

CHAPTER 4

PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED AGAINST TRUMP

Communist Pedagogy in the Emerging Mass Movement

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Education is a central component of revolutionary activity, especially during nonrevolutionary times, and especially for cadre in a Leninist Party. In fact, Lenin's (1902/1987) seminal work on organization and leadership—*What Is to be Done?*—touches on many educational issues, including consciousness and theory.

As a polemic against economism—which held that the working class develops its own revolutionary consciousness spontaneously as a result of daily struggles with the bosses—Lenin (1902/1987) argued that spontaneity was only consciousness “in an embryonic form,” and that something more was needed. Spontaneity is necessary but is ultimately limited to “what is ‘at the present time’” (p. 67). In other words, spontaneity by itself isn't able to look beyond isolated daily struggles and forward to a new society. Lenin called the spontaneously generated mindset “trade union consciousness.”

This analysis is what led Lenin (1902/1987) to state that “without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary practice” (p. 69). By this he meant that without a theory capable of connecting individual struggles and issues to the totality of the social and economic system, struggles would be limited to reforms within the existing system. Revolutionary theory is developed not by intellectuals holed up in university classrooms but through the communist party, which is composed of workers who become “socialist theoreticians” (p. 82). In the party, he wrote, “all distinctions as between workers and intellectuals . . . must be obliterated” (p. 137).

Lenin (1902/1987) believed that workers were capable of more than trade union consciousness. He actually derided those who insisted on appealing to the “average worker:” “You gentlemen, who are so much concerned about the ‘average worker,’ as a matter of fact, rather insult the workers by your desire to *talk down* to them when discussing labor politics and labor organization” (p. 153). He wrote that organizers had actually held workers “back by our silly speeches about what ‘can be understood’ by the masses of the workers” (p. 156).

PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED

The question of pedagogy comes into the picture here. Pedagogy names the process by which we enter into educational engagements with others. It’s a question that communists in the United States have to take seriously, especially at this moment, when a new truly mass movement is brewing. Of course, it is important not to dismiss those who are either new to the struggle or who are limited by liberalism or *trade union consciousness*, but we need to think beyond our attitude and toward our pedagogy.

Paulo Freire’s (1970/2011) book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* can be helpful in this regard. Freire was a revolutionary Brazilian educator who was jailed and exiled from his homeland in 1964 for his activities as a teacher. Like any good revolutionary book, it is a reflection of actual experience. In Freire’s case, the book is a reflection of his work in literacy campaigns, where he taught poor peasants how to read and write and how to, as he put it, “name the world” (p. 167).

Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1970/2011) has been targeted by the Right wing in the United States (it is currently banned from public schools in Arizona). It addresses the educational components of revolutionary movements and, as such, it is littered with references to Marx, Lenin, Guevara, and others. In fact, Freire uses Castro and the Cuban revolution as an example of the pedagogy he advocates.

Specifically, the book is concerned with *how* the revolutionary leadership pushes the struggle forward, or how it teaches the mass movement.

Interestingly, the book is mostly referenced in academia, and its tight connections to revolutionary leadership are rarely, if ever, mentioned.

THE PROBLEM: BANKING PEDAGOGY

The pedagogy of the oppressed has two stages. During the first stage, “the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through praxis commit themselves to its transformation” (Freire, 1970/2011, p. 54). During the second stage, which is after the world of oppression has been transformed, “this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation” (Freire, 1970/2011, p. 54).

The first stage of Freire’s (1970/2011) pedagogy addresses how the oppressed view and relate to the world. It begins by acknowledging that the oppressed possess both an oppressed consciousness and an oppressor consciousness. The oppressor consciousness is the enemy that needs to be liquidated:

The oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination. The earth, property, production, the creations of people, people themselves, time—everything is reduced to the status of objects at its disposal. (p. 58)

This is what capitalism does: It takes everything and makes it into private property, including our ability to labor. This has a profound impact on the world, even instilling the oppressor consciousness in the oppressed. Thus, we have to distinguish an oppressor consciousness from the oppressed person, and we have to transform that consciousness.

The way that we engage in that transformation is absolutely crucial, and this is where the question of *pedagogy* comes into play. The traditional form of pedagogy Freire (1970/2011) calls “banking pedagogy.” In banking pedagogy, the teacher is the one who possesses knowledge and the students are empty containers in which the teacher must deposit knowledge. The more the teacher fills the receptacle, the better teacher she is. The content remains abstract to the student, disconnected from the world, and external to the student’s life.

Banking pedagogy—which is what most of us in the United States have experienced in public schools—assumes that the oppressed are ignorant and naïve. Further, it treats the oppressed as objects in the same way that capitalism does.

Importantly, banking pedagogy can happen regardless of the political nature of the content. Even communists and other revolutionaries can engage in banking pedagogy and objectify the people. This is what happens when

alleged revolutionary groups talk down to the people, telling them they must read their newspapers for the correct analysis, deriding them when they don't chant their slogans or follow their directions. This is an elite form of education wherein some enlightened individuals or sects feel that they, and only they, are equipped to "name the world." Freire (1970/2011) calls this "manipulation" and "cultural invasion" (p. 181) and it can happen regardless of our attitude and our politics.

Thus, it is not enough that we be friendly to newcomers and that we welcome them to the struggle. We have to can engage them in an authentic, educational relationship.

THE SOLUTION: DIALOGIC PEDAGOGY

The correct educational method for revolutionaries is *dialogue*, which means something very specific. To truly engage in dialogue means becoming partners with the people. In this situation, "the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (Freire, 1970/2011, p. 80).

The task of revolutionaries is to engage with our class and our people in true, authentic dialogue, reflection, and action. If we have dialogue and reflection without action, then we are little more than armchair revolutionaries. On the other hand, if we have only action without dialogue and reflection, we have mere activism.

Revolutionary organizers, therefore, are defined not just by the revolutionary ideals they hold or actions they take, but by their humility, patience, and willingness to engage with all exploited and oppressed people. It is not possible for us to "implant" the conviction to fight and struggle in others. That must be the result of their own *conscientização*, or coming-to-critical-consciousness.

This is a delicate and contingent process that can't be scripted in advance. Still, there are a few general components to it.

First, we have to truly get to know our people, their problems, and their aspirations. This means that we have to actually *learn* from people, acknowledging that, even if this is their first demonstration, or even if they voted for a democrat in the last election, they might actually have something to teach us. The more experiences we learn from the people, the richer our theories are and the more connection they can have to the daily realities of workers and oppressed people today. Our class is bursting with creative and intellectual powers that capitalist society doesn't allow us to express or develop. The revolutionary party is stronger the more it cultivates these powers.

Second, we have to provide opportunities for others to understand their problems in a deeper and wider context, and to push their aspirations forward. Freire (1970/2011) gives a concrete example of this:

... if at a given historical moment the basic aspiration of the people goes no further than a demand for salary increases, the leaders can commit one of two errors. They can limit their action to stimulating this one demand or they can overrule this popular aspiration and substitute something more far-reaching—but something which has not yet come to the forefront of the people's attention... The solution lies in synthesis: the leaders must on the one hand identify with the people's demand for higher salaries, while on the other they must pose the meaning of that very demand as a problem. By doing this, the leaders pose as a problem a real, concrete, historical situation of which the salary demand is one dimension. It will thereby become clear that salary demands alone cannot comprise a definitive solution. (p. 183)

Through this process, both the people and the revolutionary leadership act together and collectively name the world. Genuine knowledge is produced and authentic action is taken, and real conviction for the struggle is strengthened.

Slogans and newspapers are crucial tools in the revolutionary struggle, but not because they instill the truth in the people. Rather, they are tools that—in addition to crystallizing demands and analysis—initiate a dialogue with others. We engage in this dialogue and action with hope and conviction, because ruling powers *are* overthrown, and because the masses *do* make history.

REFERENCES

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