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Socialism, Labour and Education: from Marx to Makarenko*

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Abstract

In this article, I am examining the ideas of Marx and Engels on the role of education in the communist transformation of society and also the understanding of polytechnical education by some notable Soviet thinkers, such as Krupskaya, Lunacharsky, Blonsky, Vygotsky and Makarenko, who played a significant role in the formation of the Soviet pedagogical theory and educational policy during the first two decades of the USSR.

Keywords: *Makarenko, Marxist pedagogy, polytechnicalism, Soviet education*

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Introduction

The October Revolution is an astounding event which determined 20th century history. Its outbreak, and the subsequent course of the Soviet regime that it spawned, were defined by a particularly crucial contradiction: on the one hand, the existence of relatively favourable conditions for its victory, on the other hand, the extremely difficult conditions for building a socialist society.

From its very first steps, the revolution set the goal of developing the country's productive forces via its extensive industrialization, something that required the establishment of a strong scientific and technological infrastructure and, of course, the wide reform and development of its educational system.

Education was immediately recognized by the Bolshevik leadership as an important institution for bringing about social change, disseminating new ideas, and forming a new type of personality.

The Soviet educational theorists who played a significant role in the initial formation of the Soviet educational system, were to a lesser or greater extent motivated by the ideas of Marxism.

Marx and Engels on Workers' Education

Marx and Engels linked the radical reform of education to the need to educate workers to be able to manage the productive forces of industrial capitalism collectively.

> As they claim in their common work, the *German Ideology*, the productive forces of big industry are so powerful and all-embracing that "[…] only individuals that are developing in an all-round fashion can appropriate them, i.e., can turn them into free manifestations of their lives" (Marx and Engels, 1975, 439).

For the founders of Marxism, the appropriation of these forces is essentially linked to the workers' education and cultivation of skills.

> The appropriation of these forces is itself nothing more than the development of the individual capacities corresponding to the material instruments of production. The appropriation of a totality of instruments of production is, for this very reason, the development of a totality of capacities in the individuals themselves. (Marx and Engels, 1975, 85)

The education of the youth is perceived as a multi-faceted development of competencies which will allow them as future workers to transcend the enslaving division of labour in order to manage the system of production as a whole. As Engels suggests;

> The common management of production cannot be effected by people as they are today, each one being assigned to a single branch of production,

> shackled to it, exploited by it, each having developed only one of his abilities at the cost of all the others and knowing only one branch, or only a branch of a branch of the total production. Even present-day industry finds less and less use for such people. Industry carried on in common and according to plan by the whole of society presupposes moreover people of all-round development, capable of surveying the entire system of production.
>
> […] Education will enable young people quickly to go through the whole system of production, it will enable them to pass from one branch of industry to another according to the needs of society or their own inclinations. It will therefore free them from that one-sidedness which the present division of labour stamps on each one of them. Thus the communist organization of society will give its members the chance of an all-round exercise of abilities that have received all-round development. (Engels, 1976, 353)

Of course, it is a fact that the references of Marx and Engels to the education in a communist society are especially scarce. In a brief statement in the first volume of the Capital, Marx claims that the education of the future;

> will, in the case of every child over a given age, combine productive labour with instruction and gymnastics, not only as one of the methods of adding to the efficiency of production, but as the only method of producing fully developed human beings. (Marx, 1996, 486)

In a more extensive reference to the issue of education, Marx highlights the"[…] tendency of modern industry to make children and juvenile persons of both sexes co-operate in the great work of social production, as a progressive, sound and legitimate tendency" (Marx, 1985, 188) and at the same time draws the conclusion that "In a rational state of society, every child whatever, from the age of 9 years, ought to become a productive labourer" (Marx, 1985, 188).

Marx proposes the organization of labour for the working class children of his era, as follows:

> […] for the present, we have only to deal with the children and young persons of both sexes divided into three classes, to be treated differently; the first class to range from 9 to 12; the second, from 13 to 15 years; and the third, to comprise the ages of 16 and 17 years. We propose that the employment of the first class in any workshop or housework be legally restricted to two; that of the second, to four; and that of the third, to six hours. For the third class, there must be a break of at least one hour for meals or relaxation. (Marx, 1985, 188)

Marx distinguishes three essential aspects for children's education: first, mental education, second, bodily education, "such as is given in schools of gymnastics, and by military exercise"(Marx, 1985, 189), and third, technological training, [Polytechnical, in the German text], which "imparts the general principles of all processes of production, and, simultaneously initiates the child and young person in the practical use and handling of the elementary instruments of all trades" (Marx, 1985, 189).

Marx suggested that the labour movement in the capitalist society should demand the significant improvement of working class children's education, stating that "The combination of paid productive labour, mental education, bodily

exercise and polytechnic training, will raise the working class far above the level of the higher and middle classes" (Marx, 1985, 189).

At this point, we should stress that when Marx refers to working class children education, he has in mind such a type of labourer who represents mainly a manual worker, a machine or manual tools operator. For this type of worker direct contact with the means of labour, immediate apprenticeship in workshops and factories and acquisition of labour experience are indispensable in order to enable him to perform different types of labour and pass from one branch of industry to another.

Moreover, Marx includes actual work experience in children's education, considering it indispensable, in conditions of big industry. His following statement is especially straightforward: "A general prohibition of child labour is incompatible with the existence of large-scale industry and hence an empty, pious wish" (Marx, 1989, 98).

Marx of course has in mind the first stages of the industrial revolution, when child labour in unskilled positions was extensive and self-evident. Thus, in conditions where the type of manual worker as direct producer prevailed, Marx believed that the combination of the self-evident participation of children in the productive process with the polytechnical education (i.e. with the acquisition of multi-faceted technical experience) and the school education would provide the working class the skills necessary for its emancipation and management of the social means of production.

That is why he states that "an early combination of productive labour with education is one of the most potent means for the transformation of present-day society" (Marx, 1989, 98).

Marx, obviously, did not have in mind a highly industrialised or extensively automated system of the means of production, in which child labour (as productive activity) is useless and essentially impossible. Such a system, as we now see it developing in the most advanced capitalist countries, renders the manual worker (that is, the holder of technical experience acquired through apprenticeship in production) redundant. His position in labour process is taken over by the labour of highly specialized employees, whose formation requires long-term education, systematic acquisition of scientific knowledge and cultivation of intellectual abilities.

Socialist Education in the Pre-War Soviet Thought

The above ideas of Marx and Engels represent the basis on which in Soviet Russia the theory of polytechnicalism and labour school and its corresponding educational policy were formed.

Nadezhda Krupskaya was a prominent figure in this direction and in her 1918 article titled *Concerning the Question of Socialist School*, she argues in favour of compulsory child labour on the premise that labour offers organizational experience and develops a sense of discipline and mainly self-discipline. Krupskaya claims that "productive labor not only prepares children to become

useful members of society in the future, but also makes them useful members of society today" (Krupskaya, 1925, 28).

Krupskaya describes the goal of education as formation of;

> […] comprehensively developed people possessing conscious and organized social instincts, an integral, well thought-out world view and a clear understanding of everything that takes place in nature and in social life; people who are prepared both in theory and in practice to undertake all types of labor, both physical and mental, and who are able to construct a rational, meaningful, beautiful and happy social life. Such people are needed to a socialist society, for without them socialism cannot be fully achieved. (Krupskaya, 1925, 26-27)

On October 16, 1918 the United Labor School of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic was established under the statute of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets, consisting of two levels. The 1st level (5 years) was for children from age eight to thirteen, and the 2nd level (4 years) was for children from age fourteen to seventeen.

The statute highlighted the need for the education of children to combine general education with polytechnical, physical and aesthetic education. Productive labour was to be the foundation of the educational process, in the sense that through the division of labor children would be trained in the collective activity, developing inner discipline and responsibility.

At the same time as the statute, the work of the first People's Commissar of Education, Anatoly Lunacharsky, was published, entitled *The Basic Principles of the United Labor School*.

In it, Lunacharsky defines labour education as the pupils' active, flexible, creative familiarization with the world, and as the acquaintance of the pupils with the agricultural and industrial labour in all its forms (Lunacharsky, 1972, 73).

As regards the objective of the labour school, Lunacharsky states:

> […] in general the objective of the labour school is not training for a specific craft, but the polytechnical education, which offers children acquaintance in practice with the methods of all basic forms of labour, partly in a training workshop or at the school farm, partly in fabrics, factories etc. (Lunacharsky, 1972, 74)

Apart from polytechnical education, children's education should include a) the provision of general knowledge in the sense of the study of human culture in its relationship with nature, b) physical education and sports, and c) aesthetic and arts education.

It is worth noting that among the People's Commissariat of Education officials during 1918-1919, there were two different positions on labour school and polytechnical education. The Petrograd group, led by Lunacharsky, advocated a model of secondary school which should combine general studies with the cultivation of various practical skills and the part-time work in factories, while the Moscow group (which included V.M. Pozner, P.N. Lepeshinsky, and V.N.

Shul'gin) was in favour of a transformation of the traditional schools into economically self-sufficient productive communes (McClelland, 1985, 116).

Another prominent Soviet theoretician of polytechnical education was Pavel Blonsky. In his book *The Labour School* (1919), he states the following, among others:

> Through the education it provides, the school leads the student to the world of one or another culture. The question that arises is: what culture emerges in front of us, the educators of the industrial-labour school?
> It is, first of all, the culture of a technically strong humanity. It seems to me somewhat primitive that I am accused of technicism. I wonder: is it wrong to be strong? Is it bad to subjugate the forces of nature? [...] Is industry not the pride of the human intellect?
> [...] The factory is the cradle where inevitably collectivism is nurtured. The technically perfect society is intricately linked with the socially perfect society. The culture of the future is the industrial-collectivist culture and the only authentic education is the one that brings us in touch with this culture. (Blonsky, 2000, 304)

Lev Vygotsky also refers to polytechnical education in his work *The Socialist Alteration of Man* (1930). As he puts it,

> […] the basic ideas which underpin polytechnical education consist of an attempt to overcome the division between physical and intellectual work and to reunite thinking and work which have been torn asunder during the process of capitalist development. According to Marx, polytechnical education provides familiarity with the general scientific principles of all the production processes and, at the same time, it teaches children and adolescents practical skills which makes it possible for them to operate basic tools used in all industries. (Vygotsky, 1994, 181)

Greater attention should be given to the work of the Soviet educator Anton Makarenko, who organised and managed two very important children's institutions which were, in fact, labour schools, the Gorky Colony (1920-1928) and the Dzerzhinsky Commune (1927-1935).

Starting with the conviction that one of the most fundamental principles of socialism is collectivism, Makarenko supported that the goal of socialist education should be to instil the spirit of collectivism in young people, that is, to form a type of personality whose individual interests, goals and activity will incarnate the interests, goals and ideals of the socialist society.

As he states;

> Correct Soviet education must be organised by forming united, strong and influential collectives. The school must be a single collective where all the educative processes are properly organised. Every separate member of the collective should feel his dependence on the collective, he should be devoted to the interests of the collective, he should uphold these interests and value them above all else. (Makarenko, 1965, 43)

According to Makarenko, the Soviet education must strive to create the cultured Soviet worker who is in possession of general as well as technical-vocational knowledge; a self-disciplined, politically informed worker with strong moral values and a sense of honour and pride in his class identity, devoted to his duty to socialist society, "capable of fighting and building, of living and loving life" (Koutaissoff, 1953, 135).

Makarenko considered the child labour-collective (which constituted an educational community of children founded on principles of self-governance and collective labour activity) a vital institution of the Soviet education. He advocated children's labour activity which had to be productive, that is, culminate in the production of use-values. The collective labour was, for him, a practical moral education, an activity through which children could be engaged in satisfaction of collective, social needs. In his own words: "Labour-care is not merely a road leading to the means of living; it is also the ethics, the philosophy of the new world, the thought about the workers' unity and the new happy mankind" (Makarenko, 1957, 520).

Through labour children were taught to devote themselves not only to the fulfilment of their personal needs, or the needs of a group, but also to the needs and affairs of the Soviet society, of the whole of working humanity:

> The collective is a part of the Soviet society which is organically linked to all other collectives […] The Soviet collective defends the issue of world unity of the working humanity as a matter of principle. It is not merely a biotic unification of people, but a part of the humanity's battle front in the era of the world revolution. (Makarenko, 1958b, 355)

The moral education advocated by Makarenko focused on the cultivation of devotion to the duty; it aimed for the education of people capable of carrying out in a disciplined and effective manner work tasks which were hard, tiring but vitally necessary for the collective progress. Makarenko highlights that;

> Life is full of effort and intensity; it demands from man regular boring labour, and we need to prepare our children for life so that they will be able to perform this labour without torturing and oppressing their personality. But this is feasible only when the value of labour is validated by a clear idea of its importance for the collective, and therefore for all members of the collective. This is what sense of duty means. (Makarenko, 1986, 144)

For this reason, Makarenko placed particular emphasis on cultivating discipline and self-discipline. The disciplined attitude towards completing difficult, arduous, unpleasant tasks was considered in the children collectives as a vital presupposition in order to ensure the functionality of their system of self-governance. Self-governance meant that every member of the community had to respect the collective decisions, to eagerly execute the orders of the administrative bodies, as well as act in accordance with the common interests and rules when elected in an administrative position.

Very important to Makarenko was also the concept of life prospect, of the man's conscious devotion to a better, happy future for all. The life prospect needs

to be optimistic, as well as connect the individual with society and direct attention to the great social issues and endeavours, to the crucial collective affairs.

Conscious life prospect, being transformed into a goal of human activity, gives meaning to individual existence, motivates and guides the individual in the efforts aimed at personal and social progress.

Reflecting on the connection between life prospect and the character of personality, Makarenko claims that;

> The most important thing we have come to appreciate in a man is strength and beauty. Both of these are determined exclusively by his attitude towards the prospect he sets his sights on. A man, who gears his behavior to a short-term prospect, is the weakest. If he is satisfied with aspiring after no more than a personal prospect, even long-term, he may seem strong, but we cannot perceive of the beauty of personality and its real value. The broader the collective, whose prospects constitute the man's own prospects, the better and beautiful that man is. (Makarenko, 1958a, 74)

Some Remarks and Conclusions on the Soviet Concept of Labour School and Polytechnical Education

The pedagogical mindset in the USSR that in its first two decades founded the ideas of polytechnicalism and labor school considered young people as active members of Soviet society, who should combine general knowledge with practical labour competencies, be able to understand the production process, have organizational skills and the necessary moral qualities that would guarantee the conscious work and social activity for the benefit of the socialist regime.

In the USSR genuine labour schools, in the sense of linking education to children's participation in real productive activities, existed only in an experimental form. The Soviet educational system during the pre-war period, while incorporating in its structure elements of polytechnical education as well as offering specialised technical-vocational training, veered, however, away from the idea of children's permanent productive activity.

Since early 1920s, a strong opposition to the ideal of polytechnical education (mainly advocated by the leadership of the People's Commissariat of Education) was expressed by the proponents (grouped in the Main Committee of Vocational Education - Glavprofobr) of the priority of vocational education, who emphasized the necessity to produce trained workers (McClelland, 1985, 119-120).

During the NEP period the teaching methods (the so-called "complex method" and the children's labour activities) that were introduced by the People's Commissariat of Education confronted with the negative reaction of both teachers and parents, including many communists (Fitzpatrick, 2002, 34-35). As for the People's Commissariat of Education itself, this was widely perceived as "a home for 'fantasists and theoreticians'" (Fitzpatrick, 2002, 35). A governmental examination of the defects of Soviet education system came to the conclusion that

"teachers did not know what to teach and pupils were failing to acquire elementary knowledge and skills" (Fitzpatrick, 2002, 36).

In conjunction with the dynamic industrialization of the Soviet economy since late 1920s, the Soviet education system grew at an astounding rate and was directed to the rapid and mass transformation of the former illiterate peasants into skilled and disciplined industrial workers, holders of basic general and technical knowledge, able to read, write, and count, as well as to understand rules and instructions. It was also oriented to the extremely crucial task of spreading the socialist ideology and educating millions of Soviet citizens to be committed to the principles and ideals of the socialist regime. In the early 1930s, changes were introduced towards a more elaborated and stable curriculum with a better specification of courses' content in order to improve the level of general knowledge in the basic scientific fields (Koutaissoff, 1953, 113-114).

It should be noted that in late 1930s, polytechnical education was abandoned. As Koutaissoff explains;

> The craftsmanship acquired in school workshops equipped with primitive tools and out-of-date machinery (new equipment could not be spared from industry) bore no relation to the skills required of a worker in a modern factory or mine. Rather than teach obsolete manual skills it was preferable to give the young sounder theoretical grounding in elementary science; in primary schools the hours spent in the workshop could be put to better use in getting inarticulate little peasants to express themselves logically and coherently in their native tongue. (Koutaissoff, 1953, 115)

A new interest in polytechnical education, as well as a discussion on it emerged in the USSR in the early 1950s (Simon, 1954). In addition, new curricula concerning polytechnicalism were tested in the experimental schools attached to the Academy of Educational Science of the USSR (Simon, 1955).

As a result of these endeavours, a new, more elaborated and systematic model of polytechnical education appeared in the Soviet Union via the 1958 educational reform (Shapovalenko, 1963, 70-88). The aims of polytechnical education were determined as familiarizing students with;

> the structure and functioning of modern machines and mechanisms, the principles of the all-round mechanization and automation of production, modern methods for the treatment of materials, and the elements of production organization and economy, while they must also have a general technical training and be taught how to handle modern tools. (Shapovalenko, 1963, 82)

Students had to become acquainted with the main branches of production, such as power production, metallurgy, mechanical engineering, chemical industry, building, plant-growing, stock-breeding, transport and communication (Shapovalenko, 1963, 83), as well with the physico-mechanical, physico-chemical and biological methods of production (Shapovalenko, 1963, 84).

It is necessary to notice that the difficulties of implementing the principle of polytechnicalism in Soviet schools in the pre-war years were due to a series of factors.

First of all, the ideas of Soviet educators regarding polytechnicalism and the labour school were abstract, limited to general statements, without taking into account the nature of the means of production and the character of labour that had not yet been completely or at least sufficiently industrialized. Given the great pedagogical significance of training children in combining theoretical activities with practice, these ideas did not take into account that the immediate labour activity of children does not always have educational results, when the working conditions are particularly hard, as was the case in the first decades of the USSR.

In addition to that, the dominance in Soviet economy of hard, monotonous physical labour for the use of manual tools or for the operation of machines (accompanied by a high level of labour accidents) was interwoven with the subjugation of the semi-qualified workers to their working conditions, as well as with their strict specialization (in a Tayloristic form) in specific bodily actions, which rendered any polytechnical labour activity impossible.

Further, the ideas of Soviet educators regarding polytechnicalism also didn't take into account the fact that a creative polytechnical education necessitated schools with a particularly expensive technological equipment, which was impossible at a large scale for the USSR, almost throughout all its history. Such an education also necessitated highly qualified teaching personnel, the lack of which was extremely acute especially during the pre-war period of USSR.[1]

As for the idea of overcoming the enslaving division of labour through polytechnical education, it proved to be very simplistic, because it ignored the fact that the industrialized division of labour significantly increases the workers subjugation to the means of labour, to the immediate material conditions of production. In other words, it increases the enslaving division of labour, the division between highly qualified, intellectual-scientific, administrative labour and un- or semi-qualified, physical and executive labour.

For every possible in the 20th century conditions industrialized socialist economy, the following observation of Marx is highly relevant:

> The worker's activity, reduced to a mere abstraction of activity, is determined and regulated on all sides by the movement of the machinery, and not the opposite. The science which compels the inanimate limbs of the machinery, by their construction, to act purposefully, as an automaton, does

[1] It is worth mentioning here the comment of James McClelland on the statute that established the United Labor School of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic: "In view of the conditions of the time in war-ravaged, poverty-stricken Russia, the statute on the Unified Labour School could only serve as a declaration of intent, and, as events were to prove, a highly unrealistic one at that" (McClelland, 1985, 116). Concerning the debate in 1920s between the proponents of polytechnical and those of vocational education, McClelland remarks that "by and large the participants on both sides of the Bolshevik educational debate were dealing with hopes and dreams, not with real possibilities" (McClelland, 1985, 122).

> not exist in the worker's consciousness, but rather acts upon him through the machine as an alien power, as the power of the machine itself. (Marx, 1993, 693)

It should be emphasized that industrialized labour, even in a socialist society, remains primarily an alienating activity for the workers-immediate operators of the means of production. As Viktor Vazjulin put it;

> […] in machine production mechanical work prevails, a work that is monotonous, uniform etc. The essence of man, as a man, and even simply the nature of man, as a living being, is not compatible with the nature of mechanical work. The prevalence of mechanical work causes man's dissatisfaction with labour and therefore, in these conditions, labour as a need cannot prevail. (Vazjulin, 1988, 297-298)

Consequently, the overcoming of the enslaving division of labour in a socialist society is not possible to be achieved via education, as far as producers (a significant part of them) still constitute immediate-physical agents of production. In my mind, the crucial way to eliminate the enslaving division of labour is to achieve the elimination of manual labour in the form of workers participation in production process as immediate operators of manual or mechanized means of production. This radical transformation of labour was described by Marx as following:

> Labour no longer appears so much to be included within the production process; rather, the human being comes to relate more as watchman and regulator to the production process itself […] He steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor. (Marx, 1993, 705)

It is worth noting that labour school, as an institution of polytechnical education, in terms of its conception tended towards empiricism, and emphasised apprenticeship (although a multi-faceted apprenticeship), in order for new workers to be in a position to comprehend and control the productive activity.

But the evolution of the means of production in the direction of advanced-complete mechanisation and automation significantly shrinks the direct manual labour of workers, while increasing the intellectual and scientific character of labour activity. In conditions under which science constitutes an increasingly definitive productive force, the education of future producers in a way that allows them to comprehend and control production is primarily associated with the systematic acquisition of scientific knowledge as well as with the cultivation of their ability to think scientifically. The last is equal, in my perception, to the ability for a "conceptual representation of an object in the totality of the dialectical relations-interactions among its parts" (Pavlidis, 2015, 16), for a "theoretical conception and representation of the contradictory relations that determine the genesis and evolution of various objects" (Pavlidis, 2015, 17).

Taking into account that the productive forces of a possible future socialist society will be highly automated manufacturing systems, interconnected by information technologies, the producers of this society, in order to collectively

manage these forces, should be specialists highly qualified in a wide variety of scientific and technological fields.

Given all the above, the principle of polytechnicalism, which is essential for the socialist concept of education, should be understood nowadays as giving students, along with general knowledge on nature and society, a systematic knowledge about the character of society's productive forces, the main branches of production and the technologies used in them, as well as about the scientific laws on which these technologies are based.

As for the practical-productive activity for educational purposes, this in the most technologically advanced countries is no longer meaningful in the form of an extended apprenticeship immediately in factories. The cultivation of practical-productive skills of contemporary children can mainly take the form of a multi-dimensional artistic, handicraft and experimental activity in school courses, science laboratories and modern machine workshops.

Conclusion

Despite the course taken by the educational system in the USSR, the pedagogical pursuits of its pre-war decades offer interesting insights for a better understanding and further development of the socialist perception of personality and its cultivation. They provide a clear picture of the ideals which guided the builders of the first socialist society.

It is worth mentioning as an epilogue a characteristic quote by Anton Makarenko. In a letter to a former student of him, referring to the issue of the meaning of life, he writes:

> I love life as it is. It is great because it is not selfishly calculated, because it involves struggle and risks, burdens and thoughts […] I live because I love life, I love the days and nights, I love the struggle, I love watching how human develops, how he handles nature, his own nature as well […] That's how people have always lived and that's how they'll always live. However, now more and more they are learning to find joy in life in the collective, to rejoice not in their personal victories, but in the victories of the whole of humanity. That is what the genuine meaning of socialism really is. (Makarenko, 1958c, 464-465)

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