

Educating the Educators

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The notion of ‘educating the educator’ appeared as part of Marx’s posthumously published *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), which criticizes the materialism of fellow Left Hegelian Ludwig Feuerbach for being merely “contemplative [*anschauend*]” and one-sided. The latter accounts for the sensuousness (*Sinnlichkeit*) of the world of our experience and its impact on our consciousness, Marx argues, but fails to address the way our praxis constitutes this world. Feuerbach thus misses the fact that we are encountering *ourselves*, the outcome of our labor, when we encounter the world, which Georg Lukács will later describe as a condition of *reification*. Moreover, Marx continues, any materialism that overlooks the transformative role of our praxis – the negativity Hegel located at the core of subjectivity (Hegel 1977, 117) – prevents us from grasping not only the truth of experience, but the significance of revolutionary praxis as well.¹ We are thus limited to what Jacques Rancière calls “impotent contemplation” (Rancière 2003, 132) and Lukács describes as a “fatalistic stance” (Lukács 1971, 38), allowing us to do little more than interpret the world, when, as Marx’s famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach proclaims, the task is to change it.

Although the eleventh thesis continues to be the most famous, Marx’s third thesis – wherein he asserts “it is essential to educate the educator” – arguably provides more insight into his critical project and the history of self-criticism within the Marxist tradition. Before I discuss the methodological, theoretical, and pedagogical senses of Marx’s claim, here is the relevant section:

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances [*Umstände*] and upbringing [*Erziehung*], and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that it is essential to educate [*erziehen*] the educator [*Erzieher*] himself. Hence, this doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society [*Gesellschaft*] into two parts, one of which is superior to society. (Marx 1978, 144)

The *methodological* conclusion Marx draws is that it is we mere mortals who produce and shape the conditions, which in turn produce and shape us, and thus our methodology must include *dialectical* and *historical* methods capable of comprehending this ongoing and multidirectional relationship. In this context, our praxis is the “educator” that shapes or “educates” the material conditions and social relations that inform our beliefs, values, and epistemic frameworks. In short, we produce the material conditions of our own upbringing [*Erziehung*] and this historical relation can only be understood dialectically and with our praxis at the center of the story.

To make this case, however, is to already enact the second sense of Marx’s claim, which concerns *theory*. The critique of Feuerbach is a form of educating the educator, but not simply because Feuerbach had been an “educator” to Marx. It is rather that Marx is seeking to re-center praxis in the production of theory. Marx argues that a materialism without praxis “necessarily arrives at dividing society [*Gesellschaft*] into two parts, one of which is superior to society.” He is referring to the division between theory and practice, which leads to theory becoming elevated and unaccountable. Reintegrating praxis and theory production keeps theory grounded, thus inhibiting it from being put on a pedestal – reified, granted authority, and defended beyond its time. Theory must remain in what Cornel West calls the ‘funk of life’, subject to revision in the face of actual material conditions with, again,

praxis at the center of the story.

This self-critical (theoretical) notion of ‘educating the educator’ informs a tradition within so-called Western Marxism – from Karl Korsch, Georg Lukács, and Antonio Gramsci to the Frankfurt School, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre – revitalizing historical and dialectical methods and the centrality of praxis against the ossified determinism of the Second International and the “scientific” Marxism of the Soviet Union that express a clear separation of theory and practice. As Sartre describes it: “Men and things had to yield to ideas – a priori; experience, when it did not verify the predictions, could only be wrong” (Sartre 1963, 23). Decolonial Marxist thought continued this critical and praxis-centering tradition. Frantz Fanon, for example, takes Sartre to task for his treatment of black praxis, or what Fanon calls the “intellectualization of black *existence*” (Fanon 2008, 113). In the context of colonial racism, Sartre had reduced the lived experience of *negritude* and black struggle to a mechanically conceived dialectical moment destined for negation. This kind of theory “expels me from myself,” Fanon wrote (Ibid, 144). It was Fanon’s mentor Aimé Césaire who famously equated colonization with “thingification” (Césaire 2001, 42) and noted that in the colonies “black people... were doubly proletarianized and alienated,” i.e. as workers and as black people (Ibid, 94; cf. Fanon 2008, 89-119). With these conditions in mind, Fanon argues in *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) that “a Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched when it comes to addressing the colonial issue” (Fanon 2004, 5). Given the material conditions of black life, labor, and decolonial resistance, it was essential to educate the educator and revise Marxist theory.

The third sense of ‘educating the educator’ is *pedagogical* and concerns the transformation of the teacher-student relation. Similar to the aforementioned problem with the elevation of theory, the paternalism of the teacher as master continues to be a focus of critique. Standpoint theory, developed most thoroughly by feminist theorists, is a critical response to traditional structures of epistemic authority, for it privileges knowledge grounded in the praxis of those experiencing domination and engaged in social struggles.² This situated knowledge, notes Patricia Hill Collins, typically diverges from standard academic theory, taking the form of “poetry, music, essays, and the like” (Hill Collins 2000, 9). Relatedly, Paulo Freire sought to undermine the traditional “banking” model of education in which passive students receive deposits of knowledge from an all-knowing teacher (Freire 1993, 92). “The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic,” he wrote, “accept their ignorance as justifying the teachers existence – but, unlike the slave, they never discover that *they educate the teacher*” (Ibid, emphasis mine). In Freire’s alternative, “pedagogy of the oppressed,” which he practiced for decades, each side in this dialectic is simultaneously treated as a teacher and student. And it was in response to his own teacher, Louis Althusser, who espoused the banking model, that Rancière called for a “method of equality,” which begins with the assumption of equal intelligence and eschews the logic of explication (Rancière 1991, 12). Each of these examples of educating the educator is a critical response to the traditional division of teacher and student, rethinking the sites of knowledge production and re-centering the agents upon whose praxis it depends.

All three senses of Marx’s call to educate the educator – the methodological, theoretical, and pedagogical – rely upon the dialectical method and seek to entrench the fundamental integration of theory and practice. The reflexive nature of Marx’s under-appreciated third thesis also ensures Marxism’s continued relevance to the extent it encourages its self-critical inclinations, which surely entitles it to greater recognition than it has gained thus far.

Notes

1] Hegel claimed that the proof of concepts is found in their actualization in the world – allowing immediate certainty to become mediated truth – while Marx argued this actualization is the result of praxis, which is why the omission of praxis obscures the nature of truth.

2] Cf. Lukács' "What is Orthodox Marxism" (Lukács 1971, 1-26), for the importance of the proletarian standpoint in dialectical materialism.

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