COMMENTS AND ESSAYS

Changing the World through Political Education: On the Attempt to turn the World upside down with the Help of Political Education

Stefan Kalmring, *Consultant for Organisational Education, Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, Berlin*

Silke Veth, *Director of the Academy for Political Education, Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, Berlin*

Change the world. It needs it.
- Bertolt Brecht (1998)

Political education that is dedicated to the task of fundamentally changing the world? Education that is committed to the tradition of democratic socialism? That also thinks of itself as 'radical' in the way that that a young Karl Marx meant it, meaning it seeks to 'grasp the root' (Marx 2010, 182) of domination, social inequality, and destruction of nature? For many readers, it may sound like we are describing a project from another time. Ultimately, we live in an era that is deeply wary of any kind of suggestion that this world could be different from exactly what it is. A few years ago, Mark Fisher labelled this 'capitalist realism' (Fisher 2013). Yet despite this capitalist realism, we still consider as an urgent necessity a political project that aims for substantive social equality, radical democracy, and a stable ecological balance beyond the imperative to create value. We are firmly convinced that political education needs to play a central role in such a project.

In the following pages, we will discuss political education that happens in the milieu of political foundations as we ourselves work in a foundation and run courses there for political activists. However, we hope that our arguments also interest educators, activists and academics who are engaged in other contexts. The work of turning the world upside down, including through political education, is ultimately only manageable by sharing the work. To move this project forward, we need to learn from each other wherever possible, in the best sense of political education.

Political Education Work in the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation

The *Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (RLS)* is the organization we work for. It is one of the large, party-affiliated foundations in Germany. Party affiliation means that, while it is closely linked to the party *DIE LINKE* and its public funding depends on the party's average electoral results, it nonetheless offers education for more than just the members of a particular party. As a foundation, it is in dialogue with the entire democratic socialist movement. It organizes comprehensive offerings not only for people who are active in the party, but also for union members, industrial council members, NGO members, participants in social movements, and people who dabble in various experiments in solidarity or cooperative economics. As a think tank, it produces up-to-date analysis, engages with leftist theory as well as socialist, feminist, and (post)migrant history, grants scholarships, and is active in the individual German states and various regions around the world. However, the core of its work is political education. Under the rubric of this central purpose, it organizes classes on political fundamentals, networking workshops for political activists, and forums for political educators to exchange ideas as well as evening events, online offerings, virtual learning environments, and conferences on various subjects that are of interest to the political left in general.

The foundation also engages in current debates about education policy and theory—for instance on the subjects of educational justice or inclusion (Hawel & Kalmring, 2014; Hawel & Kalmring, 2016). Through discussion groups (such as the *Critical Pedagogy* or the *Education Policy* discussion groups), conferences and event series (like the *Salon Bildung*), and publications on alternative pedagogy and learning, it seeks to elevate people's awareness of just how closely education issues are linked with various forms of social injustice (LuXemburg, 2015). Because our educational mission is thoroughly political, we as a foundation are concerned with pointing out the close connection between educational and political organizing processes (Veth, 2021). Just as questions of education are always political questions, conventional interventions in political events can only succeed and endure over the long term if they attach a high degree of value to political education.

Learning Politically from and with Rosa Luxemburg

Rosa Luxemburg, the name giver of our foundation, was a socialist, economist and journalist who, in the eyes of many, represented an attractive alternative beyond party communism on the one hand and social democracy on the other in the old labour movement and who, precisely because of her special position, still has something to say to us today (Hetmann, 1979). The German sociologist Oskar Negt, a representative of the neomarxist Frankfurt School, once tried to sum up her position succinctly: 'No socialism without democracy, no democracy without socialism' (Negt, 1976).

We think that Rosa Luxemburg's work is particularly important for a radical understanding of political education due to her understanding that democratic socialism is only sustainable and capable of action when it is a genuine educational movement (Hawel & Kalmring, 2014). According to Luxemburg, politics is not even conceivable if the various actors that engage in confrontational arguments with each other within economic and political fields are not continuously learning and unlearning. The things they learn in conflict situations enable them to cultivate their own interests, form solidarities with one another, gain a shared identity, and acquire the tools that they need to be able to shape politics and society in ways that are likely to be successful.

Luxemburg argued in favour of modes of organizing, a proletarian culture, and a kind of political leadership that would promote learning among the proletarian masses—instead of impeding it (Hawel & Kalmring, 2019). A broad and vibrant public is necessary in the struggle against capitalism as well as in the construction of democratic socialism within the workers' movement: 'Only experience is capable of correcting and opening up new paths' (Luxemburg & Levi, 2022). Why? Political learning is based on the concrete experiences that workers have in workplaces and neighbourhoods, for example when they organise strikes, boycotts, events or election campaigns, or build their unions, associations or parties. The experiences they have here teach them what works politically and what does not. A broad public, especially within the labour movement itself, is important so that experiences can be evaluated and strategies and political concepts can be critically discussed and examined for their viability.

With that in mind, in the social revolution Luxemburg was working for, she argued for council structures in order to establish 'constant reciprocity between the masses and their agents' (Luxemburg 1974, 442).

It is in that spirit that she also wanted to turn 'the relationship between the masses and their leaders upside down' (Luxemburg 1972b, 396). From Luxemburg's perspective, leaders' job at the outset was primarily a pedagogic one, enlightening 'the masses about their historic responsibility' (Luxemburg 1972b, 396). As soon as the process of educating the proletariat has advanced through the struggles that the leaders should be promoting as energetically as possible, those leaders should once more 'relinquish' their 'leadership'. That is because she believed that the proletariat should ultimately liberate itself in an anti-authoritarian way.

How do you have to imagine this in concrete terms? According to Luxemburg, the leaders in the workers' movement will probably be intellectuals who, because of their background, have a knowledge of society and politics that ordinary workers cannot have, since they do not have the same education, especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries. They will also have skills in running political organisations or organising political campaigns that are not common among ordinary workers. Luxemburg hopes that the workers in the political struggle will also acquire these skills bit by bit and thus empower themselves. She wants politics to be structured in such a way that this can be done as well as possible. She can thus be considered a pioneer of concepts of a 'shared leadership' or 'collaborative leadership', in which political tasks are to be distributed in such a way that as many activists as possible can acquire the skills necessary for this (Kokopeli & Lakey, n.d.).

Rosa Luxemburg is thoroughly radical in terms of her understanding of the workers' movement as an educational movement. Whether a strike or an electoral campaign, she believed that every political measure must be assessed above all according to whether it would move workers into a position of learning for their own self-liberation. She wanted a kind of politics that she described by coining the term 'revolutionary *Realpolitik*' (Luxemburg 1972a, 373), in which short-term political reforms and revolution were bound together. Why? Because learning needs to take place and because political and economic competencies have to be acquired. She claimed that transforming society is nothing less than a marathon. Skills and knowledge have to be gained along the way and new achievements that can motivate, build and expand power bases, and mobilize more and more people for the struggle for social liberation have to be organized again and again.

Above all, however, it is on the one hand necessary to push for reforms that significantly improve the conditions for socially transformative politics

in radical terms by expanding the possibilities for activists to organise, to make their voices heard or to expand positions of power in politics or society. Current examples may include reforms to provide better financial security for civil-rights initiatives, reforms that improve activists' access to the media, or an expansion of active and passive voting rights, such as for migrants or younger people. On the other hand, Luxembourg has her sights set on reforms that are already beginning to point beyond the existing society. Let's take a look at the economy of the society: here, it cannot only be about fighting for higher wages or shorter working hours, as important as this is. Reforms would be important that already today give workers control over their workplace or that, through co-determination, allow them to acquire the skills to one day take over and run the company themselves. The establishment of cooperative enterprises should also be encouraged.

Luxemburg envisioned a very weighty task for political education in this process. Education can provide things that cannot be acquired in everyday struggles. That means political education can offer scientific categories for understanding capitalist society, transmitting historical knowledge, or even connecting people from the workers' movement with one another when they would otherwise be acting in parallel. Accordingly, practical education work was important for Luxemburg's own political praxis in early social democracy—even as a way of making a living alongside journalism. Starting in the fall of 1907, she taught political economy and economic history full time for several years at the *Social Democratic Party*'s (SPD) school on Lindenstrasse in Berlin (Hetmann, 1979).

What is interesting to us about this is the fact that, as a teacher in the workers' movement, she developed an understanding of education that was surprisingly progressive and critical of traditional education (Clasen & Meyer, 2014). Above all, Luxemburg wanted to stimulate her students' ability to think critically, provide plenty of space for discussion on equal terms, and allow time for independent study. She was critical of top-down instruction from the podium. More than that, she believed that teachers should be learners themselves first and foremost. And she was convinced that the personal contribution of the learner in an educational situation was critically valuable for a successful seminar. That insight was not only the basis for fundamental considerations. It also meant that education at the SPD's worker schools was a political education that took place among comrades and fellow travellers with a similar knowledge and experience background, albeit in different fields of politics and society: on the one hand, there were

people who were entrusted with a pedagogical responsibility, like herself, but who were 'not pedagogical professionals' (Clasen & Meyer, 2014) in a narrower sense. On the other hand, the people who took those classes were 'fellow combatants' (Clasen & Meyer, 2014) who brought their own knowledge, political praxis, and wealth of experience that had to be elevated in each teaching/learning context.

As inspiring as these positions of Rosa Luxemburg's are, we should not stop there. They are only a good starting point for contemporary considerations regarding the importance of political education for activists. That is because, like any theory, they also reveal their historical *Zeitkern*, or 'core of the time' (Horkheimer & Adorno 1992, ix) that needs to be updated because the demands facing activists and a political education have changed—because society itself has changed. In an attempt to accomplish such an update, we would like to add a few lines below as we outline initial core principles of an emancipatory and organizing education. After that, we would like to describe some central tasks for political education that arise from the challenges facing the project of a left political movement.

Principles of an Emancipatory Education

An approach to education that is critical of traditional schooling is very important to our understanding of political education, both conceptually and in terms of pedagogical practice. Often, political education is organised in a similar way to education that takes place in schools. This is problematic for fundamental reasons. From the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1971), to the Austrian-American cultural theorist Ivan Illich (1971) or the German psychologist Klaus Holzkamp (1993), we can learn that the prevailing understanding of education in schools only works insufficiently—especially when it is adopted for the field of political education. The learner is not an empty box. Learning is something active. If learning is not done on one's own intention, all the good intentions of the educator are in vain. In political education we can only provide learning spaces, set impulses and offer categories or learning strategies. Participants often only become aware of certain learning needs in the process and only then can they be articulated. They should be heard. That is why political educators who can react flexibly are needed. We consider fixed seminar concepts to be problematic because they are linked to the idea that learning processes always follow a similar pattern.

Unlike learning in schools, in political education seminars we deal with people who come voluntarily—or stay away—and who have relatively concrete ideas about the world and their interests. Depending on the audience, topic and learning occasion, new and different offers should be developed, ideally by including the needs of the participants in the concept from the beginning. Emancipatory education must be committed to learning in an egalitarian framework. It brings different people together, connects them, provides space for communication, and adopts the interests and everyday experiences of learners as a starting point (Hillebrand, Kalmring & Reimer-Gordinskaya, 2015).

The sociologist Oskar Negt, who was active in workers' education in Germany, helps us to understand how important it is to start precisely from the experiences of the learners. In this, he stands closely in the tradition of Luxemburg. He tried to make clear in his books, but also in his seminars and trainings, that the experiences of activists in different political fields as well as workers in their workplaces have a surprising amount in common, even if they are made in very different companies, industries or regions. This is because they share a common capitalist structure (Negt, 1968), albeit at different intersections of race, class and gender. He offered concepts and categories for a better understanding of these experiences against the background of these very social constraints and tried to develop strategies of action together with the activists to concretely help them with their problems. His work was also driven by the hope that when people realise that they are facing similar problems and challenges and when they share some useful categories to understand them in a better way, they will begin to show solidarity. If it is recognised that individual problems are social problems, then anger, frustration and rage can be transformed into something productive, namely political action that is also really capable of improving one's own life and that of many other people who are in a similar situation.

In this sense, we consider it is important to organise an exchange of activists that highlights the commonalities of experiences and offers categories to better understand them. Moreover, we think that political learners should be able to bring their own political projects (be they political campaigns, media strategies, or difficulties in their particular organizing) into the learning process so that, with guidance, they can turn them into objects of learning for everyone. This should allow them to engage in cooperative deliberations and jointly seek out practical solutions. They should be able to independently determine what can be generalized beyond the individual case

that is being discussed as an example. That way, when the seminar is over, what has been learned can then also be incorporated into the participants' political activities, so that it can be tested in practice. Furthermore, they should be encouraged to think about whether they can practically support each other in their political projects, even if they are organised quite differently or work in different political fields. A seminar or training is a good place to learn that solidarity is more than just a word and that mutual practical support is often easier to organise than one often thinks.

The great diversity in the left political field, which is expressed by a variety of organizations, a large number of interpretive models in the social and political world and in an approach towards various contradictions and forms of inequality, is likewise to be incorporated into the education process. For instance, how do we deal with the fact that Marxist, post-Keynesian, feminist, and post-colonial groups hardly even speak the same language? How can we cultivate an intra-left culture that sees contentious issues and diversity as a valuable asset and not as a problem? How do we deal with the fact that members of different types of organisations, such as trade unions, parties, NGOs, social movements or a cooperative economy, usually hardly relate to each other and do not systematically cooperate, although together they could probably achieve more politically? What do we do about the fact that we not only criticize and want to overcome the various forms of domination and inequality in bourgeois society, but are also tangled up in them ourselves? Finally, how can we, on the one hand, address differences between us or within society and, on the other hand, still cultivate mutual, solidarity-based projects of a better future in a different society (Hawel & Kalmring, 2016)?

A political education that wants to be emancipatory and critical of society should give people who are politically active the knowledge they need about the society they want to change and its history. It should make practical skills available to them so that they can shape their politics effectively. However, as our argumentation has just shown, critical education always has a cultural function as well. It should address issues of political attitudes, invite personal and meta-reflection, and help learners cultivate new and better ways and forms of interacting with each other (DeCoster, Höhner & Kalmring, 2015).

We think that political education for activists should be measured against a simple yardstick. On the one hand, it should help activists on

the one hand to make their politics *better*, to better shape and grow their organisations, to run more successful campaigns, to help them get their messages into the media more often, and to better reach and engage the people for whom they make their politics. However, on the other hand, political education that wants to contribute to changing the world should help activists to make their politics new and *different* from the mainstream. To some extent at least, new and different forms of political organizing and culture should be developed in the here and now to disperse seeds of a new and better future. It is not enough to keep postponing the goal of change to a distant future. We should already try out new forms of togetherness, politics and economy with each other today.

Current Tasks for a Socially Critical Political Education

In his *Manifesto for Nonviolent Revolution*, George Lakey identified several skills that left political actors should cultivate so that they can get petrified social relations to dance (Lakey, 1988). Since one of the central tasks of political education for activists is to provide them with the skills they need for their activism, Lakey's reflections are a good starting point for thinking about the challenges facing political education that wants to support social movements in their work. To conclude our essay, we would like to somewhat modify and expand the list he constructed below in order to clarify the areas where world-changing education should act. Political education functions as a service for various left groups and organizations. In keeping with that vocation, it needs to develop offerings that are attuned to them.

Building on George Lakey we see at least five different fields in which they should act:

First, in our view, emancipatory education should help cultivate an ability to offer criticism of society as it exists. Social critics have to know precisely what they are actually rejecting and why. They need to learn to articulate their dissatisfaction and determine where they can exercise leverage for social change. At the same time, left political education can provide broad knowledge with a critical perspective about society and its history and convey theoretical categories that help activists with their analysis. In political education in German-speaking countries there is the important 'principle of controversy', which is widespread among people who organise seminars and courses. We believe that it should also be applied here. What

does it say? According to this principle, topics that are controversial in science and politics should also be presented as controversial in educational settings, various conceptual offerings should be made that the participants can weigh against each other and apply to their own political praxis.

A left political education should, second, make it possible to perceive and argue about the tension between what exists in society and what is socially and politically possible. Activists want to change the world in a direction that increasingly overcomes military, personal and structural violence, that is characterised by social equality, civil rights, participatory democracy and environmental protection. That is why it is important to show what is socially possible. If left politics wants to inspire people, they have to provide a constructive program, which means not only being able to say what they do not want, but also to indicate which way they believe things should go. This is all the more important at a time when it is increasingly difficult for people to imagine any alternatives at all. On an objective level, political education can raise alternative concepts for a democratic socialism or radical democracy from the past and the present for discussion. And on a subjective level, to borrow a popular descriptive term from Oskar Negt, it can also stir 'sociological fantasies' among individual participants (Negt 1968).

Third, a political education event should be a place of critical self-reflection about errors in left politics. The history of the 19th and 20th century left offers examples not only of efforts to achieve widespread liberation and emancipation, but also of attempts to legitimize dominance and oppression. Stalinism is the worst example of this. Various attempts at liberation reverted to domination (usually unintentionally) or resulted in integration into a society that had initially been rejected. A political left that comprehends contemporary events should know not only what it wants, but also what it does not want. And it should develop a feasible idea of how it can ensure that it will not unintentionally reproduce something that it did not initially want. An emancipatory education should give serious consideration to people's fears in this regard and, together with participants, seek out the mechanisms behind that kind of dialectic and discuss corresponding examples from history.

Fourth, political activists need strategic expertise to convey confidence in their own actions and provide them with guiding principles for everyday political activity. Only with a flexibly adaptable plan for getting from what

they believe is an objectionable condition to a state of society they think is preferable can they take the long breath they need and learn to act, rather than react. Along the way, education should support them as they develop their own strategic ideas and enter into debates so that this responsibility is not ceded to particular elites in an authoritarian manner. Models of how fundamental social and political change actually works and how it can be advanced should be disseminated as widely as possible through courses and seminars, as well as critically discussed here, so that as many activists as possible can form their own opinions. In this way, education contributes decisively to the democratisation of social movements. Moreover, various practical tools that can be used in concrete situations are also needed. We can make an important contribution here as well. How are successful campaigns organized? How can we build organizations that generate the desire to participate? How can we raise issues and reach our audiences?

Last but not least, political education should help build alliances within a left that is broadly fragmented by various organizations. If something effective is ever going to counter neoliberal capitalism it will take, on the one hand, an absolute respect for the different approaches, language, organizational cultures, intra-milieu linkages, and subjects within the pluralistic left and, on the other hand, the establishing of a joint capacity for action. By creating spaces for encounters and doing the necessary translation work, education can help foster a greater capacity for individual actors to work in coalitions.

The aspirations we have formulated here are significant. However, if we should manage to establish a political education that is critical of conventional schooling and committed to the maxims of change and improvement, while also being connective, socially critical, self-reflexive, strategic, and concretely utopian, then we would be well on our way to satisfying Howard Zinn's (2011) desire: it would make tangible the education work that is dangerous, in the sense that it would effectively support a subversive politics that invites the society that exists to a dance of change.

References

Brecht, Berthold: "Die Maßnahme", Frankfurt am Main, 1998.

Clasen, Anke, and Malte Meyer. "Lernen und Verlernen. Rosa Luxemburgs Beitrag zur Arbeiter:innenbildung und Schulkritik", in: Hawel, Marcus and Stefan Kalmring, Eds.: *Bildung mit links. Gesellschaftskritik und emanzipatorische Lernprozesse im flexibilisierten Kapitalismus*. Hamburg, 2014, 34-46.

DeCoster, Claudia, Ronald Höhner, and Stefan Kalmring. "Lernend die Gesellschaft verändern", in: Enkelmann, Dagmar and Florian Weis, Eds., *"Ich lebe am fröhlichsten im Sturm". 25 Jahre Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung: Gesellschaftsanalyse und politische Bildung*, Hamburg, 2015, 116-117.

Fisher, Mark. *Kapitalistischer Realismus ohne Alternative? Eine Flugschrift.* Hamburg, 2013.

Freire, Paulo. *Die Pädagogik der Unterdrückten*. Stuttgart, 1971.

Hawel, Marcus, and Stefan Kalmring, Eds.: *Bildung mit links. Gesellschaftskritik und emanzipatorische Lernprozesse im flexibilisierten Kapitalismus*. Hamburg, 2014.

Hawel, Marcus, and Stefan Kalmring, Eds.: *Wie lernt das linke Mosaik? Die plurale Linke in Bewegung*. Hamburg, 2016.

Hawel, Marcus, and Stefan Kalmring. *Autorität, Führung und Zentralismus in linken Theorien. Positionen und Kritiken*, in: Hawel, Marcus et al., Eds.: *Work in Progress. Doktorantenjahrbuch der Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung 2019. Beiträge kritischer Wissenschaft*. Hamburg, 2019, 268-280.

Hetmann, Frederik. *Rosa L. Die Geschichte der Rosa Luxemburg und ihrer Zeit*. Frankfurt am Main, 1979.

Hillebrand, Heinz, Stefan Kalmring, and Katrin Reimer-Gordinskaya. *Was kann Bildung mit links? Interview mit Stefan Kalmring, Katrin Reimer-Gordinskaya und Heinz Hillebrand über Leitfäden, Subjektorientierung und Emanzipation*, in: Enkelmann, Dagmar and Florian Weis, Eds.: "*Ich lebe am fröhlichsten im Sturm". 25 Jahre Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung: Gesellschaftsanalyse und politische Bildung*. Hamburg, 2015, 79-89.

Holzkamp, Klaus. *Lernen – Subjektwissenschaftliche Grundlegung,* Frankfurt am Main, 1993.

Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*, Frankfurt am Main, 1992.

Illich, Ivan. *Die Entschulung der Gesellschaft*, Stuttgart, 1971.

Marx, Karl. *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction*, in: Marx, Karl & Engels, Friedrich: *Collected Works Volume 3: Karl Marx, March 1843-August 1844*. Lawrence & Wishart, Electric Book, 2010, 175-188.

Kokopeli, Bruce and Lakey, George. *Leadership for change. Toward a feminist model*, n.d.

Lakey, George. *Manifest für eine gewaltfreie Revolution*, in: Lakey, George and Michael Randle. *Gewaltfreie Revolution*, Wolfram Beyer, Ed., with a foreword by Ossip K. Flechtheim, Berlin, 1988, 19-68.

Luxemburg, Rosa. *Karl Marx*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 1.2, Berlin (Ost), 1972a, 369-377.

Luxemburg, Rosa. *Geknickte Hoffnungen*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 1.2, Berlin (Ost), 1972b, 394-402.

Luxemburg, Rosa. *Was will der Spartakusbund?*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 4, Berlin (Ost), 1974, 440-449.

Luxemburg, Rosa and Levi, Paul. *Die Russische Revolution*, Hamburg, 2022.

LuXemburg. "*Das bisschen Bildung…*", Vol 2/15, 2015.

Negt, Oskar. *Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen. Zur Theorie der Arbeiterbildung*. Frankfurt am Main, 1968.

Negt, Oskar. *Keine Demokratie ohne Sozialismus. Über den Zusammenhang von Politik, Geschichte und Moral.* Frankfurt am Main, 1976.

Veth, Silke. *Das große Ziel ist, dazu beizutragen, Gesellschaft zu verändern*, in Hufer, Klaus-Peter, Tonio Oeftering and Julia Oppermann, Eds.: *Positionen der politischen Bildung 3. Interviews zur außerschulischen Jugend- und zur Erwachsenenbildung*. Schwalbach/Ts, 2021, 112-116.

Zinn, Howard. *The Zinn Reader: Writings on Disobedience and Democracy*. New York, 2011.