

## **Political learning processes**

### **On the difficult role of critical intellectuals in social movements**

**Marcus Hawel and Stefan Kalmring**

*Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, Berlin, Germany*

#### **Abstract**

*In this article the authors try to elaborate an explicit connection between social theories in relation to the role of intellectuals in social movements. These should view themselves as educational movements if they seek to be successful. By so doing they could avoid either inventing the wheel for the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> time ‘afresh’ or moving into dead ends, which have already been explored by others before them. When social movements manage to use leverage towards social change in efficient manner, then they require both practical political abilities and reliable knowledge regarding the critiqued society and its contradictions. Education is a pivotal means to both ends. The contemporary education concept of leftist movements often remains in line with the authoritarian ideas of a paternalistic relationship towards subalterns which one-sidedly attribute a privileged position to the academia in learning relationships and neglect open processes of self-learning of the people. In this theoretical article we discuss a wide range of theories from Hegel and Marx over Luxemburg and Gramsci to Bakunin, Ranciere and Spivak, which makes clear that such authoritarian point of view should be obsolete and an alternative concept has to be elaborated.*

**Keywords:** *Intellectuals, social movements, learning processes, paternalistic view of education*

#### **What is to be done?**

Capitalist societies are engaged in continual self-reference. They are highly dynamic, consist of formations marked by strong centrifugal forces, and rely on the constant (self) clarification of their overall social and political context for their reproduction (Hauck, 1984). Stability in capitalist societies depends essentially on public debate about interests and positions, and on how these should be configured in the future. Even social critique is understood in terms of “the self-clarification (critical philosophy) of the struggles and wishes of the age”.<sup>1</sup> However, this refers to

the aim behind social critique of developing solutions to the social frictions inherent to commodity-producing societies; solutions that *transcend* existing social conditions.

Over the last few years, the conditions for social critique have become increasingly difficult, especially in Germany. This is partly due to the fact that some of the institutions (e.g. trade unions, universities, foundations) that more or less successfully conducted critical praxis until recently are now only able to do so to a limited extent (Demirović, Bischoff, and Lieber, 2006). This also applies to trade union-based education, which is seeing a strong reduction in its creative power, and to the universities, which for decades at least partially acted as refuges and places to nurture social critique – a situation that was of course unique in history. In contrast, a form of ‘template research’ (Hawel 2013, p. 11) is becoming increasingly widespread in universities. Template research applies mechanized processes of knowledge production to common issues. This means research is no longer capable of assuming the actual task of critical thinking, namely: not merely providing solutions to the problems faced by ‘society’ (understood as state and capital), but reflecting on the form of these ‘problems’, reformulating them, and interpreting the manner in which they are currently identified as a problem in itself (Žižek 2011, p. 12).

Neo-liberal reforms in education have contributed extensively to this situation (Bauer et al. 2010). Cuts have often been used to dispose of critical positions – more in Germany than everywhere else in Europe. Competitiveness in German universities, the introduction of bachelors and masters programs, elite initiatives, and tuition fees has considerably restricted the space for free thinking in science and research.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the 1968-generation, which entered the universities as a result of a protest movement, has now been sent into retirement, and it was largely unable to secure a place for the new generation. This has left entire institutes and even faculties without a single critical voice. This situation is negatively affecting the universities and the entire Left in Germany. In the future, critical science and education will have to be undertaken outside of the universities and trade unions (Brand 2012, p. 41).

### **The intervening intellectual**

According to Marx, “The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living”.<sup>3</sup> This sums up many people’s understanding of critical knowledge production, and the conditions for left-wing learning and emancipatory educational work. These understandings

also pose difficulties because they are often trapped within the remnants of Leninism and Kautskyianism. If we are to overcome these problems – and doing so means making them visible – we will also have to reflect on the relationship between theory and praxis, on the dialectic of knowledge and reflected action, and on the role of teachers and learners in social movements.

The general view of intellectuals posits them as academics that wield a set of knowledge and a keen perception that enables them to stand above other things. Intellectuals are thought to be most at home in their ivory towers from which they make somewhat unworldly judgments and intervene in the world. This view of intellectuals is just as true as it is false (Behring, 1982)

The etymological origin of the term ‘intellectual’ dates back to the Latin for ‘understanding’. But it is important to remember that an academic education is not necessary for understanding, despite the widespread assumption to the contrary among the general population – the so-called masses. In more recent times, however, the term can be traced back to the Dreyfus Affair in France at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, anti-Semitic nationalists used the term ‘*intellectuelles*’ to denigrate people such as Émile Zola, who had publically supported the Jewish officer Alfred Dreyfus (Barth, 1974).

Since that time, the essence of the intellectual life was intervention in the political affairs of the ruling elite. This also includes keeping a close eye on the elite, and defending against social injustices and abuses of power with the strongest weapon at their disposal: the word (Sartre, Gavi, and Victor, 1976). It seems intellectuals use their gifts and skills in art or journalism to ensure their voices are heard. Intellectuals think outside of the box and intervene in everyday processes. They are the sand in the gears of power. In this view, the role of the intellectual is twofold: ensuring the public remains alert and keeping a check on abuses of power.

### **The divide between theory and praxis**

Hegel believed that “deep knowledge” could only be attained by philosophers: “To know what we will want, and further, what the absolute will, namely reason, wills, is the fruit of deep knowledge and insight, and is therefore not the property of the people” (Hegel 1970, § 301.). But philosophers also need to stay up-to-date, and this can actually be quite challenging. However,

doing so remains essential because philosophy always arrives too late to intervene in actual practices:

“Philosophy, as the thought of the world, does not appear until reality has completed its formative process, and has made itself ready. [...] When philosophy paints its grey in grey, one form of life has already become old, and by means of grey it cannot be rejuvenated, but only known. The owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering. (Ibid, p. 28)

Hegel’s thoughts point to three conclusions.

1) Praxis involves processes that have yet to be completed, and consequently should also be understood as such. The divide between conscious and reflected acts (praxis) and absolute concepts is a grey area characterized by spontaneity (unreflective action), contingency, irony, and arbitrariness. 2) Praxis is neither the matter of philosophers nor of the people, as neither undertakes conscious action. Whereas philosophers *interpret* and create deep knowledge, but do not *change* anything; it is the people who change things, but without leadership or conceptual guidance. 3) Some form of interdependent relationship must also exist between philosophy and praxis; and *mutatis mutandis* between philosophers and the people. Otherwise, the world will not be able to develop in the direction that it should.

### **The young Marx, praxis, and changing the world**

Marx summarized his view of philosophers in *Theses on Feuerbach*: “Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”<sup>4</sup> Marx argued that “human thinking” only reflects the “objective truth” in as much as it is not only a “question of theory”, but also, and above all, a “practical question”. “Man must prove the truth – i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice”.<sup>5</sup> Marx was simply arguing here that “it is essential to educate the educator”;<sup>6</sup> and this point of course also applies to philosophers. Marx viewed *praxis* in this context as revolutionary when a philosopher’s *theory* gains *material power* and “takes hold of the masses”, which in turn leads the masses to provide the theory with potency.<sup>7</sup>

In line with Hegel, the young Marx did not believe that the proletarian masses were capable of possessing deep knowledge (Fetscher, 2004). But we need to remember that Marx was writing at a time when the proletariat had only recently appeared on the historical stage; a period during which illiteracy was as widespread among the proletariat as among the rural population to which

Hegel had been referring. If the proletariat cannot understand deep knowledge, how can a theory grip the masses and spark the fire of praxis? Similarly, how can this form of knowledge be mediated? For the young Marx, the answer was clear: revolutions need more than just an active element (philosophy), they also need a passive element (Ibid, p. 386), a material foundation: in other words, revolutions must involve the proletariat. In Marx's view, a philosophy or theory will only take root if it also reflects the needs of the proletariat. Accordingly, the people only implement theories when theoretical needs also reflect immediate practical needs.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, this remains a sketchy construction as it assumes that two interrelated factors will come together once they are present in the world and have assumed their proper form. As Marx did not completely solve this problem, further work is needed on this issue.

### **Authoritarian avant-gardism in the old labor movement**

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of the central actors in social democracy believed that class-consciousness and socialism arose out of economic conditions. As such, cognition and the proletarian class struggle as revolutionary praxis were viewed as evolving more or less automatically out of capitalist economic conditions and capitalism's tendency to cause immiseration (Groh, 1973). Karl Kautsky reflected Hegel's view when arguing against this position:

Modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge. [...] The vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the bourgeois intelligentsia: it was in the minds of individual members of this stratum that modern socialism originated, and it was they who communicated it to the more intellectually developed proletarians who, in their turn, introduced it into the proletarian class struggle where conditions allow that to be done (Kautsky 1901f and 97f.).

According to Kautsky, socialist consciousness was not an automatic development, nor could it develop spontaneously out of the proletarian class struggle: instead, socialist consciousness had to be inserted into the class struggle as scientific knowledge that came from outside of the proletariat.

Kautsky's views were enthusiastically taken up by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov Lenin, who even derived his own understanding of the role of the avant-garde in political parties from Kautsky's arguments. In *What is to be done?* Lenin described spontaneity in terms of a general evil:<sup>9</sup> "the spontaneous development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois

ideology”.<sup>10</sup> Lenin mocked the spontaneity of the labor movement as “pure-and-simple trades-unionism”;<sup>11</sup> something that Lenin believed had to be combated. In order to do so, Lenin proposed placing the worker’s movement “under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy”. Accordingly, Lenin used Kautsky’s point about the naivety of the proletarian masses to provide theoretical legitimacy to authoritarianism. Lenin’s notion of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” implied a dictatorship of the party *over* the proletariat as a means of protecting it from the bourgeoisie. Accordingly, Lenin formulated a strategy aimed at gaining power, a strategy that reflected his time and was heavily influenced by Russian Tsarism. From the perspective of a struggle for power, Lenin’s strategy won a number of temporary successes. But his project failed at least from the perspective that matters most historically: as a project of mass emancipation.<sup>12</sup>

Lenin believed that the socialist revolution would begin by “taking possession of the means of production in the name of society”.<sup>13</sup> However, this was neither to be done by society, nor by the proletariat. Instead, Lenin argued that an elite should take possession of the means of production, as he viewed the broad population – at least for the foreseeable future – as incapable of self-enlightenment and self-empowerment. It was only after educational or political enlightenment and the advent of the new social conditions that were planned for a distant socialist future that the former proletariat would be capable of shaping society. To some extent, views approaching a Jacobean structure<sup>14</sup> are also present in Marx’s understanding of politics. However, Marx’s view swung perpetually between “Jacobinism and communalism”.<sup>15</sup> This difference means that Marx’s positions provided for the self-empowerment of the proletariat; and Marx actually believed that proletarian self-empowerment had been embodied in the 1871 Paris Commune. However, Lenin resolved any ambiguity in Marx’s work to such an extent that even Leon Trotsky, who certainly could not be labeled as having favored grassroots democracy or anti-authoritarianism – felt the need to object. Despite this, Trotsky criticized Lenin by stating that it was certainly not expedient for a socialist movement to take over thinking for the proletariat<sup>16</sup> or to attempt to substitute it politically.<sup>17</sup>

### **History as a teacher**

Rosa Luxemburg was also an adversary of Lenin, and emphasized the proletariat’s abilities to learn; in doing so she also countered Kautsky’s position and that of the revisionists. Luxemburg believed that it was spontaneity and the experiences that accompanied it that would ensure the

proletariat would further its knowledge and organizational development. “The most precious, lasting, thing in the rapid ebb and flow of the wave is its mental sediment: the intellectual, cultural growth of the proletariat, which proceeds by fits and starts, and which offers an inviolable guarantee of their further irresistible progress in the economic as in the political struggle”.<sup>18</sup> This made the unilateral provision of knowledge to the proletariat unnecessary. In Luxemburg’s view, history is a teacher: even when history remains under the surface, it continues unfolding with the “old mole of history” continually burrowing underground, only to surface at the most appropriate time. The proletariat then emerges from a learning process<sup>19</sup> that occurs through the dialectic of spontaneity and organization, mass action, and the tasks undertaken by the leadership. The dialectic between a capitalist economy and a non-capitalist “moral economy” can also provide a particularly fruitful background for such knowledge to develop, as Edward P. Thompson realized a few years later.<sup>20</sup> In Luxemburg’s view, however, if the development of the proletariat is to result in liberation from the leadership – and consequently enable the proletariat to assume the leadership role while becoming tools of conscious mass action – its development must have an anti-authoritarian objective.<sup>21</sup>

In a refreshingly original manner, Luxemburg asked how the proletariat might evolve from an object of capitalist development and political occurrences into an independent, active subject. This was an essential path that would enable the proletariat to determine its own fate and consciously regain what had otherwise constituted alienated social conditions.<sup>22</sup> In order to answer this question, Luxemburg emphasized the difficult relationship between the leadership and the masses. In doing so, she outlined a position that is still highly significant for the emancipatory learning theories of social movements. Luxemburg focused on two points: the relationship between the dialectic of teaching and learning different stocks and forms of knowledge; and how the relationship between the leadership and the masses could be turned on its head.<sup>23</sup> Luxemburg recognized that it was wrong to equate class-consciousness with scientific knowledge. Although she was unable to completely solve the problems she identified, Luxemburg’s arguments dislodge the privileged status provided to the methods of learning used by intellectuals compared with other forms of understanding and skills development. This is particularly the case with knowledge and skills acquired through the praxis of political struggle.

Luxemburg viewed leadership as having an *initial* importance, due to the educational advantages that leaders usually possess. In a similar fashion to Kautsky and Lenin, Luxemburg argued that intellectuals should ensure that the masses were aware of the historical tasks that awaited them.<sup>24</sup> However, Luxemburg also made it clear that it was up to the intellectuals to ensure they relinquished their special role as soon as it was possible to do so.<sup>25</sup> As soon as processes of (self-) learning had begun to unfold among the workers as part of the political struggle, Luxemburg emphasized that privileged intellectual knowledge was no longer as important as the practical learning experiences being gained by the masses. Whereas the young Marx had viewed the task of theory and philosophy as reaching “self-understanding,”<sup>26</sup> Rosa Luxemburg believed that knowledge about the conditions that were necessary for social transformation and a move towards emancipation could be gained through more than just theory and philosophy. In fact, she viewed alternative forms of learning and understanding as equally important to those exercised by the intelligentsia.

Unfortunately, Luxemburg failed to discuss both the conditions under which the leadership might relinquish its special role, and whether it would actually ever be ready to do so. She also lacked a class-based understanding of the technical and scientific intelligentsia (who would remain a focal point for certain structurally-related interests even after this process had begun). In addition, Luxemburg lacked the sociological-organizational knowledge of political parties and trade unions that might have helped identify and prevent ossification within the political division of labor. Several years after Luxemburg’s death, Simone Weil attempted to close these gaps with a critique of bureaucracy. Weil noticed that a new class of intellectual experts was developing throughout society, and that it promoted and defended hierarchy wherever it could in order to strengthen its own claims to power. She argued that in general, every privilege and therefore every oppression relies on knowledge that is, in essence, inaccessible to the working masses. Accordingly, the workers are forced to believe, and compelled to obey.<sup>27</sup> According to Weil, solidified elitist rule particularly characterizes labor movement organizations. After all, the labor movement is subject to the control of trade union bureaucracy.<sup>28</sup>

Rosa Luxemburg highlighted a further problem related to the question of leadership, but this time in the context of the political tactic of the mass strike. She argued that it would be difficult for the leadership to satisfactorily assume its initial role as part of a mass strike for two reasons. First, the



leadership tends to be conservative and therefore unwilling to force struggles out into the open; but doing so was exactly what would provide the proletariat with experience. She argued that the leadership of the Social Democratic Party was worried about developing innovative strategies as part of the struggle and instead usually relied on proven and well-known measures. She pointed out that the leadership tended to shy away from risk as it sought to avoid endangering the organizations it was leading.<sup>29</sup> Second, Luxemburg realized that even when the leadership was willing to accelerate a struggle, it would only have limited space to do so. Consequently, Luxemburg argued that the leadership would neither be in a position to organize a mass strike behind sealed doors,<sup>30</sup> nor to prevent a mass strike movement from developing if it were to spontaneously develop out of the existing conditions.<sup>31</sup>

Luxemburg's argument highlights an interesting dilemma in situations characterized by an underdeveloped class struggle: if the process of (self-) learning within socially critical movements has yet to unfold, then the intelligentsia's educational resources and particular social position means it will have to take on specific tasks as part of the political struggle and its associated educational work. However, the extent to which the intelligentsia will actually be willing and able to assume these tasks remains unclear. Hans-Jürgen Krahl raised this problem in the context of the 1960s student movement. Krahl saw the solution in temporary anti-authoritarian authorities,<sup>32</sup> something that Theodor W. Adorno would of course have rejected as a remnant of Leninism.

Some years later, Frantz Fanon spoke of the relationship between the masses and political leadership in learning processes associated with social movements in quite a similar manner to Rosa Luxemburg. Fanon argued that an anti-colonial revolution could only be expected through the interplay between the urban sub-proletariat, peasants, and intellectuals. Although the intelligentsia would bring its special skills to the movement, it would still have to permanently learn and develop from the peasant masses and the lumpen-proletarian "hordes of famished"<sup>33</sup> as it too was an alienated class. Fanon argued that the leadership "only draws its worth and its strength from the existence of the people at war. Literally, it is the people who freely create a summit for themselves, and not the summit that tolerates the people."<sup>34</sup>

### **Anti-authoritarian critiques of the special role of the scientific and technical intelligentsia**

Michael Bakunin provided a far more radical view than Luxemburg or Fanon in his attempt to turn the relationship between the intelligentsia and the masses on its head. Although Bakunin's critique was aimed more at German Social Democracy – and in particular Ferdinand Lassalle – than Marx, Bakunin developed a fundamental critique that is also applicable in this context.

According to Bakunin, the label “educated” or “scientific socialism” clearly demonstrated what form Marxist rule would actually take. Bakunin argued that the label demonstrated “that the so-called people's state will be nothing else than the very despotic guidance of the mass of the people by a new and numerically very small aristocracy of the genuine or supposedly educated. The people are not scientific, which means that they will be entirely freed from the cares of government, they will be entirely shut up in the stable of the governed. A fine liberation!”<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, Cornelius Castoriadis criticized orthodox Marxism for its idea of the historical development of reason, as he argued only intellectuals could reveal this form of reason.

Castoriadis believed that this implied that specialists would have to be entrusted with addressing social development;<sup>36</sup> and that these specialists would then become the technicians of reason,<sup>37</sup> as they were most familiar with the appropriate theories. Jacques Rancière rounded off this critique, when he identified a tendency among intellectuals who refer to classical Marxism to speak in the name of and on behalf of subalterns, without actually enabling them to speak for themselves. This constructs subalterns (not only the proletarians) as lacking the capacity to reflect and as unable to conduct science. This denies them a voice, which is important because if they were to begin to speak for themselves, they would no longer need anyone to speak for them. This situation prevents subalterns from leaving the place assigned to them in the social hierarchy.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, it leads intellectuals to develop a paternalistic relationship towards subalterns and enables intellectuals to make policy and theory *for* the oppressed and humiliated in the world, instead of *with* them; in fact, this is done preferably *without* them. Self-liberation is clearly unthinkable in this context.

The fact that intellectuals attempt to become the voice *of* subaltern groups constitutes a further unreflective remnant of Leninism; a similar critique applies to the relations with the proletariat mentioned above and basically to any relationship to large collective entities (such as class and nation). These entities represent “real fictions” and “imagined communities” (Benedict Anderson)<sup>39</sup>, which require a voice due to their reified constructions. Intellectuals or elites, who

then hold the power to define that voice, then assume this role. This process is described by André Gorz in *Farewell to the Proletariat*<sup>40</sup>; a situation that derives from the metaphysical aspect of the concept of the proletariat that the young Marx adopted from Hegel.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the warnings of Bakunin, Castoriadis, Gorz, and Rancière, the disastrous history of 20<sup>th</sup> century socialist movements proved to be characterized all too often by a dominating practice and a practice of domination. Marx clearly underestimated the importance of Bakunin's warning when he argued that he had only used "scientific socialism" to distinguish what he was referring to from utopian socialism.<sup>42</sup> In doing so, Marx stayed clear of the core of Bakunin's argument. At the same time, Bakunin's critique was too rash, because merely applying scientific knowledge in social struggles need not imply the necessity of an intellectual elite.<sup>43</sup> However, Bakunin would be right if the Taylorist and Fordist separation of mental and manual labor in capitalist societies were to be rigidly applied to left-wing political movements. Yet such a situation is only likely if the possibility is ruled out in advance that a broad section of society might consciously appropriate science (although it has otherwise always been shaped by the bourgeoisie) as part of its political struggle and transform its needs accordingly. Clearly, Bakunin's view is based on the assumption that Marxism devalues any means of self-enlightenment that does not involve scientific knowledge.<sup>44</sup> However, as we have seen, Rosa Luxemburg strongly supported the diverse learning processes experienced by subalterns as part of the political struggle; this demonstrates a clear weakness in Bakunin's argument.

It is important to be clear that the chances of the leadership relinquishing its special role, the likelihood that scientific knowledge will no longer be privileged as part of the political process (meaning other forms of knowledge and learning will be more highly valued), and even the possibility that subaltern groups might appropriate science, all depend on the specific social context. Karl-Heinz Roth is probably right to assume that the intellectualization of social labor and the proletarianization of the intelligentsia, which are accompanying Post-Fordism, are likely to promote the positive developments set out above.<sup>45</sup> This is at least reason to be hopeful.

### **Can subaltern groups have a voice without intellectuals as their mediators?**

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has provided new perspectives both on the possibilities of reducing the privileged status of scientific knowledge in political processes, and on what constitutes the

boundaries of such knowledge. Spivak has taken up Gramsci's concept of subalternity and instead of applying it to organized labor movements, applies it to marginalized groups. In doing so, Spivak raises the question as to whether marginalized groups will ever be able to gain a voice, and as such have public relevance.<sup>46</sup> Her theory is far-reaching: it implies that even intellectuals such as Bakunin, Castoriadis or Rancière, who demand that the intelligentsia stop speaking for subalterns, and instead that subalterns finally be listened to, may actually massively hinder these groups from gaining a voice, even if this is not their intention.

Spivak argues that this can happen in a twofold manner. First, subalterns generally lack cultural and social capital – skills such as writing texts, contacts to the media, and the necessary knowledge of dominant discourses – that are necessary if they are ever to gain access to the funds that would enable their positions to be effectively disseminated. This problem is made more serious insofar as institutions of the organized counter-media generally face similar mechanisms of exclusion to those faced by the mainstream media. Second, even when subaltern groups do have a voice, they are by no means always in a position to be heard and understood. Spivak points out that as subaltern groups are denied the capacity to speak, even when they try to gain a voice they are still unable to make themselves heard. Spivak views this as an essential point, as both speaking and listening are needed to complete the speech act.<sup>47</sup>

This situation occurs because intellectual experts tend to act as a transmission belt: they aim to transmit the meaning of what subalterns say to the public. This is especially true in the case of left-wing intellectuals, who, driven by good intentions, attempt to compensate for the subalterns' lack of cultural and social capital through their own commitment. In their desire to finally provide subalterns with a voice, intellectuals inadvertently produce clichés, but at the same time they claim that these views do not reflect their own positions. In doing so, intellectuals ensure that attempts by subalterns to gain a voice are incorporated in a distorted manner into their own – publicly effective – discourses. Spivak illustrates this with the example of widow burning in India, and Steyerl has summarized Spivak's view as follows: "These widows were silenced by a kind of discursive dilemma. Whereas the local patriarchy glorified them as preservers of a 'tradition', the British colonial powers viewed them as exemplary of India's barbaric backwardness something that had to be modernized with force. [...] Whatever the widows said,

one side at least – if not both – was able to (mis)use it to provide legitimacy to their own position.”<sup>48</sup>

Consequently, even if intellectuals who critically assess their own position and attempt to provide subalterns with a voice, there is a higher risk to worsen the exclusion faced by subalterns and to rob them of their voice. At the same time, training ‘organic’ intellectuals is not a way out of the subaltern dilemma. “Very often the excellent organic intellectuals [...], who become the voice of subalternity, are treated as alibi-subalterns. This treatment is a feature of desire, and stems from the fixation on individuals. The efforts of these individuals to become organic intellectuals are entirely nullified by their position as ‘this’ or ‘that’ subaltern. This leads to a ‘trivialized friendship’, with the remarkable results of people such as Rigobeta Menchú and Poppie Nongena”.<sup>49</sup>

### **Organic intellectuals and civil society socialism**

The realization that classes bring forth their own intellectuals, who fulfill their own special organic function, and that this is dependent on the particular context, is particularly linked to the work of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci argued that some intellectuals belonging to the ruling class: they exercise a variety of “the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government”. At the same time, they are also responsible for the production of consensus and ensuring that rule is accepted by the masses. As such, these intellectuals produce ideology. Within the state apparatus, intellectuals also assume the role of “disciplining the groups” that oppose the state or government.<sup>50</sup>

Gramsci’s views on the functions and roles of so-called organic intellectuals of the subalterns set a new course – they are, as are his concepts of civil society and socialism – (potentially) anti-Leninist. Gramsci viewed civil society as part of the so-called integral state, and it is essential to differentiate between this and the state’s bureaucratic-repressive apparatus. Civil society is located in the space where classes and interest groups struggle for hegemony, build (unstable) alliances and argue over the sovereignty of social and political occurrences. It is the central place of politics, and accordingly, of subversion and resistance. This means it can also act as the source and target of a radically democratic socialization.<sup>51</sup> Its aim is the *active* withdrawal of the repressive apparatus from civil society. Stuart Hall commended: “If the struggle for socialism in

modern society is a war of position, then our conception of socialism must be a *society of positions* – different places from which we can all begin the reconstruction of a society of which the state is only the anachronistic caretaker”.<sup>52</sup>

Gramsci viewed everyone involved in organizing socio-political developments as intellectuals. Within their own fields of action, these intellectuals implement the dialectical unity of theory and praxis, they generate theories saturated with reality out of their praxis, and orient their political praxis to these theories. They are both praxis-oriented and reflect on their praxis on an intellectual level. They direct their politics towards the contradictions found in common understandings and attempt to sublimate these contradictions to give rise to further emancipation. Organic and traditional intellectuals are divided according to class, which means they produce hegemony and counter-hegemony, but because they stem from the center of a particular social group, they speak the language of the masses, and are products of their class both politically and culturally.

It is essential to realize that party cadres could never assume the same role as organic intellectuals. If we were to abduct organic intellectuals and place them in the party headquarters, removed from the dialectic, they would become reified, know-nothing bureaucrats. Cut off from the source of their political experience, they would become “political Soup-Kaspars,”<sup>53</sup> whose fat merely takes on the appearance of muscle.

### **Critical intellectualism today**

The formation of a broad critical culture, an emancipatory education, and a new left-wing intellectualism is one of the key challenges faced by today’s socialist politics. However, the history of the theory of social movements over the last 200 years provides a number of valuable starting points.<sup>54</sup> But this same history also demonstrates how it should *not* be done if socialism and emancipation are to be combined in the future.<sup>55</sup> It was not by chance that Kautsky’s and Lenin’s authoritarianism, which imbued the technical and scientific intelligentsia with a privileged status and disempowered the general population, moved in the wrong historical direction. This is why it is essential to unveil closeted Leninism and Kautskyianism whenever it is found, and in whatever guise it emerges.

In contrast, Gramsci, Fanon, Luxemburg, and Spivak all provide concepts that possess strong critical relevance, and that can be usefully applied to new approaches.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, anti-authoritarians such as Rancière, Castoriadis, and Bakunin remind us that it is important to guard against emerging claims to power over political processes by the intelligentsia. Gramsci demonstrated that the best political praxis is not to inhibit or reform education from above so that it reflects our own particular understandings, but instead to accompany learning processes in the sense of civil society self-empowerment and relate them to common understandings. Fanon's and Luxemburg's views on the self-learning process of the working class are related to Gramsci's inasmuch as both understand teachers as students, and students as teachers. Finally, although Luxemburg, Gramsci, and Rancière are absolutely clear that subaltern groups must always speak for themselves, the question, raised by Spivak, is whether this is at all possible. Clearly, this point is something that we will have to continue working on.

---

<sup>1</sup> MEW 1, p. 346.

<sup>2</sup> See, Athanasios Karathanassis: 'Kritik, Wissenschaft und universitärer Wandel. Über die Verunmöglichung von Gesellschaftskritik an den Universitäten', in: Marcus Hawel and Stefan Kalmring, *Bildung mit links! Gesellschaftskritik und emanzipatorische Lernprozesse im flexibilisierten Kapitalismus*, Hamburg, 2014, pp. 98-117.

<sup>3</sup> MEW 8, p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> MEW 3, 5ff.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See MEW 1, p. 385.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> See LW 5, p. 389.

<sup>10</sup> LW 5, p. 396.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Agnoli 2001, p. 265.

<sup>13</sup> LW 25, p. 40.

<sup>14</sup> Korsch 1974, p. 323.

<sup>15</sup> Guérin 1979, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> Trotsky 1970, p. 68

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> LuxW 2, p. 117.

<sup>19</sup> Vester 1970.

<sup>20</sup> See Thompson 1987.

<sup>21</sup> LuxW 1/2, p. 396.

<sup>22</sup> See Schmiederer 2009.

<sup>23</sup> LuxW 1/2, p. 396. See, Anke Clasen, and Malte Meyer, 'Lernen und Verlernen. Rosa Luxemburgs Beitrag zur Arbeiter\_innenbildung und Schulkritik', in: Hawel and Kalmring, *Bildung mit links!*, pp. 34-46.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> MEW 1, p. 346.

<sup>27</sup> Weil 1987, p. 149.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 140.

<sup>29</sup> LuxW 2, pp. 344ff.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 350.

- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 353.  
<sup>32</sup> Krahl 1971.  
<sup>33</sup> Fanon 1981, p. 110.  
<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 169.  
<sup>35</sup> Bakunin 1983, p. 614.  
<sup>36</sup> Castoriadis 1990, p. 101.  
<sup>37</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>38</sup> See Rancière 2010.  
<sup>39</sup> See Anderson 1991.  
<sup>40</sup> See Gorz 1980.  
<sup>41</sup> See Hawel 2014.  
<sup>42</sup> See MEW 18, p. 636f.  
<sup>43</sup> See Kalmring 2012, p. 216f.  
<sup>44</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>45</sup> See Roth 2006.  
<sup>46</sup> See Spivak 2011.  
<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 127.  
<sup>48</sup> Steyerl 2011, p. 12.  
<sup>49</sup> Spivak 2011, p. 127.  
<sup>50</sup> See Gramsci 1999.  
<sup>51</sup> See Kebir 1990.  
<sup>52</sup> Hall 1989, p. 235.  
<sup>53</sup> Brückner 1982, p. 26.  
<sup>54</sup> See Gerlach, Kalmring, and Nowak 2003.  
<sup>55</sup> See Hawel 2012.  
<sup>56</sup> See Kalmring 2012.

## References

- Agnoli, Johannes (2001): Nachbemerkenungen über die politische Sprengkraft der Skepsis, in: Agnoli: Politik und Geschichte. Schriften zur Theorie, Freiburg, p. 261-265.
- Anderson, Benedikt (1991): Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, London.
- Bakunin, Michael (1983): Staatlichkeit und Anarchie, in: Bakunin: Staatlichkeit und Anarchie und andere Schriften, hrsg. von Horst Stuke, Frankfurt a.M./Berlin/Wien, p. 417-635.
- Barth, Hans (1974): Wahrheit und Ideologie, Frankfurt a.M. Bauer, Christoph et al. (2010): Hochschule im Neoliberalismus. Kritik der Lehre und des Studiums aus Sicht Frankfurter Studierender und Lehrender, Frankfurt a.M.
- Behring, Dietz (1982): Die Intellektuellen. Geschichte eines Schimpfwortes, Berlin/Wien.
- Brand, Ulrich (2012): Kritische Intellektualität als komplexes Projekt, in: Demirović, Alex et al. (Editor): Gegen den Neoliberalismus andenken. Linke Wissenspolitik und sozialistische Perspektiven, Hamburg, p. 37-42.
- Brückner, Peter (1982): Das schwierige Verhältnis von Parteilichkeit und Wahrheitsanspruch, hrsg. von den Basisgruppen an der Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Bochum.



- Castoriadis, Cornelius (1990): Gesellschaft als imaginäre Institution. Entwurf einer politischen Philosophie, Frankfurt a.M.
- Demirović, Alex/Bischoff, Joachim/Lieber, Christoph (2006): Intellektuelle zwischen Fordismus und Postfordismus, Supplement der Zeitschrift Sozialismus, Heft 7-8.
- Fanon, Frantz (1981): Die Verdammten dieser Erde, Frankfurt a.M.
- Fetscher, Iring (2004): Marx, 1818-1883, Freiburg.
- Gerlach, Olaf/Kalmring, Stefan/Nowak, Andreas (Editor) (2003): Mit Marx ins 21. Jahrhundert. Zur Aktualität der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie, Hamburg.
- Gorz, André (1980): Abschied von Proletariat – jenseits des Sozialismus, Frankfurt a.M.
- Gramsci, Antonio (1999): Gefängnishefte, Band 5, 8. und 9. Heft, edited by Klaus Bochmann, Wolfgang Fritz Haug and Peter Jehle, Hamburg.
- Groh, Dieter (1973): Negative Integration und revolutionärer Attentismus. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges, Berlin.
- Guérin, Daniel (1979): Anarchismus und Marxismus, 3. Edition, Frankfurt a.M.
- Hall, Stuart (1989): Der Staat – der alte Verwalter des Sozialismus, in: Hall: Ideologie, Kultur, Rassismus. Ausgewählte Schriften 1, Hamburg, p. 220-235.
- Hauck, Gerhard (1984): Geschichte der soziologischen Theorie. Eine ideologiekritische Einführung, Reinbeck bei Hamburg.
- Hawel, Marcus (2012): Krise und Geschichte. Zum Entstehungszusammenhang kritischer Theorie, in: Hawel, Marcus/Blanke, Moritz (Editor): Kritische Theorie der Krise, Berlin.
- Hawel, Marcus (2013): Von Schablonen und Masken, in: ders./Herausgeber\_innen\_kollektiv (Editor): Work in Progress. Work on Progress. Beiträge kritischer Wissenschaft. Doktorand\_innen-Jahrbuch der Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Hamburg, p. 9-18.
- Hawel, Marcus (2014): Der lange Abschied vom Proletariat. Erneuerungsversuche des westlichen Marxismus, in: Berliner Debatte Initial, Heft 4, Jg. 24, p. 17-34.
- Hegel, Georg W.F. (1970): Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts. Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft, Frankfurt a.M.
- Kalmring, Stefan (2012): Die Lust zur Kritik. Plädoyer für soziale Emanzipation, Berlin.
- Kautsky, Karl (1901f.): Die Revision des Programms der Sozialdemokratie in Österreich, in: Die neue Zeit, Heft 3, 20. Jg., 1. Bd., p. 79-80.
- Kebir, Sabine (1990): Antonio Gramscis Zivilgesellschaft. Basis demokratischer Vergesellschaftung, in: Initial. Die Berliner Debatte, Nr. 5, p. 528-533.

- Korsch, Karl (1974): Politische Texte, hrsg. von Erich Gerlach und Jürgen Seiffert, Wiener Neustadt.
- Krahl, Hans-Jürgen (1971): Konstitution und Klassenkampf. Zur historischen Dialektik von bürgerlicher Emanzipation und proletarischer Revolution. Schriften, Reden und Entwürfe aus den Jahren 1966-1970, Frankfurt a.M.
- Lenin, Wladimir Iljitsch Uljanov: Werke, Berlin (Ost), 1956ff. (quoted as LW).
- Luxemburg, Rosa: Gesammelte Werke, Berlin (Ost), 1970ff. (quoted as LuxW).
- Marx, Karl/Engels, Friedrich: Werke, Berlin (Ost), 1956ff. (quoted as MEW).
- Rancière, Jacques (2010): Der Philosoph und seine Armen, Wien.
- Roth, Karl-Heinz (2006): Die Intelligenz und die soziale Frage. Aus heutiger Sicht, in: Grundrisse. Zeitschrift für linke Theorie und Debatte, Nr. 18, p. 5-11.
- Sartre, Jean Paul/Gavi, Philippe/Victor, Pierre (1976): Der Intellektuelle als Revolutionär, Reinbeck bei Hamburg.
- Schmiederer, Ursula (2009): Quicklebendig. Zum Verhältnis von Organisation und Spontaneität bei Rosa Luxemburg, in: ak – analyse & kritik – Zeitung für linke Debatte und Praxis, Nr. 535.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (2011): Can the Subaltern speak? Postkolonialität und subalterne Artikulation, Wien/Berlin.
- Steyerl, Hilto (2011): Die Gegenwart der Subalternen, in: Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (2011): Can the Subaltern speak? Postkolonialität und subalterne Artikulation, Wien/Berlin, p. 5-16.
- Thompson, Edward P. (1987): Die Entstehung der englischen Arbeiterklasse, 2 Bände, Frankfurt a.M.
- Trotsky, Leo (1970): Schriften zur Revolutionären Organisation, hrsg. von Hartmut Mehringer, Reinbeck bei Hamburg.
- Vester, Michael (1970): Die Entstehung des Proletariats als Lernprozess. Die Entstehung antikapitalistischer Theorie und Praxis in England 1792-1848, Frankfurt a.M.
- Weil, Simone (1987): Unterdrückung und Freiheit, edited by Heinz Abosch, München.
- Žižek, Slavoj (2011): Willkommen in interessanten Zeiten, Hamburg.

### **Author and Correspondence Details**

Dr. Marcus Hawel and Dr. Stefan Kalmring are both Researcher for Education Policy at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Germany/Berlin. Contact: hawel@rosalux.de / kalmring@rosalux.de