

Don't We Relate? Resources for Organization in Marxist Pedagogy

Mark Brenneman
University of Utah

Tyson Lewis proposes a re-examination of Marxist pedagogy with specific reference to the problem of revolutionary organization. He invites his readers to think through salient possibilities of collectivity amidst the “restructuring of productive relations on a global scale.” Often marginalized from without and resigned from within, the educational left, Lewis argues, can and should reassert itself. It can and should take a more central position within the topography of political resistance: “The educational left must realize that within itself there lies an important resource for re-thinking the problematic of organization: *pedagogy*.” Lewis provocatively asserts that given its ongoing engagement with pedagogical questions, the educational left has “valuable insight into organization that it can and should export out into broader discussions concerning the direction of the revolution today.” And yet Lewis also suggests that derivative of the very theoretical resources commanded by those who argue for a critical pedagogy, there is also a historical recognition of ambiguity that surrounds the entire question of a “vanguard.” This fixation, this “symptom” as Lewis calls it, “haunts” the imaginary of critical pedagogy alongside its emancipatory hopes. Lewis’s philosophical instincts and recognition of the problematic are as germane as Karl Marx’s third thesis with which they concur.

Toward the symptom, Lewis directs us in a re-education of sorts and asks that we begin to “reframe the debates within Marxism with respect to pedagogy and revolutionary organization.” He puts us in conversation with the work of Georg Lukács and Paulo Freire who are both influenced by “a shared intellectual investigation of political and revolutionary organization,” yet whose similarities are tempered by respective differences in “historical locations and differing intellectual traditions.” Within this range of possibility, Lewis focuses on the degree to which the question of organization in Freire’s pedagogy should be seen as a revision of Lukács’s own retheorizing of vanguardism. It is a provocative idea.

I approach Freire’s conversation with Lukács in a slightly different, but, I believe, complementary way. First, I position Lukács in light of his “ontological” preoccupations. Secondly, following Lewis’s discussion of the revolutionary leader as “witness” in Freire, I look to another prominent influence on Freire’s conception of revolutionary leadership in the work of personalist philosopher Emmanuel Mounier. Both of these lines of inquiry seek to support a “relational” account of Freire’s revolutionary leadership. In this way I try to heed Lewis’s profound challenge that we make good on some of the “resources” and “insights” that he argues lie within the theoretical purview of the educational left.

Lewis distills the problem of revolutionary organization down to “the question of communication between revolutionary actors.” Given Freire’s work toward a

dialogical pedagogy, the question is a good one, but another, perhaps prior question can be suggested: How are actors constituted as revolutionary learners? Lukács's concern with this latter question is taken up in his *Reification* essay. Here the question of the status of knowledge becomes thoroughly grounded in the entire "condition" or standpoint from which knowledge is possible. As Lukács tells us at the close of the essay, "History is at its least automatic when it is the consciousness of the proletariat that is at issue."¹ This abolition of the possibility of consciousness from a materialistic determinism accomplishes two things. First, if class-consciousness and historical possibility are open ended, always in dialectical tension, always becoming, as Lukács suggests, then this tension provides both a space and time where pedagogy is in play.² Secondly, in order to understand the full measure of this productive space, we can begin to ask ontological questions about the actors who inhabit it, keeping in mind that an ontology of Marxist inflection will critically distance itself from earlier ontologies that pursue a static *essence* of humanity. In this light, the concept of reification as Lukács develops it operates as a complex of pedagogical engagements, provisionally mediated within the lives of the proletariat as they are caught in the entire complex of relationships in a society given over to commodity structure.

In dialogue with his students, Lukács spoke of ontology in the following way, "We are using the fine word 'ontology'...although one should really say that one is discovering the forms of being that new movements of the complex produce."³ In other words, Lukács conceives of ontology in a way that enables him to interrogate how actors/learners are constituted in relationships, in situations that include the communicative and may be primarily motivated by economic reproduction. He suggests that labor's way of being in the world is in constant articulation with the ongoing developments within and between subjects and their collective objectifications. Divorcing himself from ontology in its classical guise, Lukács says, "There is certainly no Being in the strong sense, and even that which we call everyday being is a specific and extremely relative configuration of complexes within a historical process."⁴ Lukács's philosophical development of a social ontology prompts a different way of raising the question about "communication between revolutionary actors." A concern for social ontological questions puts us squarely within the revolutionary subject's relationships. In other words, social ontological mediation helps us situate the "subject in relation" prior to asking the "how" of communication. This social ontology conceives of bonds between actors as already present, bonds that then can be developed and reconstituted dialogically. Recent work within "relational pedagogy" starts from the premise that "Human words and actions have no authentic meaning; they acquire meaning only in the context of specific relations."⁵ Freire, like Lukács before him, dialectically turns this specificity against itself, in order that these relations may carry forth their full educative potential.

Each return to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* confirms for me a sense in which this text is truly a confluence of voices channeled by Freire's political instincts, disappointments, and hopes. Its current is meant to convey its readers into revolutionary possibility. One voice central to Freire's conception of revolutionary

leadership, often not heard, is that of Mounier. Between Mounier and Freire, I register a convergence around questions of leadership and shared relational terms. Although I cannot hope to do justice to Mounier's "personalism" in this short essay, I am compelled at the very least to affirm his presence within the confluence of Freire's pedagogy.

Mounier advanced a "series of original actions" meant to provide an outline for the beginnings of a revolutionary posture, a point from which to remake the world.⁶ The first of these actions, "going out of self," Mounier understood as a form of self dispossession that allows one to "become available for others." We hear in Mounier's formulation the basis for "solidarity" in its Freirean inflection. For Freire, wrestling with the oppressor within, wrestling with the consequences of one's ontological constitution via relations within the oppressive context, entailed wresting the grip of this context through an act of conversion, by which one becomes available to the other of the oppressed. Further, this conversion necessitates a "self-giving" in a "humble, loving, and courageous encounter with the people."⁷

Explaining another of the "original actions," Mounier also spoke of "understanding," explaining that "there is a manner of understanding everyone which is equivalent to loving nothing and ceasing to be anything — a merging of oneself with others that is not a comprehension of them."⁸ The point lives on in Freire's work when he says, "Revolutionary humanism cannot, in the name of revolution, treat the oppressed as objects to be analyzed and...presented with prescriptions for behavior."⁹ This "understanding" in Freirean terms elicits a pedagogy which "must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed."¹⁰ These formulations in conversation with Mounier's personalist philosophy clarify the parameters of Freire's vision of the revolutionary leader's ontological situatedness alongside those with whom he or she learns.

Mounier closes his series of actions with perhaps the broadest of revolutionary dispositions, "faithfulness." Here he advocates what he calls continuity. Continuity for Mounier assures relationships whereby each person is treated as a subject. For Mounier this means that as subject the person must be understood to have an "inexhaustible" presence within relation. Continuity in this sense means that the relationship is understood as one of "perpetual renewal." One hears in Mounier's "original actions" the underpinnings of Freire's revolutionary "witness." Mounier, like Freire, calls the level of commitment to the other a "communion of love."¹¹ As Mounier says, speaking as revolutionary teacher and leader, "profoundly caught in the length and breadth of the human struggle to humanize humanity," "one might almost say that I have no existence, save in so far as I exist for others, and that to be is, in the final analysis, to love."¹² Formulations like these effervesce within Freire's concept of leadership. They push us to theorize a social ontology similar to that sought by Lukács that centers relationship not only in the moment of encounter, but also in the very anticipation of encounter that prior "movements of the complex" continually educate us toward. Perhaps we can say that the symptom exists on the way to its own demise.

-
1. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 208.
 2. I recall Antonio Gramsci's assertion that, "Every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educational relationship." Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 350.
 3. Georg Lukács, Hans Heinz Holz, and Theodor Pinkus, *Conversations with Lukács* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1975), 21.
 4. *Ibid.*, 21.
 5. Charles Bingham and Alexander Sidorkin, eds., *No Education Without Relation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 7.
 6. Emmanuel Mounier, *Personalism* (New York: Grove Press, 1952), 21.
 7. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 132.
 8. Mounier, *Personalism*, 21.
 9. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 133.
 10. *Ibid.*, 48.
 11. Mounier, *Personalism*, 23.
 12. *Ibid.*, xix and 20.