Dietzgenite philosophical wing of early-century Bolshevism strongly believed that new cultural forms, and concomitant new consciousness was indeed emerging as a definite feature of the collective life of the proletariat. That is to say, they had far more faith in the potential for the spontaneous self-education of workers in and as a result of collective labour, valuing this cultural expression as something requiring sustained nurturing over the long term to fully realise social democratic consciousness. However, for Lenin, these forms of knowledge, insofar as they appear spontaneously in the experience of the proletariat are hollow until filled with Marxist theory, directionless until given conscious direction. Lenin's dialectics locate the birth of the new society not in the void of freedom beyond the old world, but in its heart. The negation of the old culture is not possible without acquiring the canon, seeing its truth, and of turning it against itself. Learning Communism precisely does not mean reading communist manuals and pamphlets in school (Lenin, 1975, pp.87-8), it does not and cannot mean counter-posing one set of understandings, one worldview against another. Rather it means assimilating the great knowledge of the old world to the practice of the new. It is in its application to the new concrete conditions that the old body of knowledge takes on a revolutionary character. Hence Lenin's prioritisation of practical political work over cultural work.

The practical implications for leftist educators are that power knowledge still matters. It is true that capitalist schooling has a distinctive class character in that its function is to turn out willing workers of particular types, and of course others - often, still, those educated privately - capable and disposed to exploit them. Nevertheless, "we must distinguish between what was bad in the old schools and what is useful to us, and we must be able to select from it what is necessary for communism." (Lenin, 1975, p.85) In this regard, Lenin of course looks to Marx as his model, on the basis that Marx necessarily learnt from the

canon of classical, bourgeois political economy, appropriating the stock of knowledge in order to turn it the right way up. However, Marxist educators should be wary of any uses of a progressive cover for the almost parodic reintroduction of a traditionalist knowledge-based curriculum pushed by some 'free school' advocates (Vasagar, 2011c).

Lenin seeks to distinguish between two terms, knowledge and apparatus, and describe their relation. When the two are combined in bourgeois schooling, they reproduce docility, and class division. Insofar as they are successful in this endeavour they provide that allocatory function well known to generations of Marxist educationalists. The lesson of *The Civil War in France* (Marx, 1996, p.181) would appear to be that we should therefore abolish the apparatuses, destroy them. However, to sweep away the educational apparatuses of the old state is merely negation unless the ruins can be re-populated by the knowledge of the old order, transformed by its presence in the new, and the negation negated. This new synthesis is the active learning of communism, a structural rupture, which nevertheless preserves the great body of knowledge of mankind. In practical terms, Lenin of course takes the example of electricity as symbolic of the new order; that one might use electricity in new ways to construct communism requires new apparatuses for the old knowledge. The 'last word' in science becomes the first in the new lexicon of communist society, its meaning transformed within this new grammar.

The Lenin of the *State and Revolution* though, was necessarily tempered in relation to educational practice, as in other aspects of work, by the experience of revolution itself, and the state educational apparatuses which seemed so dangerous in the 'relative autonomy' of their bourgeois structure had to be tolerated and were retained by Lenin after 1920 even in the face of renewed objections from the more radical Shul'gin and others. This, however, did not disprove Marx's original concern about the state apparatus' relative autonomy, and it could be strongly argued that this stubborn structural conservatism helped usher the Russian schooling system into a new and rigid pedagogy following the NEP. But that is not the subject of this study.

## Education and segregation

We turn, now to an application of Lenin's thinking on education in relation to de facto segregation. For the purposes in hand, I will take Lenin's use of the term 'nations' to mean 'ethnic groups'. I am well aware that the terms do not neatly map onto each other, however, the application of Lenin's ideas here are eased if one thinks in terms of ethnic groupings, broadly defined, living and working within a single educational system. Within a UK context, 'nations' has a rather specific set of connotations associated with those four main constituent parts of the British Isles. In Russia, of course, similar categories apply, but 'national' minority (Tatar, Khanty, Finnish, Jewish etc.) identities overspill geographical boundaries in ways which make 'nations' an ethnographic term far closer to 'ethnic minorities' in its contemporary sense, than 'nations' in the more common political sense employed in the UK. So, let us substitute one for the other, and attempt an application of Lenin's formulation.

"As long as different nations [ethnic populations] live in a single state they are bound to one another by millions and thousands of millions of economic, legal and social bonds. How can education be extricated from these bonds?" (Lenin, 1975, p. 49) The context is Lenin's criticism of the 'tacit nationalism' of the Jewish Bundists and the very particular set of circumstances that surrounded their political emergence and activity (which are not the subject of our discussion here), but let us take his comments as applying Marxist principles more generally to educational practice. For Lenin, "If the nations living in a single state are bound by economic ties, then any attempt to divide them permanently in "cultural" and particularly educational matters would be absurd and reactionary." (Lenin, 1975, p.50)

A particular source of concern for Lenin was the proposal to nationalise Jewish schools. The "cultural-national autonomy" to which Lenin so disparagingly refers was, as he makes clear, a product of specific Austrian conditions, ones which Lenin at that time believed could not be seen in democratic Western European nations where "mixed populations" (Lenin, 1975, p.51) were not subject to educational separation in the same way. Mistakenly, Lenin believed that this blight



upon public and political life would not be seen elsewhere in the developed West. In fact, parallels have emerged in the West, and I take as an example here the current situation in Britain.

During the period of the Blair administration in the UK, strenuous efforts were made under successive ministers of education, culminating in Ed Balls to introduce a market into the British state school sector (Ball, 2007, Hatcher, 2006, Rikowski, 2003), with emphasis placed on the brand diversity which might be extended by increasing the number of state schools with a religious foundation, and bringing into the state system previously private schools with a distinctive religious character. As has been noted earlier in relation to Michael Gove's crusade against 'ideologues', this is a process which has been deepened by the British Conservative-Liberal coalition government, with particular emphasis placed on the establishment of so-called 'free schools' - state funded but independent ('semi-private') 'academies' which have the distinctive feature of being schools which are newly opened in areas which may already have sufficient state-funded capacity, simply in order to 'diversify' the educational public sector. Free schools such as those in Barnet (Rimon Jewish Primary School) and Derby (the Al Madinah School which was forced into partial closure in 2014 after a long running controversy over standards) bear a specific religious imprint. The process is a partial absorption into the state sector of religious institutions qua religious institutions. The left in the UK is coming to terms with this new situation, with some, such as the Respect Party seeking to bolster its strong Muslim base by remaining ambivalent regarding such developments<sup>iv.v</sup>. Many on the left are deeply suspicious of the retention of the religious character of free schools and academies within the state sector. Of course the reasons for the call to obtain full state funding for religious schools here are very different from the 'Bundists', but we can still take something of Lenin's analysis to the situation.

Lenin could not be clearer. Firstly, he says that all democrats, including bourgeois democrats should be opposed to school segregation along ethnic and religious lines, of the sort brutally evidenced in the Southern states of the USA during this period. Secondly, and more importantly, for

Marxists, "we must oppose segregating the schools according to nationality [ethnic or religious minority] far more emphatically." (Lenin, 1975, p.50) To this end, the 'nationalisation' of religious institutions as religious institutions, should be opposed, whether they take the form of academies, free schools or indeed those varieties of schools long established in the UK system, the Voluntary Aided Schools with a Church of England or Catholic foundation. That it is the desire to open up a market in the state sector which has impelled successive UK governments to bring about the establishment of a greater number of state Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Hindu schools is not a surprise. Charity, equality, goodwill do not enter into it. In capitalist education systems, as in any other field of capitalist enterprise, scale breeds diversity - "from huge works, mines and factories and commercial enterprises down to capitalist farms [one thinks of the huge fruit farms of parts of the UK and USA here] - we always, without exception, see a larger variety of... [ethnic and religious groups] than in remote, peaceful and sleepy villages." (Lenin, 1975, p. 50) The point here is that in the economic centres to which diverse migrant labour is drawn, schools also necessarily become ethnically plural. Workers in urban areas where this is the case should, as Lenin suggests "instinctively and inevitably realise that segregating the schools according to nationality [ethnic or religious identity] is not only a harmful scheme, but a downright fraudulent swindle on the part of the capitalists." (Lenin, 1975, p. 50) But, of course, the disorientating stream of reactionary political discourse which lauds market diversity in all things obscures such an understanding far more frequently than Lenin might have imagined possible. The landscape of free schools and academies where the idea of choice and diversity takes on a particular lustre is one in which "the workers can be split up, divided and weakened by the advocacy of such an idea, and still more by the segregation of ordinary people's schools according to nationality [ethnic or religious affiliation]; while the capitalists, whose children are well provided with rich private schools and specially engaged tutors, can not in any way be threaded by any division or weakening through "cultural-national autonomy"." (Lenin, 1975, p.51) Lenin is emphatic, that "[i]n any really serious and profound political issue sides are taken according to classes, not nations. Withdrawing school education from state control and placing it under the control of the nations [ethnic group interests] is

in effect an attempt to separate from economics, which unites the nations, the most highly, so to speak, ideological sphere of social life..." (Lenin, 1975, p.51) Schooling potentially at least represents an ideological glue for the ethnically diverse state and, as has been made abundantly clear by subsequent generations of Marxists, greatly developing Lenin's ideas here, it is also the 'highest' expression of ideology in regard to its reproductive function.

When discussing de facto segregation and its relationship to marketisation in the UK context, it would be hard to ignore the recent debate over the so called 'Trojan horse' affair in Birmingham schools. This high profile case which dominated headlines during 2014 centred upon an alleged plot by "Islamic extremists" to influence the running of several schools, including three academies operated by the Park View Educational Trust. Here again, a central theme which has emerged in debate is the freedom granted by neoliberal governments to other bodies to run schools in the sectional interests of religious and 'national' minorities, such as groups whose Islamism may represent something like the Bundists' 'tacit nationalism'. The difficulty for then Education Secretary Michael Gove was to walk a line between opposing "extremism" in state schooling, whilst promoting the fragmentation of the sector into semi-autonomous, semi-private units whose loyalty may progressively shift from state capital towards the priorities of communalist factions. For example, Gove appeared to openly favour such a trend in relation to Catholic and other Christian denominations. In a much publicised article in 2011, he wrote:

"Many of those who oppose academies and free schools on ideological grounds also oppose faith schools on "principle". Active in the teachers' unions and in other parts of the education establishment, they often misrepresent the Catholic school ethos as a mechanism of religious indoctrination and wrongly portray the admissions criteria used by Catholic schools as selection-on-the-sly. Given half a chance they would impose on Catholic schools a set of values founded on their own moral and cultural relativism. But *by becoming an academy, a Catholic school can place itself permanently out of range of any such unsympathetic meddling and*

*so ensure that it can remain true to its Catholic traditions."*

(Emphases added)(Gove 2011)

Strongly upheld Catholic morality, standing opposed to the 'relativism' of our time may be lauded by the likes of Gove with little disquiet expressed among neoconservative elements of his natural constituency; but harder for them to openly praise is the anti-relativist position taken in what are increasingly called 'religiously conservative' Muslim academies. We only need substitute the term Muslim for "Catholic" in the paragraph above to see that ecumenical consistency on Gove's part will soon put him firmly at odds not only with those in the Leninist tradition on the left and in the unions opposed to de facto segregation of workers along 'national' lines, but also with large sections of the neoconservative wing of his own party, and class.

Lenin looked not to those most 'backward' of the multicultural nations whose school systems were fractured along ethnic lines - Prussia and Austria - and forthrightly condemned those on the left who acted as apologists for educational "cultural-national autonomy." Rather his model was the more 'advanced countries' - "France, Switzerland and America" (Lenin, 1975, p. 52) whose secular systems of education prohibited such autonomy. How those on the left the UK respond to this line now will continue to be a source of lively comradely debate!

## **The class character of education**

Let us end with another illustration of the persistence of a class character to schooling. The UK government's push to introduce a market into the state education sector through free schools has been called "the most ideological of all the coalition's policies" (Gilbert, 2012). And, if proof were needed of the ideological shape of this project, Michael Gove provided it very forcefully in 2013 in a piece flatly denying it any political character. In a 'textbook' illustration of the bourgeois intellectual's claim to the 'neutrality' of a policy, Gove demonstrated his Machiavellian skill in replaying the role that his unlikely 'greatest influence', Gramsci (Gove, 2013a) had provided him with, proclaiming, "[t]he truth, of course, is that there is nothing "ideological" about free schools" (Gove, 2013b). Playing

fast and loose with his representations of Marxism, he went on to contradict his fiercely oppositional stance towards Marxists of earlier in the year (Marsden, 2013) in an acrobatic attempt to co-opt Marxists to his cause. For if free schools are beyond ideology, surely they can be supported by Marxists too! Yes, Michael Gove really did claim that "[c]lassical Marxists support free schools because they embody the ideal of the soviet, a self-managing institution run by workers in the wider public interest – which has been tried from Petrograd in 1917 to Venezuela today." (Gove, 2013b) The reader is invited to speculate on the response by Whitehall mandarins in the Department for Education office responsible for approving free school bids were they to be presented with a school proposal which pitched at embodying the spirit of the Bolshevik and Bolivarian revolutions, and proposed a curriculum which like the proletarian "free schools" of Petrograd, centred on concepts of usefulness and of wealth and its distribution, of production, exchange and capital, of the pursuit of private interest, and on opposition to property. The schools free from bourgeois ideology considered by Lenin and Krupskaya (or indeed the Venezuelan Alternative School in the Barrio Pueblo Nuevo, Mérida discussed by Cole, 2012, pp. 195-200) represented a rather different proposition from that envisaged by Michael Gove.

However, the idea that private interests such as the faith groups discussed above, charities and private companies should be able to establish their own schools, funded by the state but independent of state control offers a vision which Lenin might have recognised: one where naked class interest is bolstered by the apparatuses of the state under the guise of such 'common-sense' rubrics as 'choice' and 'diversity'. This is pure bourgeois ideology. There is no exact parallel between the current push towards full marketization of UK schools and Lenin's experience of educational conservatism, but, as with the example of the Bundists, we can find sufficient continuity in ruling class priorities to allow some license in the application of Lenin's thought to the contemporary class character of education. In revolutionary Russia as across much of Europe, the interests of sections of society were strongly linked to the 'rural gymnasia' (Krupskaya, 1985, p. 47) - these were the 'new schools' of the day (just as 'free schools' are often termed 'New

Schools' today in England and Sweden). And, just like free schools (Gilbert, 2012; Gorard, 2013) 'their intake was entirely unrepresentative of the wider populace, drawing heavily on the "moneyed and intellectual aristocracy"(Krupskaya, 1985, p.47); that is, again just like free schools, not only those with financial assets, but those whose social capital buys a place for their favoured sons and daughters (the children of the new "intellectual aristocracy" perhaps have parents who are highly paid journalists, academics, advertisers). The academies programme, including free schools has been shown to skew intakes and increasingly over time favour those with money and influence (Gorard, 2013, pp.59-63). Likewise, the rural gymnasia not only took great care of the intellectual and physical development of their wards, they also assiduously sought to "instill in their pupils the firm foundations of a bourgeois outlook" (Krupskaya, 1985, p.47), and, as such, carefully played their role in the preserving the social influence of those holding intellectual and financial capital. To suppose that free schools will do anything different would be, in Lenin's words "childish fantasy".

For Lenin, the ideological apparatuses of the state alone are not adequate to impose class order; at times it is necessary for the state to resort to harsher discipline to maintain control over a restive working class and to ensure the production of willing new workers. Following ministerial concerns about the St. Petersburg Sunday Schools referred to earlier Lenin assessed the educational priorities of the government. Crucially the minister required a particular kind of compliance from its teachers in the delivery of curricula, one best represented by the 'reliability' and 'efficiency' of the armed forces, and by the docility of the 'homegrown' worker whose experiences limit their opportunity to challenge the regime in their schools. In contrast to the 'unreliable' pedagogues of a critical bent, two 'types' are promoted, "when you read the list of teachers [approved by the minister], your hair stands on end: [1] *all you get is ex-student, again an ex-student...* [and, 2] *The minister would like the tutors all to be ex drill-sergeants.*" (Emphases added) (Lenin, 1975, pp. 28-9). It is with not a little shock that one realises the extraordinary fact that ministers of education in Britain (and, no doubt, elsewhere) are still pursuing just the same goals in their attempts to 'instill discipline' and 'maintain (bourgeois) order'. Amongst the priorities

of the current UK coalition government have been initiatives, which match both of Lenin's objections here. First, initial teacher education has been reorganised to turn the system in on itself; to ensure compliance by using current teachers to 'grow their own' new teachers, limiting students' access to theory and restricting their 'training' to the school setting, rather than the institution of higher learning, thereby establishing the 'reliable' 'ex-student' model of continuous reproduction (a huge subject which falls beyond the scope of this paper) (Boffey, 2011). Second, the political encouragement of ex-drill sergeants to take up school teaching: in free schools and academies, such former military personnel do not need any teaching qualification whatsoever. It was in a speech responding to the visceral threat of the directionless proletarian spasm of violence which took place in English cities in 2011 that Michael Gove announced a scheme intended to encourage military officers to seek employment in schools (Vasagar, 2011a). At the same time a proposal was made by the right wing Centre for Policy Studies for a free school staffed entirely by army personnel (Vasagar, 2011b) in Manchester<sup>vi</sup>. The plan finally came to fruition in 2014 as the Phoenix Free School opened in Oldham. Michael Gove, excitedly welcomed the school as the first of many to be run along military lines, and the right-wing press in the UK naturally vaunted the initiative, celebrating that "[d]rills and teamwork could become a common sight in military-style free schools after the first of its kind was given the go ahead" (Daily Mail, 2013). Since 2013, soldiers have also been eligible to rapidly re-train as teachers in the UK via a heavily funded but poorly executed recruiting scheme (Morrison, 2014) called 'Troops to Teachers' (DfE, 2014), "based on the idea that military values such as leadership, discipline, motivation and teamwork are particularly useful for teaching." (BBC, 2014) The context may be very different, but again and again the underlying truth of Lenin's analysis of the class character of schooling is revealed by the recurrence of these themes in the policies devised by successive bourgeois ministers of education. In Althusser's (1969) terms, both the state apparatuses of *repression* in the form of army style discipline, and *ideology* in terms of the 'common sense' presentation of the defence of private interest have been put to use in the recent period in the UK to bolster what Lenin identified as the class character of education.

## Conclusion

What are the lessons for the contemporary left of Lenin's educational theory? The first is, perhaps, rather dispiriting for those schooled in Western Marxist traditions, which have emphasised the transformative power of pedagogy. It is that, in the face of the apparatuses of the state and of the power of private capital, teacher intervention towards liberatory ends will have an important but limited impact. For Lenin, the real teacher of socialism is, quite simply, revolution itself - "[w]e must remember what a tremendous educational...power the revolution has... Months of revolution sometimes educate citizens more quickly and fully than decades of political stagnation" (Lenin, 1962b, p. 561) and of even the most effective socialist pedagogical work; and, says Lars Lih, "the fundamental lesson it teaches is the identity of their [the citizens'] true leaders." (Lih, 2007, p. 294) But what are both these leaders and the masses to do in the meantime, in the long periods of stagnation?

Lenin's second lesson - slightly more encouraging for we critical pedagogues and reformists, is that there is always potential for damage to be done to the "bourgeois outlook" promoted by state schools through well struck sparks of intellectual challenge cast upon even damp gunpowder. As we have all long hoped, Lenin believes that curricular and teacher-led innovation such as that in the St.Petersburg Sunday schools can crack away the ideological fortresses for perhaps a brief period of 'viability' before, we must expect, more forceful ideological apparatuses of law and bureaucracy, or even repressive apparatuses are brought to bear to shut down such activity.

The third lesson is that we must not play the game of condemning 'political intervention' in education. We will, ourselves intervene politically in education in a most dramatic way when the opportunities arise to carry through the liberation of schools from the influence of capital and private interests. In the meantime, our opponents will and must continue to seek more and better ways to revolutionise production through the preparation of more 'appropriately skilled', more willing, more ready



workers. They are not the easiest of messages to deliver, but we must persist in exposing the reasons for each and every 'political intervention' as innovations in productive processes which are designed not in the interests of those whose labour capacity will thereby be enhanced but in the interests of those who will make use of that capacity to obtain surplus value. Particular interventions must, of course, be resisted most forcefully, but the principle of political intervention per se, we should defend.

The fourth lesson: we must not fritter away our time hoping for the next revolutionary upturn. The acquisition of knowledge in school, even selective knowledge, uncritically presented should be promoted on the condition that it is understood as framed in terms of 'bourgeois truth'. The new world will not grow from a rejection of bourgeois knowledge but from its turning right-way-up.

The fifth lesson is that insofar as the ruling class seek to diversify education in order to stratify and divide, we must oppose all concessions to national and religious and ethnically divisive institutions as such. The politics of this are complicated and fall beyond the scope of this paper, but, for instance, danger lies in seeking to equalise the unequal by part-nationalising the Jewish school in order to grant it the same status as the Christian one, rather than consistently calling for the abolition of special status for any religious or ethnic group (whilst, of course, maintaining the most steadfast opposition to all forms of white-dominance, and racism.)

Are Lenin's writings still relevant to left educators? He may not have been all right, all of the time, and for my own part I have deep reservations, not discussed here, regarding his understanding of the nature of the pedagogical functioning of the party; *but*, so long as the political elite in the West roundly condemn leftists as 'ideologues' and their own policies as merely 'sensible', and so long as they express incredulity that anybody should still associate with the 'bizarre' ideas of Marxism, Lenin's writing is, without a doubt, still relevant.

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<sup>i</sup> Since as early as 1894, Lenin had been convinced that "Political revolution must precede cultural development." (Lilge, 1968, p. 233). Most observers might now consider Lenin's position laughable. However, a probelmatism of what constitutes

the cultural development of the masses renders this conclusion questionable. Does universal access to mass media, without the means to critique its content, for example, really equate to cultural development? This question goes way beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>ii</sup> It is certainly true that if British socialists and communists look for models of the anti-capitalist or radical school, they are few, and the most well-known, such as A.S. Neill's (Neill, 1968) Bertrand Russell's (Jespersen, 1987) or indeed that associated with the socialist H.G. Wells (James, 2012) were all private, fee-paying establishments. The example offered in Spain by Francisco Ferrer (1913) is somewhat more encouraging.

<sup>iii</sup> See Wells on his idea for a shared universal encyclopaedia for all humanity, a building block of his version of the new socialist society (Wells, 2008)

<sup>iv</sup> Respect's sole Member of Parliament George Galloway has registered his support for the private Al-Asr Primary School, in Blackburn which is attempting to obtain 'free school' status (Galloway, 2012; Lancashire Telegraph, 2012) .

<sup>v</sup> One might reflect upon parallels between 'near-Marxist' Bundists and those who have sought a synthesis of socialist and Muslim communalist concerns in the first decade of the Twenty First-century in Britain, but this falls beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>vi</sup> Although judged amongst strongest of the latest crop of free schools applications by the New Schools Network, the proposed school was rejected in summer 2012 (Phoenix Free School, 2012) and its backers then moved their focus to Rochdale (Manchester Evening News, 2012)

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