

The October Revolution and the Tasks of Education in the First Workers' State: Focusing on Trotsky's "Revolutionary Human"

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Abstract

This article presents a critical evaluation from the perspective of Revolutionary Marxism of the events in the early years of the Soviet revolution, where changes in education toward more centralized administrative forms and, consequently, more conservative educational policies coincided with the rise of bureaucracy in the young workers' state.

It introduces also into the analysis of education in the USSR the contribution of Bolshevik women, as highlighted by discussions on socialist feminism and lastly presents the ideas of Leon Trotsky on Education, a topic vastly neglected not only by the relevant literature on Critical Education but also by the Marxist literature as such.

Keywords: *October Revolution; Socialist Education; Education Policy; Trotsky; Dewey*

Introduction

Leftist scholars have been engaged with the issue of studying education in the USSR for many years, having produced important works on the topic (Dewitt, 1968, Zhuk, 1981;) that have been made digitally available in recent years.

Interest in education in the USSR has been renewed lately either due to the ease in accessibility in the soviet era archives provided by state authorities in Russia roughly after 2000, thus facilitating the publication of new material (e.g.

Kaplan, 2006; Yordanova, 2009) or due to the occasion of the centenary of the October Revolution giving rise to scholars' endeavour for a re-evaluation of the innovations it introduced (Fitzsimmons & Suoranta, 2020).

Given the vast amount of literature existing on the subject, for a new article to be a meaningful contribution, it must either present new evidence from archival work or offer an analysis from a different viewpoint of the already known events. This article aims to do the latter in three ways: a) by presenting the ideas of Leon Trotsky on Education, a topic vastly neglected not only by the relevant literature on Critical Education but also by the Marxist literature as such¹ b) by introducing into the analysis of education in the USSR the contribution of Bolshevik women, as highlighted by discussions on socialist feminism (Katsiampoura, 2015) and c) by presenting a critical evaluation from the perspective of Revolutionary Marxism of the events in the early years of the revolution, where changes in education toward more centralized administrative forms and, consequently, more conservative educational policies coincided with the rise of bureaucracy in the young workers' state.

The revolutionary transformation of education in Russia was destined to suffer the same fate as the revolution itself. The failure of the revolution to triumph outside Russia meant that, despite victory in the civil war, the Soviet state remained isolated. As a result, conditions within Russia were created for increased bureaucratization and centralization. In education, this led to the imposition, by the end of the 1920s, of a highly standardized curriculum, the reintroduction of privileges, and the stifling of revolutionary ideas. However, the experience of the first revolutionary steps serves as inspiration for those working in education, those who wish to combat the oppression of youth, and those struggling for a new society based on equality, justice, and freedom. Education, like other spheres of life, was open for discussion and

experimentation, and the idea that the masses could shape and control their destiny was no longer utopian (Behrent, 2010).

The defeat of the revolution and the significant challenges posed by the rise of Stalinism could not obliterate this invaluable legacy of the first workers' state in history. Indeed, it was the revolutionary Marxists who aimed to cultivate a Marxist viewpoint on education, starting with the demarcation of the Marxist approach to education from John Dewey's pragmatic ideas as elucidated in the final section of this article.

Problems of Educational Policy After October

Following the socialist revolution in Russia in October 1917, the new workers' state faced enormous difficulties due to the country's isolation and its severe economic backwardness compared to Western imperialist powers. But despite these problems, the revolutionary dynamism that unfolded created tremendous opportunities for social change and left us with an impressive glimpse of what a socialist society could look like. Both these aspects of post-revolutionary Russia can be seen in the educational system during the early years of Soviet Russia. The educational tasks facing the Bolshevik government were immense. The entire purpose of education had to change. The Bolsheviks summarized their view of the role of education under capitalism as follows (Bukharin & Preobrazhensky, 1919/2021):

In bourgeois society, the school has three basic tasks to fulfill: First, to inspire the next generation of workers with devotion and respect for the capitalist system.

Second, to create from the youth of the ruling classes, educated controllers of the working population.

Third, to assist capitalist production in applying the sciences to technology, thereby increasing capitalist profits.

Education in tsarist Russia was well-suited to the needs of the upper classes. Approximately four-fifths of children and adolescents could not even attend primary schools (Hans & Gessen, 1930). Tsarist Russia, with a population of 175 million, had 9.5 million students in primary schools, 900,000 in secondary schools, and 90,000 university students (Hans & Gessen, 1930). Together, the various colleges and universities had 112,000 students, of whom 35% were children of nobles and government officials, 10.3% children of clergy, 11% children of big businessmen, and 14.5% children of wealthy peasants. Thus, 70.8% belonged to the ruling classes (Kaftanov, 1939).

At the same time, 73.6% of the population was illiterate, and non-Russian ethnicities were almost entirely illiterate (only 2% of Cossacks and Uzbeks could read and write). Only 1.4 million out of a population of 125.6 million adults had education beyond the elementary level (Kaftanov, 1939). Moreover, in a predominantly agricultural country, huge numbers of the old working population had lost their lives either in the First World War or in the civil war that followed.

Educational advancement was not based on academic performance. University admission was based on connections, family financial status, and political beliefs. Many revolutionaries were forced to study abroad, as their participation in political activity could mean exclusion from further education.

There was, however, a tradition of private schools, and while the vast majority of these were extremely conservative, some were run by liberals who were quite radical in their approaches and familiar with the progressive educational ideas of their time. The early teaching methods of the new workers' state were influenced by the active and exploratory learning system of Dewey, developed in the US, which rejected passive, behaviorist-type learning. Dewey's ideas

were used in educational reforms not only in the Soviet Union but also in Latin America, Turkey, Japan, and China, and generally served as a source of inspiration for educational changes in the early 20th century.

According to George Novack, one of the most important Marxist theorists and representatives of the Trotskyist tradition in the US, the basic principles of Dewey's educational system and the Progressive Education Association can be summarized as follows (Novack,1960a):

1. The behavior of students is governed by themselves, according to the social needs of the community.
2. Interest should be the motive for all work.
3. Teachers will inspire the desire for knowledge and serve as guides in the inquiries undertaken by students.
4. The scientific study of the physical, social, and mental development of each student is necessary for insightful supervision of their progress.
5. Greater attention is given to the natural needs of the child, with greater use of out-of-classroom activities.
6. Cooperation between the school and the family will cover all the needs of the child's development, such as music, dance, play, and other extracurricular activities.

The basic principles of Dewey's learning theories and the Progressive Education Association, which can be codified as "Learning by doing" greatly influenced the ideas of Polytechnic Education in the early years of education in the new workers' state.

On October 26, the Bolsheviks established the new workers' government. They created a Commissariat of Education under Anatoly Lunacharsky. The

Commissariat of Education became known as Narkompros. It was given responsibility for schools and higher education, as well as for art and culture. Lunacharsky, who was particularly sensitive to issues of art, submitted his resignation when he heard that revolutionary forces occupying Moscow had destroyed part of the historic buildings in the Kremlin. He later withdrew his resignation when the reports proved false (Fitzpatrick, 2002).

From the beginning, education was not considered separate from the rest of society but an integral part of it. Education was not limited to the early years of life but was a continuous process. A true lifelong learning. Access to art and culture was also part of education for everyone.

At this point, it should be noted that the proposals of Alexandra Kollontai and Inessa Armand for preschool education and informal education are extremely important and have not been properly evaluated.

The basic proposal put forward by the two revolutionaries and pioneers of the socialist feminist movement could be divided into two periods, before the revolution and from 1917 to 1930.

Before the revolution, Kollontai and Armand sought to educate workers, especially women, who were largely illiterate. Thus, they organized schools for adult working women and peasant women. In addition to founding such schools, they also paid attention to informal education, publishing newspapers, books, and pamphlets.

After the revolution, when Kollontai became Commissar of Social Welfare and new family legislation was enacted, the Bolsheviks sought to resolve the contradiction between work and family. According to their proposal, domestic work should be transferred to the public sphere (Goldman, 1993). The revolution

sought to overturn the so-called "family hearth" — this archaic institution in which working-class women work from childhood until their death. The position of the family as an inward-looking small business had to be replaced by a comprehensive system of social care: maternity homes, nurseries, kindergartens, schools, social canteens, social laundries, first aid stations, hospitals, sanatoriums, sports organizations, cinemas, etc. The complete absorption of domestic labour by the institutions of socialist society, uniting all generations with solidarity and mutual aid, would bring real liberation to women (Katsiampoura, 2015).

This is a critical issue for education even today: the goal of comprehensive social care and education for children of preschool age, the overcoming of the "family hearth," and its replacement by organized collective social institutions.

Although after the 1930s the old Bolsheviks disappeared from history books and from the party, although the Stalinist authorities denounced the revolutionary ideas of the early years as "petty-bourgeois anarchist propaganda" (Goldman, 1993) and all revolutionary structures were abolished, today critical pedagogy and education must study the educational work of the early years of the workers' state again.

Historical Retrospective: The First Problems

As with many of the newly established ministries, the first problem faced by the Commissariat of Education was gaining access to the building. Many of the old tsarist officials continued to occupy the ministries, refusing to hand over the keys and attempting to remove important documents. It took a week of negotiations to install the new committee, with the office staff agreeing to stay, while the old officials were allowed to leave.

Since its inception, Narkompros appears to have played a significant role in the new government. Most of the newly appointed officials were women, many of whom were the wives of Bolshevik leaders. Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's wife, was a key figure (McDermid & Anya, 2006).

All had excellent qualifications. Nevertheless, despite the presence of some important personalities in the Commissariat, it seems that educational issues were rarely discussed in the Central Committee, and this was a constant source of friction and complaints, both from Lunacharsky, who was himself a member of the Central Committee, and from Krupskaya.

In the early days of the Commissariat's operation, intense discussions took place regarding teaching methods and the curriculum within the new Soviet school system. As for the issue of how schools should be organized, there seems to have been agreement within Narkompros.

Lunacharsky was eager to encourage the creation of educational councils (soviets) at all levels (village, city, district, etc.). The management of education was to be placed in the hands of the masses. This, of course, left a question mark over the role of the Commissariat. Lunacharsky and Krupskaya believed that Narkompros should support and advise rather than exercise control.

Facing opposition within the party to this insistence on democratic control by the masses, rather than control by the central administration, Krupskaya wrote:

We were not afraid to organize a revolution. Let us not be afraid of the people, let us not be afraid that they will elect the wrong representatives, that they will bring in priests. We want the people to run the country and be masters of their fate... Our job is to help the people take their fate into their own hands. (Krupskaya, 1959).

The Bolsheviks were committed to free, compulsory education for all. This long-standing socialist position was reaffirmed by Lenin at the 1st All-Russian Congress on Education, which convened in August 1918 in Moscow. According to Lenin, the duty of the revolution was "to give everyone access to education," since "knowledge is a weapon in the struggle for liberation." ⁱⁱ

Access to higher education was open to all. Private schools were not abolished, but it became illegal to charge tuition fees. The differences centered on what kind of schools were needed and what should be taught. Two different approaches emerged, one with supporters in Petrograd and the other in Moscow. All agreed on an active approach to learning in line with Dewey's principles.

The educators of Petrograd advocated a balance between academic and technical skills, while children would receive specialized training only in late adolescence. The Moscow group proposed the idea of a school community (commune), with much greater emphasis on learning through work (the unified labor school). Children would gain life experiences and life skills through school. Schools would be open seven days a week, twelve months a year.

The discussion lasted for months, and the start of the school year in 1918 was postponed for a month while waiting for the decision of Narkompros to be distributed to the schools.

Ultimately, a compromise emerged. The most explosive issue was allowing holidays, and on this issue the Moscow group eventually conceded, agreeing to have holidays for three months each year.

Schools were to be open for seven days a week, but one and a half days were devoted to collective activities and excursions.

Two documents were sent to the schools: a general statement and a more detailed statement: the first was written by Lunacharsky from the Petrograd group and the second by the Moscow group.

The impact of these two documents on the schools was particularly serious. Education had to be radically transformed. It was not only that it had to be available to all, but also that it had to be controlled by those who participated in it: by teachers, students, parents, and the local Soviet. Teachers were to be elected. The school would not only provide education and training but would also provide all students with a warm breakfast. Exercises, exams, and punishment were abolished. Schools were to be known as Unified Labor Schools to reflect their non-segregation by age or gender and their emphasis on active learning and commitment to the importance of work. The entire operation of education and schooling had to change. The new approach was summarized:

in transforming the school so that from being an instrument for maintaining the class domination of the bourgeoisie, it becomes an instrument for the complete abolition of the division of society into classes, an instrument for the communist regeneration of society (Bukharin & Preobrazhensky, 1919/2021).

But when this policy was implemented in the schools, there were two major obstacles: the teachers and the lack of resources. Narkompros inherited an educational staff trained in authoritarian tsarist Russia. Within days of the October Revolution, the most important educational union, the All-Russian Union of Teachers (VUS), voted not to cooperate with the new regime. From November 1918 until the following March, it called its members to strike. The Bolsheviks were not surprised. Teachers are described in the *ABC of Communism* as follows: "Teachers in public elementary schools receive special training through which they are prepared for their role as hunters of beasts. Only

those who have fully acquired the bourgeois outlook have access to schools as educators." (Bukharin & Preobrazhensky, 1919/2021).

Appeals were made to teachers who would be willing to cooperate with the new Soviet regime, but there were very few. Differences arose over how to deal with the opposition of the VUS. Some advocated the dissolution of the VUS and the creation of a new communist teachers' union. Some teachers left the VUS and founded the Union of Internationalist Educators.

Others, including Krupskaya, advocated a struggle within the VUS to win the base away from the reactionary leadership. Krupskaya argued that a communist teachers' union would exclude some who might be ready to cooperate with the regime. Krupskaya lost this battle. The VUS was dissolved in 1919 and a communist teachers' union was created.

Some of the teachers could likely have been won over and in the meantime new teachers would have been trained by Narkompros, but the revolution in Russia was in great danger. The civil war created terrible shortages of goods and social devastation. Education and Narkompros were not exempt. It seems that education suffered more than other sectors.

When Narkompros was established, Lunacharsky was often criticized for a rather chaotic approach to hiring teachers. Indeed, if he knew someone, he found interesting, he would immediately offer them a job at Narkompros. The approach to finances in the first year of the revolution also seems to have been equally chaotic: they had no one with accounting skills and no idea how to work with a budget. Narkompros soon became the target of some central rationalization (Fitzpatrick, 2002).

The war also brought the issue of functioning despite the pedagogical discussion to the fore. Workers began to abandon Narkompros, as it was not a priority for food rations. The offices within Narkompros were occupied by homeless employees. Typhus broke out among these unofficial residents.

In the schools, conditions were worse. Teachers had no special food rations. There were reports of teachers dying of starvation. The war created thousands of orphans, and the schools were responsible for trying to care for them. The school community did not become a place of learning but a violent necessity. The study of the value of labor, for children up to five and six years old, became of the type "start working to survive."

Lunacharsky, in despair, wrote several times to the Central Committee but with little or no response. The result of the opposition and shortages meant that little progress was made in introducing the Unified Labor School system and progressive teaching methods. Narkompros and Lunacharsky came under severe criticism for lack of central direction and control. In an early move towards increasing bureaucracy, the Central Committee, while unwilling to remove Lunacharsky from Narkompros, appointed a deputy Commissar, Litkens, to oversee and veto the work of the committee (Fitzpatrick, 2002).

In 1920, the 8th Congress of the Bolshevik Party would adopt the position on polytechnic education. What were the goals of polytechnic education?

Lunacharsky gives a definition of the educated person as the person

who knows everything in general terms, but also has his own specialty, where he knows his job well, and can say to people 'nothing human is alien to me'. The person who knows the basic principles of technology, medicine, law, history, etc. is a truly educated person... He must be a specialist in his work, but at the same time be

interested in everything and be able to engage in any field of knowledge. (Beck, 1990).

This is the goal that polytechnic education aims to achieve. The concept of polytechnic denotes the opposition to mono-technical education. In the second, the goal is specialization in a particular profession. Polytechnic education, however, at the level of general education, does not offer any specialization, but its purpose is multifaceted education in basic general skills, knowledge, and work habits (Skordoulis, 2024).

Forging the Revolutionary Human: Trotsky's Marxist Pedagogy

Leon Trotsky, the leading Marxist theorist and revolutionary, situated education within the materialist conception of history and the struggle for proletarian emancipation. His scattered yet insightful writings articulate a vision of communist education as a crucial superstructure for the emergent socialist mode of production, tasked with overcoming the contradictions inherent in bourgeois pedagogy and cultivating the "revolutionary human" – an individual equipped for conscious participation in the class struggle.

Trotsky viewed bourgeois education as a direct reflection of capitalist social relations, functioning to reproduce the division of labor, instill bourgeois ideology, and perpetuate the subjugation of the proletariat. This superstructure, he argued, served to create alienated individuals, fragmented by specialization and lacking a holistic understanding of the material world and their place within it. Genuine educational transformation, therefore, was contingent upon the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist base and the establishment of a socialist society.

His seminal work, "On Communist Education" (1923)ⁱⁱⁱ, lays out the foundational principles of this Marxist pedagogy. Central to this is the concept of polytechnical education, a direct negation of capitalist vocationalism. Polytechnicalism, in Trotsky's analysis, transcends mere acquisition of multiple skills; it entails a dialectical understanding of the fundamental principles underpinning all forms of production and technology. This approach aims to abolish the antithetical relationship between mental and manual labor, fostering individuals capable of both theoretical comprehension and practical application, thereby contributing to the overcoming of alienation. By grasping the interconnectedness of the forces of production, the future proletariat would be empowered for collective ownership and democratic control of the economy.

This pedagogical orientation is intrinsically linked to the Marxist critique of alienation. Capitalist production alienates the worker from the product of their labor, the process of labor, their fellow workers, and their own human potential. Trotsky envisioned polytechnical education as a means to dialectically overcome this alienation by fostering a conscious understanding of the labor process and the social relations embedded within it. Education, in this context, becomes a tool for reclaiming human agency within the realm of material production.

Furthermore, Trotsky emphasized the necessity of a materialist and dialectical worldview as the epistemological foundation of communist education. This involved a radical break from idealist and metaphysical modes of thought perpetuated by bourgeois ideology. Education, from a Marxist standpoint, must equip the proletariat with the tools of dialectical materialism to critically analyze social contradictions, understand the historical trajectory of class struggle, and consciously engage in revolutionary praxis. This necessitates the

demystification of religious and metaphysical dogma, replacing it with a scientific understanding of the material world and its laws of development.

In "Literature and Revolution," Trotsky (1924/1972) addresses the role of culture as a crucial element of the ideological superstructure. While acknowledging the class character of art under capitalism, he foresaw the emergence of a new proletarian culture following the revolutionary transformation of the base. Communist education, in this context, plays a vital role in transmitting humanity's cultural heritage while simultaneously fostering the creative potential of the newly liberated proletariat. This involves a dialectical engagement with past cultural forms, critically assessing their class content while extracting their universal human value, ultimately contributing to the development of a truly classless and universal culture.

Trotsky's analysis in the collection "Women and the Family" (1973) highlights the crucial intersection of education and the woman question. He viewed the patriarchal family structure as a key element of the oppressive social relations that socialism seeks to overcome. Genuine female emancipation necessitates the socialization of domestic labor and a radical restructuring of familial relations. Education, therefore, must actively challenge traditional gender roles, promoting the equal intellectual and social development of both sexes, preparing them for equal participation in all spheres of social life and dismantling the material basis of patriarchal oppression.

The "Party Education"^{iv} as a specific form of Marxist education, served to cultivate revolutionary vanguard cadres. Rooted in the principles of democratic centralism, these schools aimed to equip proletarian leaders with a deep theoretical understanding of Marxism-Leninism, a concrete analysis of the historical and political conjuncture, and the organizational skills necessary for

leading the class struggle. This underscores the Marxist understanding of education as a vital tool for building revolutionary consciousness and organizing the proletariat for the seizure of state power.

It is crucial to understand that Trotsky's pedagogical vision was not a static dogma but a dynamic and evolving approach rooted in Marxist dialectics. He emphasized the need for pedagogical methods that fostered active engagement, critical inquiry, and the development of independent thought, rejecting rote learning and passive reception of information. The polytechnical principle itself necessitates a constant adaptation of the curriculum to the evolving forces of production.

In conclusion, Trotsky's contribution to Marxist educational theory lies in his rigorous application of historical materialism and dialectical analysis to the sphere of pedagogy. He viewed communist education as an integral component of the revolutionary project, tasked with dismantling the ideological superstructure of capitalism and cultivating the "revolutionary human" – a liberated, critically conscious, and polytechnically skilled individual capable of building and sustaining a communist society. While his vision was tragically interrupted, his insights remain a vital contribution to Marxist thought on the transformative potential of education in the struggle for proletarian emancipation and the creation of a truly human society. His work serves as a potent reminder of the dialectical relationship between the material base and the ideological superstructure, and the crucial role of education in forging the consciousness necessary for revolutionary change.

Trotsky on the Tasks of Communist Education

In December 1922, the journal *Communist Review*, published by the CP of Great Britain, published Trotsky's article "The Goals of Communist Education"

(Trotsky, 1922). The article was written at a time when Lenin himself was beginning to perceive the dangers of the growth of bureaucracy in the workers' state. In it, Trotsky responds to criticisms that Soviet educational policy, through education, seeks to educate a "new man," a Nietzschean superman. Trotsky argues that the new man is nothing other than the revolutionary man, whom he describes below:

It is often argued that the work of communist enlightenment consists in educating the new man. These words are exaggerated, too pathetic, and we must be particularly careful not to allow any humanist interpretation of the concept of 'new man' or the tasks of communist education.

There is no doubt that the man of the future, the citizen of the community, will be an extremely interesting and attractive being, and that his psychology will be very different from ours. Our task today, unfortunately, cannot consist in educating the human being of the future.

The utopian and humanist-psychological view is that the new man must first be shaped and that he will then create the new conditions. We cannot believe this. We know that man is a product of social conditions. But we also know that between human beings and conditions there is a complex and active mutual relationship. Man himself is an instrument of this historical evolution, and nothing less. And in this complex historical reflective action of the conditions experienced by active human beings, we do not create the abstractly harmonious and perfect citizen of the community, but we shape the specific human beings of our time, who must still struggle to create the conditions from which the harmonious citizen of the community can emerge...

The concept of 'revolutionary' is permeated by the highest ideals and ethics that we have inherited from the previous period of cultural evolution...

But we must not forget that the revolutionary is a product of specific historical conditions, a product of the social situation. The revolutionary is not a psychological

abstraction. The revolution is not an abstract principle, but a material historical event, evolving from class struggle, from the violent subjugation of one class by another. Thus, the revolutionary is a specific historical type of man and therefore a temporary type...

What are the main characteristics of the revolutionary? It must be emphasized that we have no right to separate the revolutionary from the class basis on which he has evolved and without which he does not exist.

The revolutionary of our time, who can only be associated with the working class, possesses the special psychological characteristics, the characteristics of intellect and will.

The education of the revolutionary must, above all, consist in liberating him from the remnants of ignorance and superstition, which are often found in a very 'sensitive' consciousness. And therefore we adopt an uncompromisingly intransigent attitude towards anyone who says a word suggesting that mysticism or religious sentiment can be combined with communism. Religiosity is incompatible with the Marxist view. We are of the opinion that atheism, as an integral part of the materialist view of life, is a necessary precondition for the theoretical education of the revolutionary. He who believes in another world is not able to concentrate all his passion on the transformation of this one.

During the period when Trotsky was chairman of the Military Revolutionary Council, he stated in a speech: "The struggle against illiteracy is only the first step in the great struggle against poverty, filth, barbarism, and all the other legacies of slavery."^v

Four days later, in a letter to his comrades in Kyiv, he described his general educational beliefs:

I can only advise the youth not to rush, not to exhaust themselves, not to jump from one subject to another, and not to start a second book until they have read, thought through, and mastered the first one.

In the ideological sphere, as in the economic sphere, the phase of primitive accumulation is the most difficult and demanding.

It is better to read one book and read it well. It is better to move forward a little at a time but to master it in detail. Only in this way will the power of your mind develop naturally.

Thought will gradually gain confidence in itself and become more productive. With these prerequisites in mind, it will not be difficult to allocate your time rationally. And then, the transition from one search to another will be largely pleasant." ^{vi}

At the end of the 1930s, shortly before his assassination by the Stalinist agent Mercader, Trotsky corresponded with George Novack and encouraged him to undertake a Marxist critique of Dewey's work, which maintained great influence among American progressive intellectuals.

Dewey, in 1926, had visited the USSR and wrote a report with extremely flattering comments about its educational system. Moreover, Dewey served as chairman of the international commission that examined Stalin's charges against Trotsky during the Moscow Trials and found them baseless^{vii}. In no way did this prevent Trotsky from writing to George Novack: "I fully agree with your idea of the necessity to write a Marxist critique of Dewey's philosophy, and I believe it is your immediate duty to do this work." ^{viii}

And indeed, even if somewhat later, George Novack proceeded with a thorough critique of Dewey's pedagogical theories, which was published in the

journal *International Socialist Review* and in greater detail in his book *Pragmatism versus Marxism* (Novack, 1975).

According to Novack, Dewey's pedagogical theories and, more broadly, the ideas of the progressive movement in education must be seen in relation to the rise of industrial capitalism.

Novack criticizes Dewey for failing to understand the relationship between education and the economy in a capitalist system. In a sense, Dewey was utopian when he thought that progressive teachers and parents, together with students, "would transform the school into a factory of democratic teaching that would illuminate and activate the community and ultimately the nation."

Moreover, apart from many practical problems, progressive educators in the US, who would be called upon to implement the principles of progressive education, were and still remain a small minority compared to the number of conservative educators fighting against any kind of reform in a progressive direction. It is a commonplace that any progressive reform must first concern the educators and only secondarily the students.

As Novack noted:

Dewey had the expectation that the educational system would be able to elevate American culture, like a giant crane, to ever greater heights and lead the American people to a broader democracy, step by step, generation by generation. The level of education, however, cannot be higher than what the social structures and conditions allow. Dewey loaded the institution of education with more than it could carry." (Novack, 1960b).

Synopsis

In a synthetic way, the postulates about education that we can infer in Leon Trotsky's thought are the following:

1. Education in a class society reflects, to a greater or lesser degree, the interests of the ruling class in power
2. Access to formal education is not the determinant for the masses of workers to move towards revolution; but the denial of education, culture, science, arts, and universal knowledge are some of the objective reasons why the socialist revolution is necessary
3. It is the duty of revolutionaries to develop political education work on the mass of workers, aiming at the seizure of power
4. In the transition phase to socialism, where the dictatorship of the proletariat prevails, revolutionary education is necessary, which forms revolutionaries for the permanent struggle against the forces of world imperialist capital
5. When the working class advances in the permanent revolution, defeating and replacing the world capitalist mode of production, the systematic process of training and education tends to acquire fewer classist and revolutionary characteristics (fundamental in the previous phase) and become more universal, human, and omnilateral, constituting socialist education that can form a new human being, under new bases unknown until then.

The example of the US in the 21st century is instructive. In a capitalist system, where businessmen dominate most of the boards of public or private educational institutions, Dewey's theory of progressive education or any similar idea is doomed to fail unless it is supported by a broad social movement that combines educational with political transformation. Faced with this inevitable impasse, the experience of the early years of the Russian revolution, in the organization of the educational system of the young workers' state, highlights

the broad possibilities opened by the revolutionary change of economic relations in introducing radical transformations in education, as well as in all areas of social life.

Notes

ⁱ A detailed Google Scholar search yielded the following document: Aranha, Otávio Luiz Pinheiro (2021). *Leon Trotsky e educação: contribuições ao debate sobre educação socialista* (Leon Trotsky and education: contributions to the debate on socialist education), PhD Thesis, Universidade Federal de Bahia, Brazil

ⁱⁱ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/aug/28.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/britain/periodicals/communist_review/1923/7/com_ed.htm.

^{iv} Trotsky's Letter to Gorky concerning the Party School held in the island of Capri in August 1909

^v Published in Pravda, May 27th, 1923

^{vi} *A letter to the Kiev comrades*. From Pravda, May 31, 1923. Translated from Collected Works, Vol. 21, by Marilyn Vogt. From: Problems of Everyday Life by Leon Trotsky.

^{vii} John Dewey and Suzanne LaFollette et al., (eds): "The Case of Leon Trotsky: Report of Hearings on the Charges Made Against Him at the Moscow Trials: Verbatim Transcript of Trotsky's Testimony Before the Dewey Commission", Coyoacan, Mexico, April 10–17, 1937. New York: Pioneer Publishers.

^{viii} <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1940/08/letter12.htm>

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