

Learning for another society

The understanding of the educational concept of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung

“The almost insoluble task is to let neither the power of others nor our own powerlessness, stupefy us.”

Theodor W. Adorno

History is full of leftists who closely intertwine their vision of free learning with the utopia of a society of autonomous equals who face heteronomy in education, production and reproduction with an abstract manner without thinking of how to reach the one from the other. Leftists loudly proclaim their goals which indulge in radical poses that shoot beyond what is feasible. By doing so, however, they assume a position that is so far removed from social reality that it is neither able to connect with nor frighten those who settled comfortably on this earth at the expense of the masses.

What then? Our education claim

Changing the world through interpretation. This was Marx’s maxim in the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach (see MEW 3: 535). This is not possible without questioning one’s own stance and related competency to act. The knowledge which is used to interpret the changing world cannot be rigid and cannot be only released by the guardians of knowledge. A fixed canon of knowledge by the left has always and continuously been an obstacle to the active learning process and increased the difficulty of independent thinking.

Rosa Luxemburg has pointed out, quite early, a corresponding negative tendency in the political left by identifying an "embarrassing anxiety", in the old workers movement, to want to comply with the fundamental aspects of Marxism on the one hand, and an orthodox aspiration in the apparatus to build self-contained theoretical constructions which allows "creative enhancement" only within the already agreed upon framework on the other hand. She wanted – rightly – something else: "There is no doubt that a merely roughly designed idea-system is more stimulating than a finished systematic construction which is not to be amended, where an active mind cannot independently challenge itself" (LuxW 1.2: 363).

Knowledge – action – personality. Our task is to affirm and expand the already existing knowledge of the leftist education against the mainstream of the cultural industry. Knowledge transfer is, however, only fruitful when it occurs without the demand of rigid previous knowledge, takes the experience which actors from different political backgrounds contribute seriously and integrates that into the provision of spaces and resources which help the participants to reflect on their own action. This is the objective of a left emancipatory education today.

If one wants to draw an ideal picture of emancipatory, critical, leftist education, it ought to look like this: Critical education provides theoretical frameworks as more or less useful options that must always be critically acquired and therefore have to be changeable. This process is already common practice and emancipation at the same time; as it aims at

change, in the meaning of "changing the world through interpretation". It creates opportunities to develop political action skills and also provides space for different personal principles, especially for various actors of the pluralistic left to meet with the goal of sharing and learning in joint political projects. Critical education always produces something new and unexpected that could not have been planned for in advance. Dead ends in the learning process are not seen as failure but as a necessary step for progress. Since it relies on the mutual enrichment of actors, learning is understood as something that takes place in a far more horizontal than vertical manner, as it does not rely on the system of learners being taught by instructors, but on a mutual learning process. Instructors present opportunities, create the learning environment, provide interpretations and tools, and integrate the subjective learning motivations of learners into the educational process.

Dialectic of "becoming better and being different". What does this theory say? The tensions between the two momentums affect both the form as well as the content of leftist education. Leftist education wants to, due to its expectations, show a better form. It wants to be emancipated – and therefore different to classical education formats. It wants to be critical towards the current ideas of teaching, to centre the learning processes on the educational interests of the participants, to neither lecture them head on nor confine them within rigid course modules. It wants to provide the learners with extensive space to shape the learning process. Knowledge transfer alone is not enough; it also wants to develop competencies and skills to act – especially in regard to the design of the learning process itself.

Leftist education sees itself, through its defined goals, as part of a political policy project, which is characterized by properties such as education, autonomy, and social justice. Leftist education wants to support this project by passing on past experiences and knowledge, stimulating criticism, and developing the skills of participants to successfully intervene in political disputes. Such interventions will only be successful when they are technically good – ideally, better than that of political competition. As left political projects essentially aim for solidarity and self-determination, their policy patterns cannot be simply the same as those of the powers who champion persistence. Leftist policy must be distinguishable in both, content and form, from those which it criticizes. This is the nature of the matter, if exploitation, social inequality, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination are to be overcome.

Challenges of our educational practice

As emancipatory education focuses on horizontal learning within the plural left and wants to promote it, it faces some challenging difficulties. It brings together actors from different policy areas and sectors that follow different logics. Some of them, especial organizations with a complex structure, such as political parties and trade unions, are very focused on gaining and maintaining power. As they are equipped with relative larger resources than other actors, the danger arises that they close open learning process in order to use those for short-term gains for the organisation. Social movements, by contrast, often follow consensus and autonomy principles. At the same time they are, especially if they focus on a specific topic (e.g., women, anti-racist movements), less oriented towards the general process of social change but towards the balancing of divergent interests within their organizations.

Our understanding of politics, therefore, extends far beyond the parliamentary definition. We address everyone, from political educators, networkers, shapers and doers, allies in political parties, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), actors in social movements, dedicated people with mandates in positions of local volunteering and in political groups, to

newcomers, intermediates and experienced actors. In short, people who show a high degree of willingness to deal with society and to change it in emancipatory ways. Through our work, we want to support them, strengthen their capacity, share experiences, consider different social inequalities, and trigger solidarity action.

People who describe themselves as leftists should seek and find in the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung their place for professional or political education. Apart from building social skills, we are concerned with the delivery of independent and practical alternatives which focus on social change. In practice, this tension is always palpable.

Political work in a pluralistic and emancipatory left needs:

- Professionalism! We draw from a rich pool of psychological models, best practices, and proven coping strategies.
- Collectivity! We provide opportunities that comprise of capacity building, reflection on experience, and theoretical foundation in a social learning group.
- Uniqueness! To this end, we develop independent theory approaches, define topics, and develop our offers according to the leftist political culture of learning.

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, therefore, takes on the challenge of giving the entire left-wing political field relevant opportunities, in a moderating manner, as the left is caught in its partial logic, and is thus hardly able to produce opportunities in a consistent manner. Our educational work is always caught in the tension between the political party and the party related foundation, between functionaries, grass-root activists, and independent intellectuals, between compiled leftist knowledge and real-life experience, between institution and social movement. It has to save traditions and already existing knowledge, but also to add new social and political developments and to reflect. The interests of different groups meet in several impact areas and argue incessantly with each other. The task is to balance the forces again and again to ensure political education as an open practice.

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