

Review essay: Class, ethics and education

Paul Blackledge, *Marxism and Ethics: Freedom, Desire, and Revolution*

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I hesitate before sending JCEPS a review of a general work on Marxist philosophy, but consider its subject matter foundational to the development of a critical / socialist pedagogy. We are so accustomed to the framing of educational purpose in terms of individual opportunity, national competitiveness or (even nowadays!) personal growth, that we rarely consider human development in a collective sense. I hope readers will bear with me in this introduction to this remarkable book, and consider the implications for our project as critical educators.

I was reminded of this when translating a chapter for *Changing Schools: Alternative Ways to Make a World of Difference* (co-edited with Pat Thomson and Bob Lingard, 2012). The chapter *Pedagogy of the Landless* was a contribution by Roselia Salete Caldert of the Landless Workers Movement (MST) of Brazil. Going beyond the customary Enlightenment model of education as individual personal development (Bildung), she writes of the educator's role in the collaborative strivings of an oppressed community.

It is common to speak of education in terms of the formation (formação) of children into humane and responsible adults, but this is not a process that takes place in the abstract. The chapter begins therefore by locating the formation or

education of children and young people within the wider process of human development in struggle, which is itself an educative process. The context therefore is the formation of a new social subject which calls itself Sem Terra (people without land), and the task is to identify a pedagogy, a way of producing human beings who collectively take control of their own destiny. This is a pedagogy where the Movement itself is the principal educator, educating the landless by rooting them in a strong collectivity, and by putting them in motion in the struggle for their own humanity.

The chapter speaks of the regaining of dignity but in ways which raise political perspectives far more explicitly than we are used to.

What is educative about the Movement of Workers without Land, these lost beings astray from the earth, marginalized from everything and with life drifting away from between the toes of their bare feet, these miserable beings, seeming barely human, who suddenly (or not so suddenly) resolve, in thousands, to raise themselves up from the soil and struggle for the earth they have been torn from? In this moment they are struggling for the return of their human condition itself, realising that they have rights and can say *no* to a project of nation and society that wants to deny them the possibility of existence, and yet can't stop giving them a name, the 'excluded'. Now you know. It is for their future and for their children.

This struggle for respect and dignity is also a major challenge in the education of young people growing up in poverty in affluent economies such as Britain. What is so inspiring about our Brazilian comrade's account is her articulation of a collective process which is politically situated.

Paul Blackledge's book makes this move from the other direction, so to speak. By raising questions about the formation and development of the working class, he raises pedagogical questions which cry out to us as critical educators.

Marxism and ethics are often taken to be incompatible terms. This has generally resulted in either the disregard for ethics exemplified at its worst by Stalinist ideology and politics, or the grafting of abstract and extraneous moral principles onto Marxist history and politics. The book clearly demonstrates why neither option is satisfactory.

As chapter 2 explains, some often-cited comments by Marx and Engels (e.g. *The German Ideology*; *Critique of the Gotha Programme*) make explicit their distaste for moralising; yet there is an implicit moral stance throughout their political and economic writings, which resound with moral indignation at the destructive and dehumanising effects of capitalism. The issue, as Blackledge points out, is partly one of perspective: Marx's 'standpoint of the proletariat' provides a basis from which both to historicise and to deepen the otherwise uncertain concept of human rights.

Already in the theses on Feuerbach, Marx criticised timeless notions of 'human nature', and yet a critique of alienation demands and implies a sense of human essence as potential. Although needs evolve through history, it is scarcely possible to condemn the alienating effect of capitalist production without having some alternative sense of human possibility. Drawing on Mészáros and others, Blackledge argues that Marxist ethics centre on an evolving and emergent understanding of freedom, and are grounded in work - our productive interaction with nature - along with class struggle against the causes of our oppression. Drawing on Lukács, he explains:

Because Marx understood freedom in this historical and materialist manner, he was able to grasp... its intimate connection with the realization of human needs through the medium of desire... Thus historicized, the human essence as freedom is best understood as an immanent potential which evolves over

time through a process of collective struggles shaped by the development of humanity's productive forces. Freedom... has a concrete meaning which changes through history, as both the material parameters for its realization expand and as groups form through struggle to fight for the realization of these expanding demands. (page 57)

Bourgeois revolutions give rise to a one-sided or empty emancipation, in which concepts of human rights (liberty, equality) are consolidated principally as individual rights to property for those fortunate enough to have some. Similarly, even in more progressive articulations of educational purpose, self-realization is normally understood in disconnected individual terms. For workers however, the road to freedom and social justice lies in solidarity – the formation of collective strength, common purpose, and organizations for struggle. It is precisely this which traditional schools so often break, through patterns of alienated learning, competitive individualism and an ethos of disrespect.

The philosophical framework for the book is carefully built in chapter 1 around a contrast between Aristotelian and Kantian ethics. This is where the debt to the 'revolutionary Aristotelianism' of Alasdair MacIntyre's little known early work begins to emerge (further articulated, in its historical context, in chapter 5). Crucially, Aristotle's ethics are grounded in a notion of wellbeing and human flourishing (eudaimonia) – the question of which desires are most truly and practically satisfying.

Despite the distortions caused by Aristotle's privileged social position, he expounds a naturalist ethics which connects to his politics.

Because Aristotle recognized that humans are only able to flourish within communities – he defines us as 'political animals' – he made a direct link between ethics and politics. The question of how we are to flourish leads

directly to questions of what form of social and political community would best allow us to flourish. (page 21)

Kant, by contrast, built on a Protestant dichotomy between duty and desire, such that ethics becomes the duty to *repress* desire. This is ironic in an atheistic world since the justification for such a stance logically derives from Divine authority: as MacIntyre once expressed it, Kantian ethics is ‘the simulacra of morality’. The Kantian mode of moral constraint is also something we are familiar with in our schools.

Blackledge contextualises this within emergent capitalist social relations, beginning with Hobbes’ recognition of a ‘war of all against all’ in the struggle for self-preservation. Hobbes’ counter-revolutionary solution in *Leviathan* (published in 1651, at the height of the English Revolution) was popular consent to rule by an absolute sovereign. Drawing partly on MacIntyre, Blackledge discusses various other historic solutions, though all of them have the same broad context – how to insert a code of mutuality within a capitalist society built on competitive individualism.

Social contract theory, utilitarianism, Kantianism, deconstruction, and even modern virtue ethics can all be understood as attempts to provide an answer to the problem of how to formulate a common good in a world of egoistic individuals. (page 24)

He also sees the re-emergence of competitive individualism in recent years in such ideologies as ‘selfish gene theory’ (page 19). This is the kind of discourse which tacitly underpins neoliberal ideology and marketised systems of schooling.

According to MacIntyre, capitalism:

‘miseducates’ people to perceive themselves primarily as consumers, for whom ‘success in life’ is increasingly judged through the medium of the

‘successful acquisition of consumer goods’. Consequently, whereas pleonexia, the drive to have more and more, was understood by Aristotle to be the very vice that was the counterpart of the virtue of justice, in bourgeois society it has itself become a virtue. (page 31)

Because Kantians, and modern liberals generally, have no sense of how agreed values emerge through class struggle, they rely on free-floating moral principles based on a vague sense of duty prevailing against desire.

The second half of the book provides a lucid historical exposition of how inadequate understandings of Marxism and ethics have affected successive periods of struggle. Central to the author’s argument is a Trotskyist commitment to the *self-emancipation* of the working class.

Chapter 3 deals with late nineteenth century reformism, particularly in Germany, and then Stalinism. Eduard Bernstein’s increasing insistence on the gradual improvement of workers’ living standards through trade union struggle within capitalism, aided by a reformist parliamentary party, amounted to an abandonment of Marx’s faith in the working class’s revolutionary agency.

Others denied the importance of this agency by insisting on simply awaiting the inevitable collapse of capitalism. Lenin on the other hand, while constantly preparing to seize opportunities arising from such crises, broke with Second International fatalism by rejecting the idea that the collapse of capitalism was inevitable. Blackledge quotes knowledgeably from other theorists such as Henryk Grossman, whose argument has obvious relevance to the current financial crisis: namely, that there is ‘no absolutely hopeless situation’ for capital so long as workers are prepared to pay the price (page 125).

He goes on to examine the disappearance of Marxist ethics under Stalinism:

History was conceived as a mechanical story of the liberation of the forces of production from the fetters of increasingly regressive relations of production. Marx's revolutionary theory was subsequently reduced to a general evolutionary schema: 'the productive forces of society change and develop, and then, *depending* on these changes and *in conformity with them*, men's relations of production, their economic relations, change' (Stalin 1938). Whereas Marx had understood the growing contradiction between forces and relations of production as the context within which struggles for freedom were fought out, Stalin reduced the growth of human freedom to development of the forces of production. This allowed him to equate the industrialization of Russia with the liberation of the Russian people. (page 138)

All of this was an epic pedagogical process – a process of mass mis-education – and had its counterpart in Soviet schooling, a repudiation of the revolutionary pedagogical understanding of pioneers such as Vygotsky, Eisenstein, Kollontai and the rest in their diverse modes of (in a broad sense) educational activity.

Chapter 4 deals with the complex positions articulated by some key intellectuals of the twentieth century. After the defeat of the German revolution in 1923 and the growth of fascism, it became increasingly difficult to wager on the revolutionary potential of the working class. Blackledge argues that, in their various ways, Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse sought to rationalise defeatism: the Frankfurt School argued that the working class had effectively been incorporated into capitalist society. The chapter continues with a condensed account of Althusser's attempt to strip Marx of morality, the opposing stance of Analytical Marxism, a brief summary of Calinicos' proposed engagement with egalitarian liberal ideas, and a wonderfully clear account of Sartre's political trajectory.

The final chapter concentrates on Alasdair MacIntyre, whose neglected early writings provided the initial stimulus and orientation for this book. It should be read in conjunction with *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism*, a republication of MacIntyre's early work co-edited by Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson. This is contextualised by a short section on the British New Left, an important but short-lived movement which included diverse public intellectuals of the stature of Edward and Dorothy Thomson, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. Like MacIntyre, they found their voice in response to the dramatic events of 1956: Krushchev's denunciation of Stalin, simultaneously contradicted by Soviet repression in Poland and Hungary; and the British and French invasion of Egypt to seize back the Suez Canal, involving a secret plot with Israel.

MacIntyre's *Notes from the Moral Wilderness*, for example, provides a critique both of Stalinist determinism and of left-wing versions of individualist liberal moralism. MacIntyre argued that (Blackledge's summary) 'it was not enough to add something like Kant's ethics to this existing Stalinist theory of historical development if one wished to reinsert moral principle into Marxism' (p180). Drawing on Aristotle's linking of ethics to human desires, this essay invites us to construct an ethical 'theory which treats what emerges in history as providing us with a basis for our standards, without making the historical process morally sovereign or its progress automatic'. (p181) Reasserting the need for socialism from below, he directs attention to the emergence of new needs, desires and morals in the course of working-class struggles for emancipation. MacIntyre's historical perspective is noticeably missing from much school-based moral or citizenship education, with its static account of human rights.

This discussion involves an understanding that the working class transforms itself in the course of struggle, and that the internal divisions which it is always subject to, as well as the cultural impact of capitalism, create the need for a democratic socialist party. In another essay ‘Breaking the Chains of Reason’, MacIntyre

insisted that freedom could not be won by telling the masses to do what the elite desires it do, but only by helping ‘them move where they desire. The goal is not happiness, or satisfaction, but freedom. And freedom has to be both means and ends. The mechanical separation of means and ends is suitable enough for human manipulation, not human liberation.’ (p184)

MacIntyre made a distinctive contribution to the British far left including two years as co-editor of the journal *International Socialism*, before himself despairing of the potential of the working class to engage in anything more than short-term industrial struggles for higher wages. Notwithstanding this tragic turn, MacIntyre’s early philosophy lays the foundation and creates a space for articulating an authentic Marxist ethics – an ethics which is simultaneously immanent and transcendent. It is immanent in the sense of emergence from working-class needs and struggles, and transcendent in that it leads to new possibilities beyond our current way of life. There is a challenge for educators here, to find ways to situate thoughts about human development within this wider frame, including its relevance for the education of children and young people. How, in practical terms, do we develop a pedagogy of hope – that there *are* alternatives?

This is not to suggest that the book provides readymade answers. I found myself puzzling over many questions relating to education and development. Why do some people seek the fulfilment which comes from a collective struggle for liberation and justice while others, though

apparently in similar situations, seek self-fulfilment in material gain or commodified pleasure? What leads people on from the necessary but isolated struggle for their own and their family's wellbeing into the solidarity of a wider collective? These are serious questions which hammer at our door but rarely enter the spaces of our pedagogical thinking.

Another intriguing question, reading beyond the lines of Blackledge's book, is how all this relates to values which extend before and outwith the development of social solidarity and revolutionary agency. It is really too facile simply to write them off as 'bourgeois morality'. What underpins, for example, values such as honesty, fidelity, caring for your children, or a love of the forests? Is sexual or racial equality *only* important to avoid divisions in the working class? Are such values and principles and 'rights' and desires only meaningful in terms of the struggle for socialism, or do they relate to a more general sense of human essence and social relationship - albeit situated, emerging from earlier struggles, and constantly undermined by capitalism? In other words, does Aristotelian 'wellbeing' have a wider significance?

These questions and more are an indication of the excitement which this book generates, as well as the much clearer grasp of philosophy and the historical development of Marxist theory which it provides.

In concluding, I am fully conscious that this review of Blackledge's book will have raised more questions than it answers, but they are a fundamental challenge if we are to develop a more convincing pedagogy which is both grounded and far-sighted, realistic and revolutionary.

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