Introduction

Addressing the Ideological Break in Practice and in (Educational) Theory

Lenin's contributions to Marxism, the socialist struggle, and liberatory movements more generally have revolved around true praxis: the merging of theory and practice. Marx's own theories, of course, were also based on practical experience and theoretical reflection, but in the academy Marxism has become reduced to a mode of analysis completely detached from mass movements. Perhaps this explains low interest in Lenin among academics, who in general cling to a pure kind of Marxism that, by definition, can't be changed by practice. Over the last decade, however, 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. This isn't new in the United States, of course. Throughout most of the 20th century radical organizations and individuals looked to and linked with the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and elsewhere. After the McCarthy witch-hunts of the 1950s, and then the neoliberal offensive in the 1970s, these links were broken.

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They are re-emerging today, but there is much work to be done. Brian Becker (2016) identifies a primary task of our moment as addressing a "break in ideological continuity." The main problem since the neoliberal era and the defeat of the people's struggles in the United States has not been the political downturn. As he says, "setbacks and defeats are not uncommon. They are not the exception to the rule. On the contrary, *victories of the oppressed classes are the exception*." Our problem right now 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. This is the reverse of the last great wave of insurrection in the United States. "If some people have criticized the idealism of the 1960s and 1970s generation, for prematurely believing that revolution was imminent," he says, "today's problem is the opposite and far more challenging: the assumption that socialist revolution will never happen, and the masses will always be oppressed."

Learning with Lenin seeks to contribute to the rematerialization of a revolutionary movement in the United States by focusing on the pedagogy of Lenin. This is particularly important since there has also been a "break in ideological continuity" in the realm of education. As Marxism–Leninism suffered theoretical and political attacks, it was not only purged from working-class struggles, but it was also purged from educational theory. Rectifying this omission is a significant task given the influence of Lenin's (and Marx's) work on two of the twentieth century's most significant educators: the Soviet Union's Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) and Brazil's Paulo Freire (1921–1997).

Through this focus, we aim to truly study and learn from Lenin's writings from the standpoint of *today's* social and political movements. Each text is preceded by a set of questions meant to serve as both a study and discussion guide. These can be consulted before and/or after reading the text. Reading the questions before will help you key in on certain parts of the text and may help make your reading active. Some of the questions are geared toward comprehension ("What does Lenin say about *x*?" or "What does Lenin mean by *y*?"). Other questions are intended for collective discussion ("How can we implement this lesson in our organizing today?" or "What current manifestations of this problem exist today?"). As you can see, we aren't interested in abstract philosophical questions or detached academic debates. Lenin certainly wasn't. Approaching Lenin as strictly a theorist or as someone intervening in intellectual arguments fixes Leninism into a dogma. This is a particularly troubling thing to do with anyone in the Marxist tradition, but especially Lenin, who was always making targeted interventions for strictly practical purposes.

The Leninist Continuity in Educational Theory

Deeply influenced and inspired by Lenin and the Russian Revolution, which coincided with his graduation from Moscow University in 1917, Lev Vygotsky also understood this opaque gap dialectically. Some of Vygotsky's (1986) most central conceptions of mind were based upon Lenin's philosophical notebooks. For example, Vygotsky quotes Lenin at length from his discussion distinguishing "primitive idealism" from Hegelian idealism. Whereas primitive idealism attempts to universalize a particular being, which Lenin calls "stupid" and "childish," Hegelian idealism distinguishes an object from the idea of it. Lenin reflects on the dialectical unity and contradiction between objects and the idea of them. Basing his complex conception of *mind in society* on this formulation as laid out by Lenin Vygotsky explores the dialectical relationship between thought and imagination as unity and contradiction constituting another gap between. Vygotsky was taken by Lenin's observation that the distinction between objects and the idea of them is vulnerable to being consumed by an always latent element of fantasy as ideas can never mirror, with complete exactness, the objects they intend to represent. For Vygotsky, attending to the gap between objects and the ideas they intend to represent is fundamentally connected to the process of navigating the gap between what *is* and what *can be*.

So taken by the significance of the gap between what *is* and what *can be* Vygotsky named it the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and created a whole educational theory around it. The ZPD represents the gap between an existing level of development and what can be achieved with the help of more capable and differently situated peers. It is important to acknowledge that the content of this gap isn't predetermined, which is what makes it a gap and not a lack or deficiency. Navigating this gap was a real concern for Lenin after the 1917 Russian Revolution since the predominantly peasant feudalistic social formation tended to suffer from a conservative, reactionary ideology. While Lenin was conscious of the changing roles of revolutionaries at different stages in the process toward communism, Vygotsky too was attuned to the changing significance of multiple interacting factors in human cognitive processes. In laying the theoretical groundwork for his approach to educational psychology Vygotsky took up the task of challenging the world's leading educational psychologist of the day, Jean Piaget (1896-1980) of Switzerland.

Significantly, Vygotsky draws heavily on Lenin in his challenge to Piaget. For example, in *Thought and Language* Vygotsky (1986) reproduces a long quote from Lenin where he argues that Hegel's insistence that men and women's thought produces their activity must be "inverted." That is, Lenin

argues that it is the endless repetition a million times over of men and women's activity (i.e. the labor act) that produces consciousness. Similarly, Vygotsky (1986) notes that, "it was Piaget himself who clearly demonstrated that the logic of action precedes the logic of thought, and yet he insists that thinking is separated from reality" (p. 53). Sounding remarkably like Marx in his use of metaphor Vygotsky summarizes the inadequateness of Piaget's formulation: "... if the function of thinking is to reflect upon reality, this actionless thinking appears as a parade of phantoms and a chorus of shadows rather than the real thinking of a child" (p. 53). Having established the relationship between mind and society Vygotsky took social formation as the ultimate determining factor influencing the dynamic development of human personalities and consciousness. Producing his major works during the transition from an underdeveloped peasant-based economy to socialism Vygotsky was deeply interested in the socialist alteration of humanity (see Appendix A). It was the intellectually exciting and creative context of the Soviet Union that Vygotsky found himself in (see Wertsch, 1985), combined with the work and example of Lenin, that offered the concrete context from which Piaget's formulation unveiled itself to Vygotsky as incorrect.

Throughout Vygotsky's body of work he explains that at "moments of revolutionary dislocation the nature of development changes" (Wertsch, 1985, p. 19). This speaks to the opacity of the gap, which can never be known in advance. Vygotsky defined transition points in development in terms of changes in mediation. A fundamental feature of Vygotsky's genetic analysis is that he did not assume one can account for all phases of development by using a "single set of explanatory principles" (Wertsch, 1985, p. 19). Instead, Vygotsky argued that the critical issue is how to account for the changing relationships among multiple forces of development and their corresponding set of explanatory principles. Thus he "rejected accounts that are based on the assumption that development can be explained solely in terms of quantitative increments of some psychological unit, such as stimulus-response bonds" (Wertsch, 1985, p. 20).

Vygotsky rejected Piaget's use of a single explanatory principle (i.e. biology) as the cause of all development. Rather, Vygotsky emphasized that "at certain points in the emergence of a psychological process new forms of development and new explanatory principles enter the picture. At these points ... there is a 'change in the very type of development' and so the principles which alone had previously been capable of explaining development can no longer do so. Rather, a new set of principles must be incorporated into the overall explanatory framework, resulting in its reorganization" (Wertsch, 1985, p. 19-20). At certain points there is a fundamental reorganization of the forces of development. This occurs naturally as language

and social interactions become more and more prominent mediators in child development through the years. The character of social mediators impacting the development of human personalities also undergo significant alteration with the transition from capitalism/feudalism to socialism.

In his last major work first published the same year he passed away, 1997, Paulo Freire (2005) stressed the importance of reading Vygotsky as contributing significantly to our understanding literacy and comprehension as open processes intimately connected with the development of the larger social totalities literate practices are forged and practiced in. However, Freire's debt to Lenin does not just come indirectly from Vygotsky.

In his most far reaching text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire attributes the core framework of his project to Lenin's insistence that without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolution. Pedagogy of the oppressed is therefore not just an academic theory forged out of abstraction, but was developed out of an engagement with revolutionary theory read through the experience of teaching illiterate adult, peasant learners, the oppressed. What was born was a revolutionary educational praxis, a pedagogy of the oppressed.

Although he does not cite Lenin in his discussion of neutrality and education, Freire's insistence that education is unavoidably political is strikingly similar to Lenin's position. For example, in a speech at a conference of teachers after the Revolution, Lenin discusses how the bourgeoisie "lies subtly" by declaring that schools are apolitical and benefit all of society. Challenging bourgeois propaganda that dominated before the revolution Lenin comments, "in fact the schools were turned into nothing but an instrument of the class rule of the bourgeoisie." Not only does he insist that a revolutionary educational practice require a revolutionary educational theory, following Lenin, but Freire (1970/1998) is clear that his "pedagogy of the oppressed, which is the pedagogy of the people engaged in the fight for their own liberation, has its roots" in "the revolutionary party" (p. 35).

While it is more understandable why US educators tend not to be aware of the Leninism of Vygotsky since references to Lenin (as well as Marx and Engels) were eliminated from English translations of his work for decades (Au, 2007), English translations of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, however, have never had the references to Lenin removed, and yet the vast amount of scholarship that is oriented toward the legacy of Freire overwhelming ignore Lenin's central influence. When it is acknowledged, it tends to be discounted as an error Freire would quickly overcame. For example, Raymond Morrow (2013) acknowledges Lenin's influence on *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in a chapter in a significant edited volume focused on exploring Paulo Freire's intellectual roots. Morrow (2013) argues that Freire

"momentarily mis-recognizes" his project "as consistent with an idealized Marxism–Leninism" (p. 73). Morrow argues that because *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is conjunctural in that it is the product of a revolutionary era, it invites "retrospective criticism and reinvention" (p. 77) in non-revolutionary times. Freire, Morrow contends, alluded to such criticism and reinvention as his focus shifted from "'revolutionary' to 'democratic struggle'" (p. 78). Morrow's guess work here seems to be driven by an anti-Marxist bias.

Like Morrow (2013) Adrienne Johnstone and Elizabeth Terzakis (2012) also contend that the shift in Freire reflects a changing global situation. However, Johnstone and Terzakis do not suggest Freire was self-critical of his engagement with Lenin. Freire never denounced Lenin or the core of his project, namely, the ongoing development of theory and practice always attuned to the changing global and local situation. In this way one might infer that Freire's re-focus reflects not a departure from Lenin but a continuity with his contextually grounded praxis. For example, during moments of revolutionary upheaval Lenin called on proletarian communists to break from trade union consciousness and exit the unions as limiting organizations committed to maintaining capitalist relations. During non-revolutionary times, on the other hand, Lenin called for communists to enter unions as organizers when the working class's ZPD tends to be at a lower stage of development. In other words, if working class activists do not go to where their class is developmentally, they will be outside the range of their ZPD and therefore likely ineffective. Freire's shift from revolution to democracy reflects his awareness of the changing consciousness of the poor and oppressed reflecting a change in the global situation after the fall of the Soviet Union and capital's neoliberal counter-offensive.

Another interpretation of Freire's shift is that he was influenced by the anti-Marxist and anti-communist bigotry of leading North American critical educators, especially Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux (see Ford, 2017; Malott, 2016), who, at least indirectly, were attempting to put pressure on him to abandon Marxism for critical pedagogy (see Aronowitz, 1981; Giroux, 1981; 1983). Perhaps Freire was politely accommodating the North American's less developed ZPD as the balance of global forces was shifting back in capital's favor by the 1980s. This type of critical educational theory seemed to welcome the neoliberal assault in practice while denouncing it in theory. However one interprets the changes Freire's published work underwent, unlike Giroux and others, he never denounced Marx outright, only those who hinder the agency of the people through a vulgarization of Marx (see Freire, 2005). While there remains an anti-Marxist tendency within critical pedagogy, the field is beginning to shift back to the Marxism–Leninism of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Indeed, proletarian consciousness is moving back to the left, as the global situation continues to develop. To forge a deep comprehension of Freire (and Vygotsky) an in depth reading of Lenin is unavoidable. Of course, understanding is not enough. What Lenin offers is praxis. *Learning with Lenin* therefore stands to contribute to the revitalization of Lenin's significance in understanding Freire and Vygotsky and their dialectical contributions to navigating the gap between. We need to develop a praxis that confronts the ideological break in both practice and (educational) theory for such a navigation.

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