

# Lenin on Learning and the Development of Revolutionary Consciousness

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## **Abstract**

*In this article we ask, what was Lenin's idea of education and learning and what was needed in developing revolutionary consciousness in the service of the emerging Soviet Union? We suggest that bringing Lenin's ideas of education and learning back into focus in educational theory, and especially in critical pedagogy, it is possible to search for alternatives to the present educational policies and unite the ninety-nine percent of the population against the tyranny of the one percent. The Lenin embraced in this article is molded in the lived reality of everyday life and in the human condition, and his message to the present is clear: there are only alternatives!*

**Keywords:** *critical pedagogy, class struggle, Lenin, neoliberalism, revolutionary consciousness*

## **Why Lenin?**

After the long years of ideological confusion Marxist–Leninism has slowly returned to the stage of political and cultural struggle and aroused interest also in critical social and educational sciences. As Derek Ford and Curry Malott (2019, p. ix) state, in recent years “activists, organizers, and even younger radical

academics have increasingly turned to Leninism and the practical and theoretical experience of the struggles of working class and oppressed people for inspiration and to understand their own struggles.” At the same time the problem “is that the revolutionary theory of Marxism–Leninism is at worst discredited, and at best seen as one theory among an almost endless assortment of defeatist bourgeois academic theories” (ibid, p. x). As the universities around the world have been domesticated, neo-liberalized and attacked by right-wing governments, Marxism–Leninism has been purged from educational theory. Now, as Ford and Malott further suggest, it is time to free Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) from his mausoleum and study his educational lessons in our era of climate panic and lethal neoliberalism.<sup>1</sup>

In a general historical narrative Lenin has a place in the category of important 20th century figures because he influenced world history and he invented Marxism as a state-political doctrine. He spent the greater part of his life in revolutionary confrontation with the Russian autocracy and monarchist elite. He was also a practicing revolutionary in transforming tsarist Russia, based on the division between aristocracy and serfdom, into the Soviet state and hoped that the socialist revolution will eventually go global. The Soviet Union, as the center of gravity in the proletarian struggle for much of the twentieth century, gave a new hope for the world’s oppressed. “It was the armory from which the world’s oppressed drew their weapons to overthrow their oppressors, and it fertilized a counter-hegemonic bloc to imperialism, allowing the class war against the bourgeoisie to take on a truly global character for the first time in history” (Ford 2016a, p. ix). In some right-wing conservative interpretations Lenin has earned a place in the horror cabinet of history as any other leftist revolutionary. These grand narratives have often forgotten that besides his leadership in the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917 he spent a good part of his adult life studying extensively history, philosophy and the social sciences, especially the Marxist

strand of thought, and publishing a large amount of political and philosophical texts. In the end his collected works consisted of 45 volumes.

In this article we ask, what was Lenin's idea of education and learning and what was needed, in Lenin's view, in developing proletarian revolutionary consciousness? In conclusion we ponder the relevance of Lenin's educational thinking in today's theory of education. Our method is close reading of Lenin's remarks on learning and education from the vast estate of his collected writings found in digital format (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/cw/>). We place Lenin directly opposite to the forces of exploitation and capital domination and put the worker and the student on the center stage of human engagement. Our purpose in bringing Lenin into active leftists discussion in critical pedagogy, and the social sciences in general, is not to reintroduce Lenin as a soulless mummy, or Leninism as a lifeless dogmatism but rather to reinvent his thinking as a creative counterforce to the present "disaster capitalism" and especially its ideological hegemony in current education policies. By doing this we try to be committed to the fact that Lenin "was always learning from life, from the struggle and from the working class" (Molyneux 2017, p. 215). In what follows we will first discuss Lenin's conception of learning and revolutionary consciousness, and then the need for active revolutionary pedagogy that can challenge capitalism as an ideological formation based on exploitation of people and the planet.

### **Lenin and Learning: Revolution Needs to Be Taught**

Lenin was an autodidact who studied widely, among other subjects, philosophy, economics, sociology and world history. He "*had a wonderful knowledge of Marx*" writes an unknown contemporary in the early 1930s, and continues that "[I]n 1893, when he came to St. Petersburg, he astonished all of us who were Marxists at the time with his tremendous knowledge of the works of Marx and Engels" (see Krupskaya 1933, italics in original). Lenin's famous conclusion was that it is impossible to comprehend Marx without studying first the entire Hegel's

*Logic*. He added that the consequence of this is that in the last fifty years there has not been a single Marxist who would have understood Marx properly (Service 2001, p. 288).

What was characteristic about Lenin's autodidactic style of learning was that when necessary, e.g. in the cases of Aristotle *Metaphysics* and Hegel's *History of Philosophy*, he flexibly changed the basic parameters of his thinking. Thus, after studying Aristotle and Hegel he replaced his old politico-philosophical paradigm, absorbed a new belief system that stated that reality is a liquid entity and to know it is to act upon it, and established the foundations of his theory of proletarian revolution. Lenin's inquiries on such philosophical classics prepared him with thinking tools that emphasized the dynamic nature of reality and the pragmatic approach in politics. From this the leading ideas ought to be poured, chopped, fluid, mobile, relative, and connected to each other; in a word, they were a combination of contradictions and in that character would enclose the whole world. (Service 2001, pp. 289–291.)

In the spirit of modernity Lenin defined socialist revolution “as a *substitution for*, instead of *continuation of*, the bourgeois revolution,” and according to Zygmunt Bauman this “was the founding act of communism” (Bauman 1992, p. 166, italics in original). As Bauman further notes, Lenin wanted to skip the capitalists from the equation of a modern society altogether. “The good society could be, had to be constructed right away, before the capitalists had a chance to mismanage and the workers to sample the outcomes of their mismanagement; or, rather, its designers should take over the management of society right away, without waiting for the consequences of mismanagement to show up. Capitalism was an unnecessary deflection from the path of Reason.” (Bauman 1992, p. 167.)

The period of learning to see the world anew produced Lenin's "prolonged explosion of utopian energy" which can be termed, after McLaren and Farahmandpur (2004, p. 64), as "The Event of Lenin." It was followed by Lenin's political orientation to seize the moment and take the state power; this was his second move (we might call it as The Event of the Real Politics), as he realized "the uniqueness of the state power," as Linera (2017) has made explicit:

"From then on there will be, in the minds of the people, in the institutions of government and in the defeated classes themselves, a single state project. Therefore, the defeated force enters into a situation of disbanding, and the worst part is that it loses faith in itself. It is not as if the defeated social classes disappeared; what disappears, for a good time, is its organization, its moral force, its project of country for the society. Materially they are classes in the process of domination, but fundamentally they cease to be a political subject. Consolidating this defeat requires the victorious social forces to make punctual blows to the regime of ownership of the great means of production, weakening their organizational structures in civil society, incorporating their flags in the victorious project, recruiting administrative cadres, promoting the various types of political transformation of the old intelligentsia, etc., giving rise to a new phase of the hegemony corresponding to the period of stabilization of the new power." (Linera 2017, pp. 272–273.)

Lenin believed that all education needed to be fundamentally political in order to prepare the proletariat for the revolution and the coming Soviet state, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Thus "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 1920a, p. 364). In his writings and speeches he wanted to galvanize the proletariat to fight the oppressor. He criticized relentlessly the aristocracy and the capitalist class, but also warned the internalized exploiter within the proletariat. In his speech to the youth league he said that "[I]t was not difficult to drive out

the tsar – that required only a few days. It was not very difficult to drive out the landowners – that was done in a few months. Nor was it very difficult to drive out the capitalists. But it is incomparably more difficult to abolish classes; we still have the division into workers and peasants.” (Lenin 1920c, p. 292.) For this reason, he insisted that the task of the communist youth was to create a revolutionary body who would go and teach communism to the masses as an active praxis for revolutionary transformation.

Teaching and agitation were necessary for Lenin knew that revolution was by no means an inevitable incident. Rather, it needed to be taught and announced by many means. Revolutionary propaganda had to be distributed widely and in all possible venues.<sup>2</sup> For Lenin, the point was to convince the people of the necessity of revolution. This is why his pedagogy was focused on the conducting of propaganda and agitation throughout society in order to provide the masses with an alternative view; that is, a revolutionary position in form and content. Lenin underlined the dissecting of the base and superstructure of society, as Marx had written, in educating people for revolutionary consciousness and activity. Communist education was for “genuine political consciousness” and to “respond to all cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse” as Lenin proclaimed (Lenin 1902, p. 42). He believed that the task of creating a new revolutionary way of being and thinking like a communist was summed up in the simple verb: to learn (Lenin 1920c). Interestingly, learning to be a communist, writes Lenin, is not about rejecting all the old habits of thought, or old authoritarian educational theories and practices:

When we so often hear representatives of the youth, as well as certain advocates of a new system of education, attacking the old schools, claiming that they used the system of cramming, we say to them that we must take what was good in the old schools. We must not borrow the system of encumbering young people's minds

with an immense account of knowledge, nine-tenths of which was useless and one-tenth distorted. This, however, does not mean that we can restrict ourselves to communist conclusions and learn only communist slogans. You will not create communism that way. You can become a Communist only when you enrich your mind with a knowledge of all the treasures created by mankind. (Lenin 1920c, p. 287.)

The Arts were among those treasures Lenin was referring to. The early years of the Soviet state, “the period of 1917–1928, was exceptionally fertile in Russia” as Isabelle Garo (2017) has pointed out. “Such development was the occasion for virulent and passionate theoretical debates about the social function of the artist, his political role, the education of the people, the dissemination of old and new works, before the repressive turn of the 1930s which killed this bubbling moment.”<sup>3</sup> In another instance Lenin confirmed that the Soviet state and the proletarian culture could only be built on by the previous human culture.

Marxism has won its historic significance as the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat because, far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, it has, on the contrary, assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture. Only further work on this basis and in this direction, inspired by the practical experience of the proletarian dictatorship as the final stage in the struggle against every form of exploitation, can be recognised as the development of a genuine proletarian culture. (Lenin 1920b, p. 317.)

The development of a genuine proletarian culture cannot be done by just digesting all the information but by critically assessing it. Lenin cautioned the youth that they cannot develop as communists by using superficial techniques of learning or reaching only “cut and dry conclusions.” Instead they ought to work hard, be serious in their studies, and examine critically all the information they encounter. “If I know that I know little, I shall strive to learn more; but if a man says that he

is a Communist and that he need not know anything thoroughly, he will never become anything like a Communist” (Lenin 1920c, p. 288). Lenin thought that in order to create and sustain a new environment based on socialist ethics a revolutionary consciousness was needed, and it could be reached with thorough and critical education and hard and serious learning (Lenin, 1920c).

Lenin understood that education needed to develop in the student the desire to learn, to organize, to unite and to fight against the old way of thinking related to capitalist ideology. The old indoctrinate learning needed to be replaced by more reflective learning practices. It was necessary that the working class learnt to think for themselves and overcome the interests of the ruling class. Thus he stated that the old system of education needed to be replaced by “the ability to acquire the sum total of human knowledge, and to acquire it in such a way that communism shall not be something to be learned by rote, but something that you yourselves have thought over, something that will embody conclusions inevitable from the standpoint of present-day education” (Lenin 1920c, p. 289).

Besides the content of instruction, education as applied to a new socialist society needed a new morality. According to Lenin, the old morality was based on a rotten principle: “rob or be robbed; work for others or make others work for you; be a slave-owner or a slave” (Lenin 1920c, p. 293). A communist education would be based in the *communis* (commons). The act of learning would take on a common struggle for all people to build a society benefiting everyone. Lenin’s idea of education would form the link between the school and the community — the living organism of real-lived reality. Lenin had the understanding that schooling should have a role in raising the critical consciousness of the learners so that they can be active agents of their everyday lives and see the Soviet state with a critical awareness. But according to Lenin schooling should not be seen narrowly but in the context of lifelong learning. He believed that learning was a



lifelong endeavor and stated, “we could not believe in teaching, training, and education if they were restricted only to the schoolroom and divorced from the ferment of life” (Lenin 1920c, p. 295).

In this respect Lenin demanded “the army of teachers must set themselves tremendous tasks in the educational sphere, and above all must form the main army of socialist education” (Lenin 1918a, p. 445).

Life and knowledge must be liberated from the sway of capital, from the yoke of the bourgeoisie. The teachers must not confine themselves to narrow pedagogical duties. They must join forces with the entire body of the embattled working people. The task of the new pedagogics was to link up teaching activities with the socialist organisation of society. (Ibid. p. 445.)

### **Spontaneous Consciousness and Revolutionary Consciousness**

Thus, students needed to realize that lifelong learning, as part of other ferments of their lives, was political by nature — that ideology plays an integral part not only in their learning process but also in their everyday lives — and for that matter they needed to learn not only the school subjects but also their roles as communist human beings in the service of a new society. In other words, the students ought to acknowledge the fundamental role of ideologies as part of their revolutionary learning process. The first tasks were then to know the difference between Marxism as an ideology of the developing Soviet state and capitalism as a destructive and destructible ideology of the capitalist societies (Allman 2001). Within capitalist ideology there were “rob or be robbed” moral developments of the individual, a Social Darwinist tendency which took shape under the pretext of “every person for themselves.” Lenin observed that in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s the collective impulse in Russia and Europe had weakened, and collective wellbeing was decaying. Human living had become increasingly a matter of

individual survival and people had learnt to please the powerful and to be socialized into the norms of the capitalist system. In other words, people wittingly or unconsciously had surrendered to support and reproduce the system that had created the psychology of the profiteering society. These tendencies Lenin wanted to change by teaching the youth the basic principles of communism as follows:

Suppose I take a piece of this common property and grow on it twice as much grain as I need, and profiteer on the surplus? Suppose I argue that the more starving people there are, the more they will pay? Would I then be behaving like a Communist? No, I would be behaving like an exploiter, like a proprietor. That must be combated. If that is allowed to go on, things will revert to the rule of the capitalists, to the rule of the bourgeoisie, as has more than once happened in previous revolutions. To prevent the restoration of the rule of the capitalists and the bourgeoisie, we must not allow profiteering; we must not allow individuals to enrich themselves at the expense of the rest; the working people must unite with the proletariat and form a communist society. This is the principal feature of the fundamental task of the League and the organisation of the communist youth. (Lenin 1920c, p. 293).

Lenin was thus against the capitalist impulse that concerned itself only with self-interest and greed and stated quite plainly that people with a communist impulse would be able to fight capitalism and form a new society directly opposed to it by defending consciously and with courage their class interests. People needed to learn and implement communism in their daily lives and become the new Soviet person through communist education. At its core communist education was about “participation in the common struggle of all working people against the exploiters” (Lenin 1920c, p. 295). A communist education would allow people to become part of the “struggle against the exploiters, education in alliance with the proletariat against the self-seekers (...) against the psychology and habits which

say: I seek my own profit and don't care a rap for anything else." Learning thus would turn authentic when people take on a revolutionary consciousness and engage in a "conscious mass struggle against the exploiters." (Ibid. p. 294.) From the point of view of education, the key question was how to build a revolutionary consciousness.

Among the most important concepts in Lenin's educational theory were spontaneous consciousness and revolutionary consciousness. In Lenin's rationale the proletariat in general was in the stage of a spontaneous consciousness, that is, in an embryonic form of consciousness (Lenin 1902). His pedagogical idea was that the revolutionary intelligentsia should teach the proletariat revolutionary consciousness (see Ehrenberg 1983). A spontaneous, embryonic consciousness had many forms, one of them being as Lenin stated was a "trade union consciousness" – organizing unions and recruiting members, fighting against the employers and struggling for pro-labor legislation. For Lenin this was not enough and meant only reformism, the "ideological enslavement of the workers" by the capitalist ruling elite (Lenin 1902, p. 384). A revolutionary consciousness was more than a spontaneous happening and trade unionism. At first it meant the clear understanding of an economic, social, and political development of society.

The worker must have a clear picture in his mind of the economic nature and the social and political features of the landlord and the priest, the high state official and the peasant, the student and the vagabond; he must know their strong and weak points; he must grasp the meaning of all the catchwords and sophisms by which each class and each stratum camouflages its selfish strivings and its real 'inner workings'; he must understand what interests are reflected by certain institutions and certain laws and how they are reflected. But this 'clear picture' cannot be obtained from any book. It can be obtained only from living examples and from exposures that follow close upon what is going on about us at a given moment; upon what is being discussed, in whispers perhaps, by each one in his own way;

upon what finds expression in such and such events, in such and such statistics, in such and such court sentences, etc., etc. These comprehensive political exposures are an essential and fundamental condition for training the masses in revolutionary activity. (Lenin 1902, p. 413.)

The main responsibility for building such a revolutionary mind in the evolving Soviet state would rest with the revolutionary intellectuals combined with a vanguard party. They would lead the workers forward toward revolutionary socialism (see also Malott 2016a). Vanguardism had been Lenin's conscious choice in the early 1900's as he debated the political direction of the Российская социал-демократическая рабочая партия (The Russian Social Democratic Labour Party) with the Mensheviks faction who defended more moderate politics than Lenin's Bolsheviks.<sup>4</sup> Thus at the Third Congress of the Party in London in 1905 he insisted that the workers must have a firm place in the party organization.

To place workers on the committees is a political, not only a pedagogical, task. Workers have the class instinct, and, given some political experience, they pretty soon become staunch Social-Democrats. I should be strongly in favour of having eight workers to every two intellectuals on our committees. (Lenin 1905, p. 408.)

The workers ought to learn to be the new working-class intelligentsia for the coming Soviet state. Around the same time, as Lenin made the above suggestion of increasing the amount of workers on the committees, he drafted a manuscript, published only twenty years later, in which he emphasized that there is always an element of pedagogy in party politics and political activity in general. Raising the revolutionary consciousness of all the workers is a necessity and it must be done in a pedagogically correct manner:

We must educate the whole class of wage-workers to the role of fighters for the emancipation of mankind from all oppression. We must constantly teach more and

more sections of this class; we must learn to approach the most backward, the most undeveloped members of this class, those who are least influenced by our science and the science of life, so as to be able to speak to them, to draw closer to them, to raise them steadily and patiently to the level of Social-Democratic consciousness, without making a dry dogma out of our doctrine—to teach them not only from books, but through participation in the daily struggle for existence of these backward and undeveloped strata of the proletariat. (Lenin 1926, p. 454.)

Not only the act of education but also training in agitation and press propaganda were required in developing the workers' revolutionary mass movement. Lenin stated “the consciousness of the working masses cannot be genuine class-consciousness, unless the workers learn, from concrete, and above all from topical, political facts and events to observe *every* other social class in all manifestations of its intellectual, ethical, and political life” (Lenin 1902, p. 412). In terms of propaganda Lenin stated in 1918 that the Russian press has so far concentrated on the petty political issues and the press in all capitalist countries “have striven to divert the attention of the masses from the really important, profound and fundamental questions of our life”. The urgent task in the Soviet state will thus be “to convert the press from an organ mainly devoted to communicating the political news of the day into a serious organ for educating the mass of the population in economics” (Lenin 1918b, p. 203).

Lenin laid bare his definition for an activist, revolutionary-centered pedagogy by insisting that it was necessary for the workers to grasp “a clear picture in his mind of the economic nature and the social and political features” that are occurring in her society. He cautioned that such learning cannot come from a book but rather from “living examples and from exposures that follow close upon what is going on about us at a given moment: upon what is being discussed, in whispers perhaps, by each one in his own way; upon what finds expression in such and such events (...) These comprehensive political exposures are an essential and

*fundamental* condition for training the masses in revolutionary activity.” (Lenin 1902, p. 413, italics in original).<sup>5</sup>

Lenin stressed the dialectic between the capitalist system and the worker so that the worker can see the contradiction between their interests and the interests of the capitalist system and the capitalists who support it. Therefore, it was a pedagogy of conflict and confrontation because it should bring students into the realms of actual freedom where the emphasis is on the ability to directly challenge the ways and means that the capitalist system incorporates everyday life. The basic intent was to fight for a revolutionary form of socialism throughout the social commons: in the workplace, the schools, in the universities and any other public place. Lenin’s revolutionary pedagogy was not seen as neutral but as an active element of society on behalf of the working people, and the marginalized, the excluded, the unemployed, the poor, the elderly and youth in need and for the invisible people in society.

This is where Lenin’s political awakening, ‘The Event of the Real Politics,’ was so important, for through grasping the foundations of Marxism, he realized that the capitalist system will never create a socially just society. The most that could be accomplished without a revolutionary consciousness (a coming together of a revolutionary theory and praxis) were a series of economic and political reforms that were usually initiated by trade unions and redistributive politics that would at best prolong the misery of the capitalist system. Thus, he believed that reformism (a spontaneous consciousness) could never succeed in ushering in an equal society; it was only an opportunistic “alliance between a section of the workers and the bourgeoisie, directed against the mass of the proletariat” (Lenin 1915, p. 242).<sup>6</sup>

## **The Importance of Active Philosophy**

Lenin endorsed Marx's famous eleventh Feuerbach thesis ("The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it") in his own activist educational philosophy. He believed that an active-oriented educational philosophy could be a weapon for the working class to use in their struggle to create an equal, proletarian way of being in the world, away from capitalism and the chaos and the constant repetitive crisis that it causes for the working people. Referring to Marx and Engels Lenin wrote: "The slaves, as we know, revolted, rioted, started civil wars, but they could never create a class-conscious majority and parties to lead the struggle, they could not clearly realize what their aims were, and even the most revolutionary moments of history they were pawns in the hands of the ruling classes" (Lenin 1919, p. 486). In relation to the past movements for emancipation, the party was a progressive change in the emancipatory struggle for liberation, a class-conscious organization, which would be united in its fight against the social relations of capital. This is where theory and practice become the spiritual and material weapon of the working class as theory is tied with practice in order to achieve a common objective: working class unity against a common enemy, that is, capitalism.

In Lenin's view theory with practice had to do with the active existence of the human being in the social, economic and political aspects of existence. It was this realm of thought and practice that an active philosophical life was not only lived and experienced by humanity, but which also fermented the ideological battle for its own liberation. Lenin demanded that classrooms ought to be everywhere, and theory put into active revolutionary practice. People needed to realize that the old ideological structures, comprised of institutions of power, are kept alive by a ruling elite and it was their task to crush the old order and replace it by a new structure which represented their interests. This particular class was the working class and it was its duty to become enlightened and organize for the struggle

involved through an educational practice of class struggle (Lenin 1913, p. 28). This was done by teaching the educators from the ranks of the working class to be *tribunus plebis*, tribunes of the people, who bring forth the political class consciousness not only to the proletariat but to “all classes of the population; they must dispatch units of their army in all directions” (Lenin 1902, p. 422).

The Social-Democrat’s ideal should not be the trade-union secretary, but *the tribune of the people*, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth *before all* his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for *all* and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat. (Ibid. p. 423. Italics in original.)

Education was indeed the key in overcoming the politico-economic order in Russia and according to Lenin education had to be grounded in a ruthless critique of the capitalist economic and political system. This ruthless critique was to be created not only as a direct challenge to capitalism but also to transforming the social consciousness of the working class. The goal for Lenin was not only the complete overthrow of the capitalist economic order but also changing the idea of learning and education to meet the requirements of socialism and embrace a socialist learning ethic. In this regard he had very simple, almost *laissez-faire* type of instructions for the people involved in establishing the beginnings of the Soviet government and education under socialism:

Very often delegations of workers and peasants come to the government and ask, for example, what to do with such-and-such a piece of land. And frequently I myself have felt embarrassed when I saw that they had no very definite views. And



I said to them: you are the power, do all you want to do, take all you want, we shall support you, but take care of production, see that production is useful. Take up useful work, you will make mistakes, but you will learn. (Lenin 1918c, p. 468.)

Lenin emphasized the socialist ethic of worker control through practice was an important starting point for self-directed learning and democratic control of the workplace and the land. He did not want workers to be objectified and alienated from their work as they were in the former system but stated that “the workers have already begun to learn; they have already begun to fight against the saboteurs. People have transformed education into a fence which hinders the advance of the toilers: this will be pulled down.” (Ibid. p. 468.) “Pulling down the fence” of the old education system was of prime importance for the advancement of revolutionary thinking and learning.

Lenin understood that putting all the contradictions inherent in capitalism on the table for all workers to see would not give credence for a socialist alternative. The work of the revolutionary in transforming the commons was to be acted upon and spoken about in practical and plain terms. Lenin’s methodology was centered in practical education, a unity between theory and practice. Socialism needed to be presented to the working class in a positive vocabulary with a firm conviction that the socialist ideology was not a utopian dream but a real alternative to capitalism. Capitalism was built upon destructive mechanisms, based on oppression and exploitation of the working class, which under the right circumstances could be challenged and replaced through revolutionary action.

Although Lenin’s active educational philosophy could be seen as top-down, or even as banking education, in Freire’s terms, there is also a strong element of pedagogy of reflection, a certain restraint, in Lenin’s thinking as Tyson E. Lewis has pointed out:

Like studying, restraint is an action that deactualizes itself, remaining impotential. The lesson of restraint is not that “I will do something” or that “I will not do something” but rather that “I can/cannot” do something. Whereas liberal democrats assume to know what to do and how to do it through calculated prediction and the critical pedagogue assumes to know what to do and how to do it through prophetic knowledge of historical necessity, the communist *does not necessarily know what to do and thus must study the situation*. (Lewis 2016, p. xvi, italics in original.)

## **Lenin Today?**

What, then, is Lenin’s pedagogical legacy today? Where, if anywhere, do we find his pedagogical ideas in the current educational discourse? Are there any signs of his pedagogy in today’s educational theory? One corner of educational theory, namely critical pedagogy, is the place to look for the signs. We suggest that currently there are four main strands in critical pedagogy. Firstly, there is practical, *organic critical pedagogy* that is shown in the everyday life of schools and other sites of education and learning. Many teachers around the world, who know Paulo Freire’s influential work and share some of the basic premises of critical pedagogy, can in some way or another apply critical pedagogy in their classrooms. They can create creative dialogues about the various aspects of capitalism and give their students a chance to bring their experiences to the fore. This way the classroom will transform into a laboratory of a society and society can become a living classroom in which students and teachers alike act as transformative intellectuals (see Giroux 1988). As Giroux (2006, p. 211) has put it, “[p]ublic and higher education may be one of the few sites available in which students learn the skills of social citizenship and learn how to deepen and expand the possibilities of collective agency and democratic life.”

Secondly, there is a *traditional critical pedagogy* best represented by Henry Giroux, the founding figure of U.S. based critical pedagogy. With his critical

commentaries and *Zeitgeist* analyzes he has relentlessly taught, from one decade to the next, the general public about the critical issues of the world (in Freire's words, how 'to read the word and the world') (see Giroux 2018). These two genres of critical pedagogy, organic and traditional, have still operated *inside* the capitalist framework whereas the third, what Paula Allman has titled as revolutionary critical pedagogy and Peter McLaren as *critical revolutionary pedagogy*, has been strongly influenced by Marx's theory of capitalism and class structure (see, e.g., Allman 2001; McLaren 2005, McLaren 2015; see also Hill 2009). The third approach has been in tenacious opposition towards capitalism and neoliberalism as the new imperialism, and in search for the Marxist politico-educational alternatives.

In addition, the fourth genre of critical pedagogy has been evolving at least since 2000. What we would name as a *communist critical pedagogy* is wonderfully present in the works of Derek R. Ford, Curry Malott (see, e.g., Ford 2016b; Malott 2016b). In the context of communist critical pedagogy, Ford and Malott openly argue for "the global class struggle, the necessity to combat anti-communism and to defend workers' states and actually existing socialism" (Ford & Malott 2015, p. 1). And as Rikowski states this "is also a struggle to create new forms of personality and individual existence" (Rikowski 2004, p. 567). In the current debate Jodi Dean has emphasized the role of the revolutionary communist party and criticized the left for the wishful thinking visible in the moments of street and social media demonstrations. She argues that the energies directed at street activism such as Occupy Wall Street should be put into building a party that acts as a collective political subject. Dean states that the revolutionary party operates not only at a conscious level but also as a knot of unconscious processes and thus binds people together. (Dean 2012; Dean 2017.)

As Ford (2017) has further suggested, in a communist critical pedagogy the communist revolutionary party is seen as a necessary vehicle for the development of revolutionary class consciousness and the class struggle. The party can teach “class-consciousness, a learning of the tendencies and laws of capital accumulation and the dynamics of imperialism, racism, and national oppression,” and members of the communist party are able to feel “an affective intensity” with other members as they realize “that things can be otherwise and that this otherwise is already present, already germinating.” (p. 460.) Thus, we suggest that it is precisely in the framework of communist critical pedagogy that Lenin’s legacy as a political and educational thinker fits best.

Undoubtedly the left of today, along with the part of practitioners and theorists of critical pedagogy, are honorably good at criticizing the current state of affairs. Sometimes their moral righteousness seems to be almost overdeveloped and this can be a problem. In the political context of right-wing onslaught and normalization of civic stupidity the leftist normative argumentation can be interpreted as a certain kind of *besserwisserism* especially in the alt-right media. Of course, there is a lot to criticize in the current world, and right-wing extremism must be denounced and opposed strongly. But what is also needed are collective initiatives, uniting the forces of the people of the world, the 99 %, and it is here that a lesson from Lenin is of value and might be necessary. For as Žižek has reminded us, we should not overestimate Lenin’s image as the “lone genius” masterminding the Revolution, but remember his contribution – while bypassing the Party nomenklatura – in “revolutionary micropolitics”: “the incredible explosion of grass-roots democracy, of local committees sprouting up all around Russia’s big cities and, ignoring the authority of the ‘legitimate’ government, taking matters into their own hands. This is the untold story of October Revolution, the obverse of the myth of the tiny group of ruthless dedicated revolutionaries which accomplished a *coup d’état*.” (Žižek 2002, pp. 6–7.)

This is an interpretation that integrates Lenin's revolutionary theory and his 'revolutionary micropolitics' as grass-roots democracy to the thinking of the renowned critical educator Paulo Freire. It is sometimes forgotten from the body of Freire studies that Freire had a firm revolutionary position in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (see Morrow 2013), and that, at the time of writing his book in Chile, he was in favor of political revolution that must precede a humanist-dialogical education. In his *magnum opus* Freire quotes Lenin's famous statement: "Without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement" (Freire 1970, p. 125). Furthermore, when pondering the possibility of political revolution Freire cites Dr. Orlando Aguirre Ortiz, the then Director of a Medical School at a Cuban University: "The revolution involves three 'P's': *palavra, povo, e pólvora* [word, people, and gunpowder]. The explosion of the gunpowder clears the people's perception of their concrete situation, in pursuit, through action, of their liberation." (Ibid. pp. 177–178.) Only after the political revolution – this is "the second stage, in which *the* reality of oppression has already been transformed" – a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, the pedagogy of the oppressed, "becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation," Freire confirms (ibid. p. 54).

In his speech at the *First All-Russia Congress on Education* Lenin emphasized the meaning of education as follows:

"Education is one of the component parts of the struggle we are now waging. We can counter hypocrisy and lies with the complete and honest truth. The [First World] war has shown plainly enough what the 'will of the majority' means, a phrase used as a cover by the bourgeoisie. It has shown that a handful of plutocrats drag whole nations to the slaughter in their own interests." (Lenin 1918d, p. 87.)

In terms of plutocracy little has changed in a hundred years if we look at the current state of the world after the rise of Donald Trump and right-wing

nationalism almost in every continent. Just a little over a hundred years ago, World War I ended with utter devastation for the planet and its inhabitants, and life became a vast 'wasteland' for many people. Such was Lenin's world in 1919 in the face of rampant capitalist imperialism but what about our planet today, a hundred years after Lenin's words? Do we have our own capitalist wastelands to face and if so, what is the solution? For Lenin, it was class struggle and revolution.

Lenin's aforesaid strategy of, in Žižek terms, 'revolutionary micropolitics', should be taken to heart in today's left politics and critical pedagogy in every corner of the globe: how to organize those multiple grassroots groups and peoples' associations that advance a needed political and ecological change? Perhaps we see them in the current demonstrations against climate change and the impact that this change is now having on our planet. Perhaps our current Lenin has the shape of a Swedish teenager named Greta Thunberg, who at rather short notice, has activated and inspired hundreds of thousands of young people all over the world to confront the biggest challenge of humanity, the unforeseen climate change. We need a critical pedagogy that can put aspects of Lenin into its core understanding of education and its purpose of revolutionizing the curriculum: to create a free space away from disaster capitalism. And we need students who will be pragmatic and radical so they can have a critical and a revolutionary awareness of everyday life to take upon themselves such a utopian spark. Students in critical pedagogy should have the abilities to challenge power relations within their society and make radical interventions to change the oppressive natures of diverse power imbalances.

For sure, Lenin, as others, had contradictory dimensions in his thinking. At one extreme he was a reluctant revolutionary who wanted to — and did — overcome the autocratic capitalist regime of the old Tsarist Russia and dreamed of smashing

international imperialism. On the other hand, he was a critical reflective thinker, an autodidact, who maintained that it was everyone's duty to learn to think and localize both the old powers of the given society and the new ones that can make a significant political change:

People always have been the foolish victims of deception and self-deception in politics, and they always will be until they have learnt to seek out the interests of some class or other behind all moral, religious, political and social phrases, declarations and promises. Champions of reforms and improvements will always be fooled by the defenders of the old order until they realise that every old institution, however barbarous and rotten it may appear to be, is kept going by the forces of certain ruling classes. And there is only one way of smashing the resistance of those classes, and that is to find, in the very society which surrounds us, the forces which can—and, owing to their social position, must—constitute the power capable of sweeping away the old and creating the new, and to enlighten and organise those forces for the struggle. (Lenin 1913, p. 28.)

This is the Lenin that keeps the revolutionary tradition alive, a living Lenin of human flesh and spirit that can challenge “the way things are,” and the right-wing's ideologically laden slogan “there is no alternative.” The Lenin embraced in this article is molded in the lived reality of everyday life and in the human condition, and his message to the present is clear: *there are only alternatives!* It is a Lenin that speaks to the oppressed, whether the disenfranchised, the socially excluded or those living in the marginalized borders of life; a Lenin which leans towards genuine working class creativity in the productive and spiritual sphere of lived existence; a Lenin formed in class struggle and in the revolutionary tradition of collective-realization; a Lenin designed to lead the working class away from a commodified, market-centered existence and into a different way of living; a Lenin which not only gives vision and purpose to human life but also to a collective valued existence where the human is connected to her reflective,

critical being; a Lenin that embraces “the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things.” (Marx & Engels 1976, p. 57)

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek brought Lenin back into the philosophical discussion in the early 2000s by understanding that this move was not fashionable and could cause ridicule and even hatred (Žižek 2002). Whereas mentioning Karl Marx in the university classroom or in the discourse of critical pedagogy might have been a source of ‘coolness’, at least for a while (see McLaren 1998, p. 450), Lenin has been doomed to stay in his mausoleum and his writings has gathered dust in library bookshelves for a good part of the 20th century.

<sup>2</sup> Lenin’s core ideas can nowadays be found everywhere, even from inside the U.S. entertainment industry. For example, media experts Naomi Burton and Nick Hayes are building a streaming platform service, a Netflix for socialists as, to “shift the culture towards one where socialism and overthrowing capitalism becomes the possibility.” According to Burton their Means TV “post-capitalist, subscription-based streaming platform’ will feature exclusively anti-capitalist content, ‘all of it with the idea that we have to be within the culture, introducing these ideas to people before they’re just accepted.’” Hayes states that the culture of revolt needs to be built “and tear down a lot of these individualist ideas that are pushed in entertainment.” They aim is to create “solidarity through entertainment, to build class consciousness, to build frustration and anger towards capitalism.” (Diavolo 2019.) In the Marxist-Leninist tradition the point would be to dig deep at the roots of the current stage of world capitalist development and bring “ruthless criticism” into the discussion. For Marx, this ruthless criticism must be merciless in its critique of “all that exists”— regardless of the results of the criticism and without concern for the ruling powers. (Marx 1844, p. 142). Lenin was also a ruthless of critic of the various strands of socialist thought that existed during his own revolutionary times and his 45 volumes of writings are full of this criticism as he dissected and reflected on his own social commons.

<sup>3</sup> “Concerning art, from the first years of the revolution, the theoretical and political debates were raging, extending those debates of the previous decades, involving artists, intellectuals, the highest levels of political leaders, such as Lenin and Trotsky to name a few regarding the questions: should art be autonomous? Should the works be accessible to the people? Should we draw from the Russian tradition, Western, hybridize them, inventing new forms, producing a proletarian culture? Groups and manifestos are born, currents clash, institutions of training and dissemination are in place, in



particular under the leadership of Anatoli Lounatcharski as the head of the Narkompros, the People's Commissariat for Education.” (Garo 2017, pp. 177–178.)

<sup>4</sup> Vanguardism was not Lenin’s invention, for before him a group called propagandists, led by a famous theorist of narodism, Pjotr Lavrov (1823–1900), had maintained that the people were not ready for the revolution and it was the task intellectuals as vanguards to teach the people and do continuous propaganda work (Troitski 2019, p. 73).

<sup>5</sup> This correlates with Peter McLaren’s critical revolutionary pedagogy which must be formulated in the “lived experiences” of people experiencing repression and oppression: a critical pedagogy will need to address these experiences from the standpoint of revolutionary theory and praxis and give voice to the oppressed (McLaren 1998, p. 459).

<sup>6</sup> Reformism can be considered off-center since the premise is to fight for evolutionary change for working class interests (Macnair 2008, p. 39) which usually ends in compromises with the neoliberal elite and the labor aristocracy, the upper echelons of the trade union movement at the expense of the worker and a continuation of power of the neoliberal economic and political elite.

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