

Nadine Violette* Education for Whom?
Toward A Peoples' Pedagogy
of Liberation

ABSTRACT

This essay advances a Maoist philosophy of education as both a critique of dominant pedagogical paradigms and a revolutionary alternative grounded in class struggle. In the context of a global crisis in education—marked by mass teacher strikes, student suicide epidemics, AI automation, and the commodification of the learning process—liberal and Soviet models alike prove inadequate. Liberal education mystifies structural inequality through the language of meritocracy and inclusion, while Soviet pedagogy, despite its emancipatory aims, often reproduced the very hierarchies it sought to dismantle, through bureaucratic centralization. In contrast, Maoist pedagogy centers the mass-line: a recursive process of social investigation, synthesis, and return, that grounds knowledge in the lived experiences of the oppressed masses.

KEYWORDS

Maoism
Education
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Cultural Revolution
Ideology

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Education for Whom? Toward A People's Pedagogy of Liberation

"In all practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily "from the masses, to the masses." This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study...), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action... And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time. Such is the Marxist theory of knowledge.¹"

From mass teacher strikes and rising student suicides to the criminalisation of dissent on university campuses, public education in liberal democracies is facing a deepening crisis. Decades of neoliberal restructuring have hollowed out education's emancipatory potential, subordinating pedagogy to the needs of capital. Education has been reduced to workforce training, credentialism, and the cultivation of entrepreneurial subjectivities. Meanwhile, liberal discourses of 'inclusion' obscure the structural function of schooling in reproducing hierarchies of class, race, gender, and ability. As the contradictions of capitalism sharpen, so too does the strategic question for Marxists and militants alike: What is education for, and for whom?

This essay proposes a Maoist philosophy of education as both critique of and revolutionary alternative to the dominant liberal and Soviet paradigms. Against the liberal fantasy of education as a meritocratic investment in human capital, and the Soviet tendency to bureaucratise knowledge under centralised party control, Maoist education begins from a different premise: the mass line. Introduced in the opening epigraph and developed throughout the essay, this method of leadership synthesizes the lived experiences of the masses—peasants, workers, soldiers—through collective social investigation and returns them in concentrated ideological form. Through mass participation in the knowledge process, a "people's pedagogy" emerges reconfigured as a dialectical practice of social transformation.

Drawing on Mao Zedong Thought, the essay forwards a vision of education in which all members of society are called to be both "insatiable in learning" and "tireless in teaching."² For Maoists, the pedagogical task is not to transmit expertise, but to dismantle the very hierarchies that bourgeois education reproduces. Structured by the spiraling movement of the mass line—through contradiction and synthesis—Maoist education is a living alternative to both liberal abstraction and Soviet technocracy. Retooled for the present, it confronts the crisis of capitalist education and the degradation of life under global imperialism.

The essay proceeds in six sections. First, it outlines the Marxist theory of knowledge and dialectical mediation as the basis for rev-

olutionary pedagogy. Second, it analyses liberal education as an ideological formation that naturalises capitalist relations through propagation of political myths such as meritocracy, inclusion, and possessive individualism. Third, it examines the contradictions of Soviet pedagogy, particularly the tension between subjective intentions and the reality of bureaucratic control. Fourth, it develops the distinctive features of Maoist education, grounded in the mass line and exemplified through concrete historical experiments—especially during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) in China (1966-1976). Fifth, it turns to Mao's writings on Art and Literature³ to examine how the question "for whom?" serves as both philosophical anchor and political mandate. The essay concludes by advancing Maoist pedagogy not only as a historical formation, but as a living method—capable of confronting today's educational crisis by cultivating revolutionary consciousness and transforming education into a site of collective ideological struggle.

The Marxist Theory of Knowledge

Marxism's distinctive treatment of the "abstract" and the "concrete" offers a critical entry point into its epistemology, as both concepts animate the dialectical process of cognition. Unlike formal logic, which treats "abstraction" as static and detached from material life, Marx understands it dialectically—as a provisional starting point in the transformative process toward grasping—and transforming—social reality "concretely." Cognition, in this view, does not proceed through accumulating ready-made knowledge or fixed truths, but through a dynamic process in which ideas are shaped, tested, and deepened in practice. It is the movement of thought, from abstraction toward concreteness, mediated by practice and collective struggle⁴. The goal is not to isolate particular facts, as with empiricism, but to arrive at a "concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse"⁵.

This dialectical model is further developed by Lenin and Mao, both of whom describe knowledge as advancing not in a straight line but in a spiral. In *On the Question of Dialectics*, Lenin writes: "Human knowledge is not (or does not follow) a straight line, but a curve, which endlessly approximates a series of circles, a spiral"⁶. He defines dialectics as "living, many-sided knowledge (with a number of sides eternally increasing), with an infinite number of shades of every approach and approximation to reality"⁷. The spiral is not a poetic flourish but a figure of dialectical motion: it captures the recursive and contradictory movement by which knowledge is forged in practice, re-evaluated through struggle, and re-applied under new conditions.

The spiral reappears in Mao's theory of the mass line—a pedagogical and political method through which leadership moves "from the masses, to the masses"⁸. Knowledge begins with the lived experience of the people, is filtered through Marxist analysis, and returns to the masses as concentrated political consciousness. Maoist pedagogy thus enacts the spiral in motion: knowledge is not transmitted from above but co-produced through social inves-

1 Mao, Zedong, *Serve the People*. In *Selected Works*, Vol. III. Foreign Languages Press, 1965, p. 119.

2 Mao, Zedong, *Serve the People*. In *Selected Works*, Vol. III. Foreign Languages Press, 1965, p. 210.

3 Mao Tse-Tung *On Literature and Art*. Foreign Languages Press, 1967.

4 Mao, Zedong, *On Practice*. In *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. I. Foreign Languages Press, 1937.

5 Mao Tse-Tung, *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People*. In *Selected Works*, Vol. V. Foreign Languages Press, 1957; Mao Tse-Tung, *Mao Tse-Tung On Literature and Art*. Foreign Languages Press, 1978, p. 237.

6 Lenin, V. I. *On the Question of Dialectics*. In *Collected Works*, Vol. 38. Progress Publishers, 1915, p. 357.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Mao Zedong, *Serve the People*. In *Selected Works*, Vol. III. Foreign Languages Press, 1965, p. 119.

tigation, collective struggle, and ideological transformation. What I call the Maoist People's Pedagogy is grounded in this mass line principle: a recursive, participatory process in which education emerges from the contradictions of everyday life.

This model stands in sharp contrast to the circular logic of bourgeois abstraction, where knowledge revolves around fixed ideals—freedom, equality, merit—untethered from material conditions. In liberal education, critical thinking is often valorised in form but neutralised in content: students are taught to analyse, interpret, and debate, but not to interrogate the social structures that shape their own lives. Theory in this limited view becomes self-referential, sealed off from the ever-shifting terrain of practice. The Marxist spiral, by contrast, insists on the transformation of both knowledge and knower through contradiction. Lenin's call for "concrete analysis of concrete conditions"⁹ is thus not a call to empiricism, but a dialectical method: a way of grasping reality as a symbolically structured and historically mediated totality.

While Marxism holds that knowledge is always partial and subjectivity always in formation, this cannot be treated as a barrier to revolutionary practice—it is its precondition. The incompleteness and opacity of social consciousness does not foreclose collective liberation; it demands it. Through struggle and reflection, new insights and new forms of being become possible. It is precisely this dialectical process that enables revolutionary transformation. Marxist education must follow the same logic. It is not a neutral transmission of facts but a terrain of ideological struggle and political reformation

Revolutionary education does not simply fill minds— it remakes them in relation to the world. It is omnilateral: a many-sided development forged through contradiction, collective inquiry, and transformative practice. As Lenin and later Mao emphasised, the goal of socialist education is not a form of mastery—neither of content nor of the self—but the transformation of social consciousness and being through ongoing collective struggle. By contrast, capitalist education is not simply inadequate to this task—it is structured to achieve the opposite. It mystifies the very relations it reproduces. To understand this ideological formation, we turn to the historical development of liberal education and its role in reproducing capitalist social relations.

Liberal Education

Liberal ideology does not reflect universal truths, but rather historically specific class-interests. Yet it often conceals its bourgeois character beneath the language of universality, presenting itself as post-ideological— as if transcending class, race, gender, ability, coloniality, and religion— even as it depends on the subordination of these very positions. Liberal education works to naturalise its own assumptions: that knowledge is individual, apolitical, merit-based, and detached from labor. In order to maintain this façade, it propagates certain political myths— such as bourgeois freedom, rationality, meritocracy, and mastery—into the classroom as if they were eternal truths, rather than historically produced ideologies tethered to the rise of capitalist social relations.

At its core, liberal education abstracts the learner from history

and reduces pedagogy to a polite form of workforce preparation— training students to become docile, employable, entrepreneurial, and adaptable to the volatility of modern industry. This ideology is weaponised and exported globally under the banners of "modernisation" and "development" by institutions like the IMF, World Bank, and OECD, restructuring education systems across the Global South along neoliberal lines. But far from embodying genuine freedom, liberal education depends on a set of false universals that reflect the values of a particular historical subject: white, male, European, Protestant, bourgeois—the paragon of colonial modernity and the unspoken subject of its curriculum.

Marx exposed this liberal sleight of hand in his critique of classical political economy. Figures like Adam Smith and David Ricardo projected this liberal subject backward onto all of human history, imagining a timeless individual detached from any actual social context—exemplified in the mythical figure of Robinson Crusoe. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx ridicules this fantasy: the liberal subject, he writes, "appears detached from the natural bonds" of historical life, and thus reflects bourgeois ideology rather than material reality¹⁰. This same abstraction is at work in liberal education's tendency to frame structural violence—colonial dispossession, racism, genocide, poverty, and exploitation—not as systemic effects of a global system, but as unfortunate outcome of individual failure or moral deficiency.

In a particularly striking passage, Marx turns this logic on its head. Even the criminal, he notes, is a useful product of bourgeois society, generating new markets, institutions, and jobs for security technologies:

"The criminal breaks the monotony and everyday security of bourgeois life. In doing so, he keeps the police going, develops new methods of detection, drives forward the production of locks... and gives employment to many honest people!"¹¹

In this way, so-called criminality—especially among the proletariat and lumpen elements—is not an aberration or deviation from capitalism—it is a produce of capitalism, made useful by fueling the expansion of policing, surveillance, and carceral logics. Liberal education plays a critical role in legitimising this logic. It displaces structural violence—contradiction—onto the most marginalised subjects, framing poverty and rebellion not as products of capitalism but as moral failures to be corrected, contained, or punished. The masses, in this view, are criminalized through tropes such as the dangerous "mob" or irrational "protestors." They must be governed—not educated, let alone included in the process of knowledge production.

Still, liberal theorists occasionally say the quiet parts out loud. While many frame liberal education in meritocratic or altruistic terms, Leo Strauss stands out as a more overt defender of its class content. The contradictions animating Strauss's text help clarify what is at stake in opposing liberalism from a Marxist perspective, because they inadvertently affirm a fundamental truth: that Marxist critique is not merely philosophical but deeply material and political, rooted in the irreconcilability of lived contradictions.

9 Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Certain Features of the Historical Development of Marxism* (1910), *Collected Works*, Vol. 17, p. 43. (See also György Lukács. (1924/1970). *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought*. Translated by Nicholas Jacobs. London: New Left Books. pp. 41-42).

10 Marx, K., & Engels, F. *The Marx-Engels Reader* (R. C. Tucker, Ed.). (2nd ed.). Norton, 1978, p 222.

11 Marx, K. *Collected Works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Volume 30, 1861-1863*. Lawrence & Wishart, 1988/2010, p 309.

In *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern* (1968), Strauss writes that liberal education “is the necessary endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society¹²”. According to Strauss, only an educated elite—culturally refined and philosophically trained—can rule the “vulgar” masses. This cultivation of “gentleman,” he adds, “is the preserve of a certain kind of wealthy people¹³”. Here, liberal education has nothing to do with liberation; it is unabashedly committed to the preservation of social inequality.

Ironically, Strauss admits that Marx—the “father of communism”—was “liberally educated on a level to which we cannot even hope to aspire¹⁴”. In doing so, he inadvertently testifies to the power of Marxist critique: it sees liberalism from within, exposes its contradictions, and turns its tools against it. While liberal education attempts to universalise its own premises, Strauss inadvertently admits its actual content: hierarchy, exclusion, and the reproduction of class rule.

To be sure, liberal education is fraught with contradictions—between freedom and inequality, meritocracy and privilege—that have long provoked resistance. Anti-colonial and Marxist educators have shown how liberal schooling functions as cultural imperialism, exporting Eurocentric values under the guise of objectivity¹⁵. These ruptures are the openings through which revolutionary pedagogy intervenes. To seize that possibility, however, we must move beyond critique and toward reconstruction. The task is not only to unmask liberalism’s false universals, but to pose a radical alternative. For that, we turn next to the contradictions and innovations of Soviet education.

Soviet Education

Soviet education, though grounded in Marxist principles, developed through the exigencies of revolutionary struggle and statecraft, often in tension with its own ideological commitments. Lenin recognized that the seizure of state power—the expropriation of capital—was only the beginning of the communist project. Revolution also required a corresponding transformation of social consciousness, a Cultural Revolution. Yet he famously argued that such a revolutionary proletarian consciousness would not arise spontaneously from within the working class but had to be introduced “from without” by a socialist intelligentsia¹⁶. While this position may have been tactically necessary amidst the collapse of Tsarism and the absence of mass-literacy and pedagogy, it encoded an asymmetrical relation that would continue to haunt the Soviet project: the worker as object of education, the Soviet intellectual as its privileged bearer.

As the USSR shifted from revolutionary upheaval to socialist construction, this structural asymmetry became institutionalised. Schools and universities were retooled to produce technical cadres for the centralised Party-state. Mass literacy campaigns and scientific education expanded rapidly—historic achievements in their own right—but education increasingly became “mechanistic,” subordinated to the demands of socialist economic planning. As one historian of the Russian intelligentsia observed, “While

Soviet leaders may aim at abolishing the distinction between town and country, they have not yet realized it.¹⁷” The same holds true for the parallel separation between intellectual and manual labor, which remained structurally intact even despite the USSR’s ideological commitment to its eventual abolition. These contradictions reflected the persistence of class stratification even within the institutions of socialist development.

Lenin’s concept of the “Red Expert”—a technically skilled yet ideologically committed worker-intellectual—represented an early attempt to overcome this divide. The Red Expert was meant to synthesize thought and labor, knowledge and struggle, and thus prefigure a new socialist subjectivity. Initiatives to realise this synthesis included “transmission belts” linking education to productive labor through trade unions, youth organizations, and factory committees¹⁸. But in practice, these efforts were uneven and frequently undermined by the rise of bureaucratic command structures. The Soviet education system was, despite its efforts to integrate theory and practice, still by and large grooming the children of bourgeois intellectuals and experts, thus reproducing the same old educational hierarchies¹⁹.

After Lenin’s death in 1924, Soviet education took on an increasingly hierarchical and technocratic form. Under Stalin, it became a tightly managed instrument of modernisation, oriented less toward revolutionary consciousness than toward a mechanistic approach to industrial growth. Top-down instruction, rigid standardisation, and ideological orthodoxy displaced the dialectical relation between theory and practice. Education was treated more as a repressive apparatus than a terrain of ideological struggle. Mao would later reject this shift in his *Critique of Stalin’s Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR* (1951), where he emphasized the failure to integrate superstructure, mass-politics, and ideological transformation into socialist development:

Stalin’s book... says nothing about the superstructure. It is not concerned with people—it considers things, not people... The basic error is mistrust of the peasants... They believe that technology decides everything, that cadres decide everything, speaking only of ‘expert,’ never of ‘red,’ only of cadres, never of masses... They speak only of production relations, not of politics, nor of the role of the people. Communism cannot be reached unless there is a communist movement... If we make mistakes we will lead the peasantry to the enemy side.²⁰

This passage clarifies Mao’s central divergence: the revolution cannot be engineered solely from above, nor can it proceed without the political initiative of the masses (including its peasant elements). The Soviet emphasis on technical development and elite administration, in Mao’s view, marked a critical limitation in the Marxist-Leninist tradition. The USSR had placed planning above politics, cadres above class struggle, and expertise above ideology.

Still, the Soviet experience cannot be reduced to simple failure or betrayal. Its educational experiments reflected real efforts

12 Strauss, L. *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*. Basic Books 1968, p 10.

13 Strauss, L. (1968). *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*. Basic Books. 1968, p 11.

14 Strauss, L. (1968). *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*. Basic Books. 1968, p 24.

15 Illich, I. *Deschooling Society*. Harrow Books. 1972; Carnoy, M. *Education as Cultural Imperialism*. Longman. 1977.

16 Lenin. *What Is to Be Done?* In *Collected Works*, Vol. 5. Progress Publishers. 1975, p 28.

17 Churchward, L. *Education and the Russian Intelligentsia*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1973, p 27.

18 Lenin. *The Trade Unions, The Present Situation and Trotsky’s Mistakes*. Arxists. 1920.

19 Churchward, L. *Education and the Russian Intelligentsia*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1973.

20 Mao, Z. *Critique of Stalin’s Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*. *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, Vol. 8, Red Guard Publication. 1951, paras 1-13.

to produce a new kind of socialist subject. But the unresolved contradictions—between experts, workers, and peasants, between theory and practice, and between the Party and the masses—ultimately created the conditions for a more radical pedagogical intervention. For Mao, the political role of the masses would become central to the dialectical development of Marxism-Leninism on new terrain and the eventual inauguration of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Thought.

Towards a Maoist Philosophy of Education

In this context, Maoism did not simply reject Soviet educational theory—it advanced it dialectically. Drawing from its strengths while politicising its limits, Mao re-centered education as a terrain of ideological transformation and mass participation. His critique of the Soviet model was not merely policy-based; it extended to epistemology and practice. Who produces knowledge? Who teaches whom—and toward what end?

While Lenin had emphasised the importance of political education, Mao went further by radically reconfiguring education itself as a dialectical process driven from below through the mass line. As Mao famously wrote, “the people, and the people alone, are the motive force in the making of world history²¹”—a principle that guided his educational philosophy of empowering the masses. This marked both an organisational and epistemological rupture from the Soviet vanguard model, where authority still flowed top-down through the Party cadres.

In contrast, the Maoist mass line insisted that ordinary people must actively shape and supervise the educational process. Unlike the Soviet view, in which the Party carried out socialist development on the people’s behalf, Mao placed the masses themselves at the helm of revolutionary transformation. His 1950s critique of Stalin’s Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR emphasised the need for ongoing ideological struggle within the superstructure—particularly in culture and education. Without this, Mao warned, the revolution would stagnate and risk reproducing class society in new forms. Class struggle was to continue under socialism.

In this light, Maoist education ceased to be a vehicle for transmitting expertise and became a process of transformation led by the masses through class struggle. It also confronted a deeper contradiction: that the petty bourgeoisie within the Party—and the university—could not remold themselves through willpower alone. What Mao affectionately called a “change in feelings” could not remain an individual, voluntary act of class suicide. Rather, it required mass re-education as well: the transformation of intellectuals through collective struggle. As Mao insisted, “If our writers and artists who come from the intelligentsia want their works to be well received by the masses, they must change and remold

their thinking and their feelings²²”.

As William Hinton observed, prior to the Cultural Revolution, China’s schools were dominated by bourgeois intellectuals who emphasised “memorisation over real tests of one’s ability to learn and to reason²³”. They separated theory from practice and reproduced class divisions by grooming children of the elite rather than developing capacities of workers and peasants. Maoist pedagogy turned this model on its head. The goal of socialist education, Mao argued, was to “enable everyone who receives an education to develop morally, intellectually, and physically and become a worker with both socialist consciousness and culture’ so that each can truly serve the people instead of personal ambition²⁴”.

Education, in this view, was to be collectively owned and politically supervised by the masses themselves. Mao insisted that class struggle had to be waged within education itself to prevent the rise of a new bourgeoisie. The stakes were nothing less than the “question of ‘revolutionary successors,’” as he called the young generation who would one day determine the future of socialism²⁵. Their consciousness, he argued, would be shaped by the education they received; therefore, the revolution’s survival depended on transforming the schools²⁶.

By the early 1960s, it was clear that without a “vast shakeup of the whole system”—in Hinton’s words, the re-education of bourgeois teachers and a completely new curriculum integrating study with labor— Chinese education would continue to produce a privileged stratum in its own image²⁷. Mao’s response was to launch a mass ideological offensive in education, making “class struggle... central” to initiatives like the Socialist Education Movement and, ultimately, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution²⁸.

The Cultural Revolution (GPCR) (1966-1976) marked the most radical effort to realise Mao’s educational vision. It unleashed mass-led educational experiments and innovations to dismantle the old bourgeois academic order and fuse learning and knowledge production with class-struggle²⁹. Students were “sent down” to the countryside to learn from poor peasants and bridge the urban-rural divide, while workers and soldiers entered the schools and campuses to democratise their management and curriculum³⁰. The Maoist method of mass criticism and self-criticism became central to the transformation of education during this period: established authorities were subjected to public critique and compelled to undergo ideological remoulding. This was the mass line in action— the masses educating the educators themselves.

As Dongping Han’s study of a rural village during this period documents, these changes empowered people long excluded from education and knowledge production. Peasants and workers who had been illiterate or marginalised became active participants in study and teaching, dramatically expanding rural education and

21 Mao, Z. Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership. In Selected Works, Vol III. Foreign Languages Press. 1965, p 257.

22 Mao, Z. Mao Tse-Tung On Literature and Art. Foreign Languages Press. 1942/1967, p 7.

23 Hinton, W. Turning Point in China: An Essay on the Cultural Revolution. Monthly Review Press. 1972, 48.

24 Ibid

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Longobardi, A. P. The Workers University in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Doctoral Thesis, Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, University of São Paulo, São Paulo. 2018, p 50.

29 Hinton, W. Turning Point in China: An Essay on the Cultural Revolution. Monthly Review Press. 1972; Longobardi, A. P. The Workers University in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Doctoral Thesis, Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, University of São Paulo, São Paulo. 2018; Longobardi, A. P. What Does a Socialist Factory Produce? Workers in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The PRC History Review. Vol 6(1), 2021, pp. 1-13; Dongping, H. The Unknown Cultural Revolution: Life and Change in a Chinese Village. Monthly Review Press. 2008.

30 Hinton, W. Turning Point in China: An Essay on the Cultural Revolution. Monthly Review Press. 1972, p 84-109.

narrowing the cultural gap between town and country³¹. Andrea Piazzaroli Longobardi similarly notes that under Mao, the governance of educational institutions shifted: “common people kept some power of decision” over who was in charge, in contrast to the Soviet model of top-down rule by persons of authority³².

In the countryside, these principles also took concrete form. As students and intellectuals were sent to live and work with peasants, elitism broke down and knowledge was reoriented toward the needs of the rural majority. William Hinton, in *Iron Oxen* (2024), documents these experiments in striking detail. Director Li, a leader of the Tractor Program, reminded his students: “There is no particular merit to being a student. If things had been the other way around, anyone might have done the same as you³³”. For Li, education was not to be treated as a privilege, but a political task rooted in mutual aid and practice. He contrasted this with the resistance of Western-trained experts, who resented having to plow, plant, and harvest alongside peasants and students. As Hinton recounts, they “resented ‘practice’—the periodic emptying of the school as faculty and students alike went down to the farms to plow, plant, and harvest³⁴”. Director Li, by contrast, insisted on transforming schools into living institutions of political education, aligning them with the goals of proletarian consciousness and collective labor³⁵.

By placing politics in command and the masses at the center of revolution, Maoist education aimed to produce a generation of “red and expert” graduates: technically competent but proletarian in outlook³⁶. As Hinton wrote, this education was “as qualitatively different from bourgeois education as socialism is from capitalism³⁷”.

Mao’s writings from 1957 to 1966 crystallise the philosophical core of this revolution in education. In *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People* (1957), Mao affirms the role of ideological struggle not only within the state but within the sphere of education. The now-famous slogan—“Let a hundred flowers blossom, let a hundred schools of thought contend”—called for open struggle over ideas in art, science, and philosophy, to be resolved not by decree but through collective experimentation along proletarian lines³⁸. A related formulation—“long-term coexistence and mutual supervision”—affirmed the need for ideological difference even within the process socialist construction, so long as all sides remained committed to the principle of serving the people. Because, Mao insisted, “a party, like an individual, has a great need to hear opinions different from its own³⁹”. This vision of mutual supervision, dialectical contradiction, and political education from below marked a decisive turn away from bureaucratic top-down models of socialist development. It grounded revolutionary pedagogy in contradiction, mass participation, and the remaking of both knowledge and subjectivity.

Conclusion: Teaching Toward Irrelevance

Long before the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong posed the

foundational question: for whom is culture—and by extension, education—carried out? In his Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art, he argued that before intellectuals could educate the workers, peasants, and soldiers, they had to be re-educated by them⁴⁰. This was not a symbolic gesture, but a political imperative. To serve the people, educators had to abandon their petty-bourgeois standpoint, immerse themselves in mass life, and transform their own consciousness through practice.

Mao’s pedagogy turned the teacher-student relationship on its head. Education could no longer be a one-sided transmission of knowledge from expert to subordinate. Instead, it had to become a dialectical, collective process—one in which the so-called ignorant were empowered to teach, and the so-called educated were compelled to learn. This vision was materially enacted during the Cultural Revolution, where intellectuals and youth were sent down to the countryside to study and labor alongside the rural poor. There, education was redefined as re-education: a remodeling of knowledge through direct experience, a shift in class standpoint, and a dissolution of pedagogical hierarchy. The task of the educator was no longer to consolidate authority over students, but to cultivate collective capacity—to teach in such a way that the structural position of the “teacher” becomes unnecessary, superseded by a mass of politically conscious subjects capable of educating themselves and transforming the world.

In sum, Maoism developed a distinct philosophy of education grounded in class struggle, the mass line, and dialectical transformation. It marked an epistemological break from the elitist transmission model found in both liberal and Soviet paradigms, and an organisational break from cadre-centered control in favor of mass participation. Knowledge was no longer a commodity to be delivered by experts, but a social process to be co-produced and transformed by the masses in the course of revolutionary struggle. Maoist pedagogy thus stands not only as a historical formation in 20th-century China, but as a living method with profound relevance today. It demonstrates that education can be reconfigured into a site of ideological struggle and collective liberation, rather than a mechanism for reproducing class hierarchy. As capitalist education systems across the globe face deepening crises—of commodification, inequality, depoliticization, and despair—the legacy of Maoist education calls on Marxists and militants alike to reimagine pedagogy as a process of collective liberation. By placing politics in command and grounding knowledge production in the contradictions of the oppressed, Maoist education offers a framework for transforming the school into a microcosm of class struggle—cultivating revolutionary consciousness and turning learning from passive consumption into active participation in world-making. In the final analysis, Maoist pedagogy is both a product of its historical moment and a living challenge: a reminder that “education for liberation” is not a metaphor, but a material process. And that to teach toward our own irrelevance is not to abdicate responsibility, but to fulfill it—by helping to dissolve the distinction between teacher and student in the process of collective transformation. ■

31 Dongping, H. *The Unknown Cultural Revolution: Life and Change in a Chinese Village*. Monthly Review Press, 2008.

32 Longobardi, A. P. *The Workers University in the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. Doctoral Thesis, Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, University of São Paulo, São Paulo. 2018, p 22.

33 Hinton, W. *Iron Oxen: Revolution in a Chinese Village*. Monthly Review Press, 2024, p 126.

34 Hinton, W. *Iron Oxen: Revolution in a Chinese Village*. Monthly Review Press, 2024, p 376.

35 Hinton, W. *Iron Oxen: Revolution in a Chinese Village*. Monthly Review Press, 2024, p 377.

36 Hinton, W. *Turning Point in China: An Essay on the Cultural Revolution*. Monthly Review Press, 1972, p 48-49.

37 Ibid.

38 Mao, Z. *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People*. In *Selected Works*, Vol. V. Foreign Languages Press, 1957, p 150.

39 Mao, Z. *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People*. In *Selected Works*, Vol. V. Foreign Languages Press, 1957, p 155.

40 Mao, Z. *Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art*, Foreign Languages Press, 1967, p 17.