

## Contributing to a Marxist Theory of Schooling

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Within the context of schools, what would the approach of a Marxist pedagogy consist of? A Brazilian educator responded to this question by emphasizing that such an approach would:

- “a) ... identify the most developed forms through which objective and historically produced knowledge is expressed, recognizing the conditions of its production, while understanding its principal manifestations as well as the present tendencies of its transformation;
- b) ... convert objective knowledge into school knowledge in such a way as to make its appropriation by students possible within school space and time;
- c) ... provide the means necessary for the student to, as a result, not only appropriate objective knowledge but to also appropriate the process of its production and the tendencies of its transformation.” (Saviani, 1997, p. 14, *my translation*).

I agree with this answer formulated by Dermeval Saviani, Emeritus Professor of UNICAMP (Universidade Estadual de Campinas), who, since the 1970s, has become an important reference in both Brazil and the rest of South America for educators who have been working for the construction of a Marxist pedagogy.

Saviani also formulated the following definition of the educational work of schools:

“Educational work is aimed to produce intentionally and directly in each individual the humanity that has been produced historically and collectively by humankind. In this sense, the objective of education is related, on one hand, to the identification of the cultural content that needs to be appropriated by the individual in the process of formation (humanization) and, on the other hand and at the same time, to the discovery of the most adequate forms to achieve that goal.” (*idem., also translated by me*)

The fundamental concepts within Activity Theory allow us to appreciate the dialectical function of schooling as it reproduces historical/accumulated human experience. The three most important references for Activity Theory in Psychology are:

- **Vygotsky**, Lev Semenovich (1896-1934)
- **Luria**, Alexander Romanovich (1902-1977)
- **Leontyev**, Aleksei Nikolaevich (1903-1979)

Karl Marx and Friederich Engels define labour as a vital activity specific to humans involving the metabolism between the human being and nature. The survival of humankind would be impossible without that active relationship between the human being and nature. The social process fundamentally consists of the production of the means for satisfying human necessities. Such production constitutes the transformation of nature. Other animal species survive through an active adaptation to their natural environments. Humans transform their environments to create the social, cultural, historical world, creating the human world. This process of production and reproduction of the material and the non-material cultural reality is historical. A cultural object is a product of human activity even when human beings make any, even minor, change/adjustment to the form of a natural object in order to use it towards some practical propose. In its most simple manifestations, labour is merely the modification to the physical form of a natural object (a stone, a bone etc) to create a tool. A tool is a human creation; it is not just the result of a natural process. Even when a human being creates a new function (social function) for a natural object, this process transforms the object into something social, cultural, something “humanized”.

Through human social history, the totality of human activity has consisted of creating various kinds of material and non-material systems (structures) of cultural objects. These represent the “essential powers” of humankind (in Marx’s terms: “social organs”, “the inorganic body” of humankind).

How are these “essential powers” of humankind transmitted to each human individual? The answer: through the appropriation of the accumulated, embodied and objectified social experience through material and non-material cultural objects. The individual’s formation process is a result of appropriation of the “inorganic body” of humankind.

The totality of social objectified (embodied, accumulated) human powers is a synthesis of the human social and historical experience. Each cultural object is in itself condensed human activity. The historical activity is embodied in the object. A human individual can insert that object in his/her own activity only if he/she appropriates the activity embodied in it, mainly the correct use of that cultural object but sometimes also its production activity. The process of appropriation is valid for all kind of cultural objects (material and non material).

Leontyev describes the three most important characteristics of the appropriation of culture by the individual: a) It is an active process; b) It is a process of reproduction; c) It is a mediated process

**a) *It is an active process.***

The individual must perform a practical and/or cognitive activity that has to be suited to the social meaning of the cultural object. In other words, the individual has to reproduce the social activity accumulated in the social function of that object. Of course the level of adequacy of the individual's activity to the social meaning of the cultural object can be lower or higher depending on the specific situation and the moment in which the appropriation occurs. The most common form of appropriation is the process that occurs as a spiral in which the individual passes through different levels of mastering of the cultural object. This is one of the reasons that time and repetition in educational process are of such high importance.

**b) *It is a process of reproduction.***

The process of appropriation must reproduce in the individual the human powers historically produced. Here it is necessary to point out the positive sense in which Leontyev uses the term *reproduction*. In current day educational theory, it is common to see reproduction considered as an essentially negative process. But when describing an educational process as being reproductive, and evaluating its process as something negative or positive, we should endeavour to understand what it is that is actually being reproduced. The

reproduction of human culture is an essential process without which human life could not continue. The educative process has to be reproductive. The fact that we valorize an educative process by which autonomy and creativity are developed does not mean that we are against any kind of reproductive educational process. For example, we can consider that a specific language is being reproduced when a child is learning a language.

**c) *It is a mediated process.***

The process of appropriation of the meaning of the cultural object is not one of solitary discovery. The individual learns this meaning in interaction with people. This means that appropriation is an educative process that can be direct or indirect, intentional or unintentional, practical or theoretical. Schooling is a specific form of appropriation of knowledge by the individual.

Since the later 1980's, I have been developing a theory of schooling that combines Activity Theory and the Theory of Everyday Life (elaborated by Agnes Heller in the late 1960s). From this perspective, I have been defining schooling as the mediation between the production (reproduction) of culture in "everyday" activities and the production (reproduction) of culture in "non-everyday" activities, such as science, art and philosophy.

It is from this point of view that I will debate today with Professor David Olson.