

ww workers of the world

International
Journal
on Strikes
and Social
Conflicts

NUMBER

16

Volume I
April
2026

Dossier

Education, how, what and for whom?

Education
for Whom?
Toward A Peoples'
Pedagogy of
Liberation

Nadine Violette

Capital versus
public education
defended by
the working
classes

Roberto Leher

Vygotsky and the
Pedagogy of Contents:
Deconstructing
the Sacralisation of
Processes

Roberto Valdés Puentes

"Teaching is a
relationship, and
children and young
people have been
convinced not to
learn."

An interview of Raquel Varela and
Roberto Leher with Carlos Fernández Liria

BOOK REVIEW

School or
barbarism:
a second warning
Manuel António
do Carmo Ferreiro

OUT OF DOSSIER

The ideological
delimitation of
the political
left-right dichotomy
in historical

Afonso Maia Silva

Table of contents

Letter from the editor _____	4
Education for Whom? Toward A Peoples' Pedagogy of Liberation Nadine Violette _____	6
Capital versus public education defended by the working classes Roberto Leher _____	12
Vygotsky and the Pedagogy of Contents: Deconstructing the Sacralisation of Processes Roberto Valdés Puentes _____	22
"Teaching is a relationship, and children and young people have been convinced not to learn." An interview of Raquel Varela and Roberto Leher with Carlos Fernández Liria _____	30
BOOK REVIEW	
School or barbarism: a second warning Manuel António do Carmo Ferreira _____	36
OUT OF DOSSIER	
The ideological delimitation of the political left-right dichotomy in historical research Afonso Maia Silva _____	40

Editorial Team

JOÃO CARLOS LOUÇÃ
Universidade Aberta,
Portugal

ANTÓNIO SIMÕES DO PAÇO
Observatório para as Condições
de Vida e Trabalho, Portugal

EDDIE COTTLE
University of Pretoria,
South Africa

RALPH DARLINGTON
University of Salford,
United Kingdom

RAQUEL VARELA
FCSH, Universidade Nova
de Lisboa, Portugal

CARLOS SALAS
Universidad Autónoma
Metropolitana-Azcapotzalco, México

GUOWEI LIANG
Johns Hopkins University,
United States

MARIA HARO SLY
Johns Hopkins University,
United States

LU ZHANG
Temple University, Philadelphia,
United States

Advisory Team

ALEXANDRA JAEGER
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
e. V (Germany)

ANDREIA GALVÃO
(Campinas, Brazil)

BERND HÜTTNER
Rosa Luxemburg Foundation
(Germany)

BEVERLY SILVER
Johns Hopkins University
(Baltimore, Maryland, USA)

BRYAN PALMER
Professor Emeritus, Trent
University (Canada)

CHARLES SMITH
St Thomas More College in
Saskatoon (Canada)

CURTIS LYONS
Cornell University (USA)

DAVE LYDDON
Keele University (UK)

ERIC VANHAUTE
Ghent University (Belgium)

HENRY FOWLER
StrikeMap (UK)

KIRK NIERGARTH
Mt Royal University
(Calgary, Canada)

MARCEL VAN DER LINDEN
International Institute
for Social History
(Netherlands)

MARÍA CELIA COTARELO
PIMSA (Argentina)

MARIA DA GRAÇA DRUCK
Universidade Federal da Bahia (Bra-
zil)

MARTÍ MARIN
Centre d'Estudis sobre Dictadures i
Democràcies (Spain)

PANAGIOTIS SOTIRIS
Hellenic Open University (Greece)

FRANÇOIS JARRIGE
Université de Bourgogne (France)

PAULA MARCELINO
Universidade de São Paulo
(Brazil)

RICARDO ANTUNES
UNICAMP (Campinas, Brazil)

ROHINI HENSMAN
Independent scholar and writer

ROBERTO DELLA SANTA
Centro de Estudos Globais,
Universidade Aberta (Portugal)

RUBÉN VEGA GARCIA
Universidad Oviedo (Spain)

SJAAK VAN DER VELDEN
International Institute for
Social History (Netherlands)

SILKE NEUNSINGER
Arbark (Sweden).

VERITY BURGMANN
University of Melbourne (Australia)

WENDY GOLDMAN
Carnegie Mellon University (Pitts-
burgh, USA)

XAVIER DOMÈNECH
Centre d'Estudis sobre Dictadures i
Democràcies (Spain)

Technical team

PEDRO PÁSCOA
Art-director

SOFIA TAIPA
Web-developer

LILLIAN ROBERTS
Copyrighting

Workers of the World is the journal of the International Association Strikes and Social Conflicts, born in Lisbon on March 2011. The Association has the participation of academic institutions from Europe, Africa, North and South America

E-mail

workersoftheworld1848@gmail.com

Website

www.workersoftheworld.net

Letter from the editor

Education, how, what and for whom?

Education has been at the centre of some of the most important debates in recent years. Words and expressions such as burnout; students’ mental health pathologies; workers’ “blackout” and inadequate training; teacher shortages; digital “teaching”; have spread to the “common sense” lexicon. In parallel, a new wave of strikes, from Chicago to South Africa, from Amsterdam to Lisbon, has since 2008 put teachers’ struggles i.a. for public education in the forefront of social movements, in what seems to be a trend toward a global response to the degradation of public services in the era of declining capitalism.

As far as the ruling classes are concerned, education is central not only because of its sheer reach in society — more than 1.5 billion students and teachers attend the world’s schools and universities every day, which makes them decisive crucibles for the internalisation of ruling ideologies — but also because of the demands of the labour market in a context of radical transformations in the world of work and, more broadly, in the capitalist mode of production itself. In a number of countries around the world the order of capital drives the relentless modification of curricula to the detriment of scientific and historical-social education, as well as the accelerated marketisation of the sector in line with the velocity of capital accumulation and investment; it promotes digitisation, automation and AI in line with algorithms designed by corporations, as well as increasingly precarious labour relations to make up for teacher shortages (caused, strictly speaking, by low salaries and terrible working conditions). Despite growing xenophobia, capital can’t

help but deal with the integration of migrant populations through the educational apparatus, albeit as an industrial reserve army. Faced with such onslaughts, everyday educational practices end up assimilating crucial aspects of bourgeois cultural policies. In this, the liberal view re-signifying multiculturalism as a paradigm of diversity and inclusion without any connection to the material basis of societies prevails. The same applies to the active methodologies that remove the ontological dimension of labour from human agency, as if the profound educational inequalities could be overcome by operative procedures in educational processes.

As far as the working classes are concerned, however, there is an evident deepening of strategic dilemmas, as expressed in critical theories. Teaching workers' struggles around the world corroborate the generalised dissatisfaction with capital's proposals. In academia questions are also being asked. However, education progressives are far from a consensus. Amid the liberal educational thinking, some progressive conceptions have adopted a constructivist vision that distances students from work as an educational principle on the basis of its ontological, ethical and political dimensions, as advocated by Vygotsky and his interlocutors. Instead of knowledge mediating with nature and society, capital celebrates so-called "skills" — a subject that is hardly broached by many pedagogical currents. Within dialectical materialist conceptions some have come to support the idea that the meaning of education is disinterested knowledge (not aimed at the unilateral training of the workforce), an education that aims for real universalism, overcoming false liberal universalism and committed to the knowledge and explanation of the totality, always in the process of searching for truth through science, which are central dimensions of public education in the face of dogma and obscurantism. Historical-critical pedagogy rejects educational dualism and stands for integral education: in Marx's terms, omnilateral.

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
Pedagogy
Cultural Revolution
Ideology

* Researcher, writer, and educator working at the intersections of education, violence, and revolutionary struggle. PhD candidate in Social and Political Thought at York University, Toronto, Canada. Core member of *The Vermin*— a critical literary magazine and collective dedicated to centering the marginal and periphery in print and practice, with a forthcoming (2026) article in *Socialism and Democracy*.

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.

Roberto Leher* Capital versus public education
defended by the working classes**ABSTRACT**

Developing an antisystemic strategy by the world working class against capitalist totalising offensive over the education of peoples is an urgent and non-deferrable task. To this end, a correct diagnosis of the correlation of forces in worldwide education is essential and is an effective contribution that can be made nationally and internationally by research collectives committed to the emancipation of workers from the capitalist order. It is undeniable that, at some point, such efforts—combined with persistent struggles against attacks on public education—may coalesce into a “party,” as occurred with the International Workingmen’s Association in the second half of the nineteenth century.

KEYWORDS

Commodification of education
Financialization of education
Education policies
Private apparatuses of hegemony
Socialist education

* Professor at Federal University of Rio de Janeiro . Was rector of UFRJ (2015-2019). Researcher at CNPq, Scientist of Our State (FAPERJ), works in the Collective for Research in Marxism and Education (Colemarx), and collaborates with the Florestan Fernandes National School.

I Understanding capital's systemic offensive against education requires a proposition of Marx's method, incisively grasped by Karl Korsch:

*"The first fundamental tenet of the new revolutionary science of society is the principle of the historical specification of all social relations and conditions. Indeed, Marx conceives all institutions and relations existing in bourgeois society in terms of their historical singularity, thereby criticising all categories treated by bourgeois social theory in which the specific character of historicity has been effaced."*¹

The current correlation of forces is very different from that of the so-called "Thirty Glorious Years" (1945–1975)², during which the affirmation of social rights—conceived as achievements of the working classes resulting from proletarian organisation and struggle—was a cause that galvanized a broad and polysemic spectrum of left-wing forces. The advance of austerity³, in the context of the structural crisis of the 1970s, unfolded through neoliberal statal reforms, the flexibilisation of workers' rights—which weakened trade unions—and the hollowing out of popular sovereignty over public affairs, via new forms of state management and governance anchored in technocracies that detach education from the struggles of peoples.

Therefore, the understanding of today's context cannot ignore specific differences engendered by the development of productive forces and transformations in labor relations and ideologies. The contradictions between the productive forces (expressed in changes in organic capital) and relations of production materialise in even greater expropriations and exploitation of labor power. Capital's political agency, historically imbued with the ideology of human capital, is increasingly coordinated to effect ever greater control and domination over human formation, encompassing both the means and the ends of education.

This article argues that the new forms of capital's saturation of human formation over the past two decades are systemic and planetary, and are embedded in the everyday life of schools and universities, in state apparatuses, and—of immense political importance—in popular common sense.

A new type of commodification of education

In the wake of the Great Crisis intensified in 2008⁴, capital propelled the conversion of fundamental rights formerly public and conceived as duties of the state into commodities, or into policies under the direct or indirect control of capital. Commodification is occurring on an unprecedented scale and with entirely new characteristics. This movement has resulted in an impressive process of concentration, centralisation, and monopolisation of capital and, consequently, in the rapid diffusion of ideologies congruent with the order of capital⁵. From the privatisation of water and energy to social security and health—and, with particular vehemence, education—the major achievements of the working

classes over the last hundred years are increasingly under the dominion of capital, not only as "tangible properties," in the form of businesses, holding companies, and the like, but also in the realm of ideology, as anticipated by Marx in the 1859 Preface⁶.

Indeed, privatisation has penetrated every pore of education, materialising a new type of commodification expressed:

- a) directly, through the expansion of the provision of the education commodity via private schools, universities, and institutions;
- b) through the introduction of Trojan horses for the private interests of big capital into public schools, especially "teaching systems," technological platforms, books and workbooks, "school management systems," platforms for assessments, and university endowments;
- c) in mediated form, through private apparatuses of hegemony (PAH) instituted by the ruling bloc⁷, which determine the fundamentals of state educational policies—particularly curricula, guidelines for teacher education, the modeling of financing, forms of evaluation, and conceptions of the management of school systems and schools based on principles imported from corporate management—and, in sum, the ideological conceptions of basic education that naturalise the generalised precarisation of the labor of new generations on the basis of notions such as resilience and entrepreneurship
- d) through neoliberal austerity policies that bar popular sovereignty over public affairs, strangle the budgets of public institutions, and precarise teaching work. Aiming to remove the public character of education, ministries of education and education secretariats are reconfigured and placed under the direction of technocrats linked to corporate PAH. The management model established by these technocrats is structured around public-private partnerships that shift what is fundamental in education to corporations, the Brazilian Civil Society Organisations, foundations, think tanks, and institutes linked to big capital;
- e) through curricula elaborated under the direction of corporate PAH, based on "essential" competencies imbued with epistemological relativism and on social-emotional competencies that seek to conform students to the order of capital in an extremely regressive context of brutal flexibilisation of labor rights. To this end, they marginalise—or even disregard—the centrality of science, culture, art, reflection on technologies and the world of work, and the critical and inventive use of language;
- f) through learning targets measured by assessments external to schools, calibrated by the values and demands of capital; and
- g) through pedagogies that advocate learning without teaching, in which the teacher is re-signified as a tutor or facilitator charged with operating the platformisation of educational labor.

Direct corporate presence in education

In a growing number of countries, the direct control exercised by capital over what is fundamental in education is unprecedented in the history of peoples, eroding the foundations of national

1 Korsch, K. Karl Marx. Tradução de Gilda Lopes Encarnação. Lisboa. Antígona, 2018, p. 32.

2 Hobsbawm, Eric. A Era dos Extremos: O Breve Século XX (1914-1991). São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1995.

3 Mattei, C. A ordem do capital: como economistas inventaram a austeridade e abriram caminho para o fascismo. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2023.

4 Kliman, A. A Grande Recessão e a teoria da crise de Marx. Revista Outubro, São Paulo, n. 24, 2º sem. 2015.

5 Mattei, C. A ordem do capital: como economistas inventaram a austeridade e abriram caminho para o fascismo. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2023.

6 Marx, K. Resoluções do Congresso de Genebra (1866). In: MUSTO, M. (org.). Trabalhadores, uni-vos! Antologia política da I Internacional. São Paulo: Boitempo; Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2014.

7 Poulantzas, N. O Estado, o poder e nós. In: BALIBAR, E.; POULANTZAS, N. et al. (org.) O Estado em discussão. São Paulo: Edições 70, 1981.

education and the principal pillars of public education won by the working classes.

Although private education was a significant phenomenon throughout the twentieth century in many countries, the current period exhibits specific differences with respect to earlier forms of privatisation and commodification. Among the distinguishing features is the strong presence of investment funds and private equity firms that control educational corporations structured as companies and governed by boards of directors composed of investors, many of which are listed on stock exchanges—including NASDAQ—and headquartered in tax havens.

Educational corporations have been transformed into a sector linked and subordinated to rentiers and to operators in the finance world. The scale of business has thus shifted, reverberating in an accelerated change in the organic composition of capital. The educational business sector and related activities are undergoing a disconcerting intensification of technology that crushes labor and commodifies curricula. From this unprecedented mobilisation of large volumes of capital there results a vertiginous process of monopolisation of educational groups. In Brazil, there are 2,500 higher education institutions, 2,200 of which are private; however, only about a dozen of them account for more than 40% of total enrollments and roughly 80% of distance education offerings, which, as noted, attract more than 60% of new students.⁸ Moreover, the control exercised by publishing groups and labor platforms enhances the implementation of technological packages in schools that accelerate the refunctionalisation of educational institutions and promote a new scale of expropriation of teachers' intellectual labor.

Commodification of higher education in Brazil

The commodification of higher education in Brazil by investment funds, private equity firms, and banks is at the global vanguard of the commodification of education, constituting the most advanced stage of the financialization of education⁹, which justifies the prominence accorded to it in this article.

The major leap in the financialisation of Brazilian education—expressed in acquisitions and mergers—coincided with the governments of the Workers' Party, especially from 2008 onward, the year of the Great Crisis that prompted investment funds to seek real assets worldwide. In that year, 53 striking acquisitions occurred in the education sector, placing it third in the national ranking of acquisitions, behind only information technology and food and beverages.¹⁰

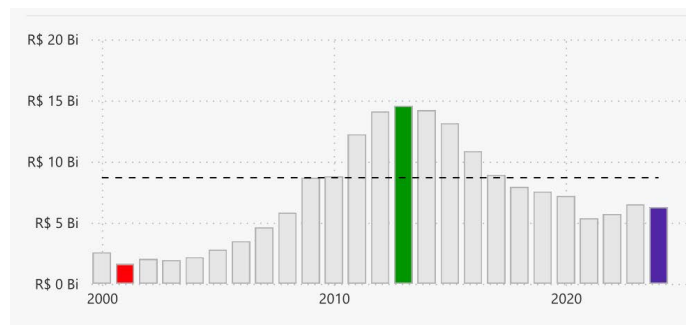
One factor explaining investment funds' interest was the granting of tax exemptions to for-profit educational companies through the University for All Program (ProUni, in the Brazilian Portuguese acronym) in 2005. This robust transfer of public funds to commercial educational groups was a key variable, as attested by the corporations themselves. During Dilma Rousseff's presidential term (2011–2014), the Student Financing Fund (FIES, in

the Brazilian Portuguese acronym) was resized and flexibilised, enabling an exponential increase in direct transfers of public funds to educational groups that were then in the process of going public on stock exchanges, converting into publicly traded companies, and expanding the control of investment funds and private equity firms over their ownership.

Although during Lula da Silva's second administration (2007–2010) and at the beginning of Dilma Rousseff's term (2011–2014)—the period of neoliberal neo-developmental accumulation¹¹—there was an expansion of federal education, it is easy to observe, based on allocated resources (Graph 1), that this growth process amounted to a "chicken flight." Between 2007 and 2013, funding increased for the expansion of federal universities—funding that was insufficient and unsustainable, yet enabled the near doubling of the number of students in federal universities, from 640,000 to just over 1.2 million during this period.

From the orthodox neoliberal turn of the Dilma government in 2015, through the 2016 Coup, the constitutional amendment that froze increases in public spending for twenty years (Constitutional Amendment No. 95/2016), and the Bolsonaro government (2019–2022), austerity policies financially strangled public institutions with the aim of rendering them unviable—under the Bolsonaro administration (2019–2022), within the framework of a culture war. Nevertheless, due to austerity, this situation has persisted into Lula da Silva's third term (2023–present) (see Graph 1).

Graph 1
Discretionary resources of federal universities (Brazilian reais, constant values).



Source: ANDIFES¹²

The takeoff of the commodification of education engendered by government policies was also shaken by the worsening commodities crisis in 2015. In 2016, the coup carried out by the ruling bloc against the legitimate government of Dilma Rousseff was consummated. The deterioration of state finances affected the Brazilian Federal Student Education and Credit Fund (FIES, in the Brazilian Portuguese acronym), which has since drastically reduced new contracts. At its peak, in 2014, 732,000 contracts were signed underwritten by the educational fund; in 2015, 287,000; in 2016, 203,000; and in 2018, only 82,000. However,

8 BRASIL. Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (Inep). Censo da Educação Superior 2024: resumo técnico [recurso eletrônico]. Brasília, DF: Inep, 2025.

9 Leher, R. Mercantilização da educação básica, sistemas de ensino e plataformas de trabalho como expressões da pedagogia do capital. Paradigma (Maracay), v. XLIV, 2023, p. 34-60.

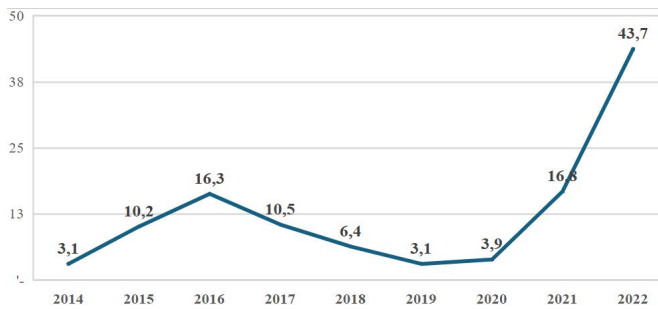
10 Fusões e aquisições em educação: melhor resultado desde 2008. Monitor Mercantil, 09/03/2022, <https://monitormercantil.com.br/186731-2/>, access: 10/01/2026.

11 Saad Filho, A. Moraes, L. Brasil: neoliberalismo versus democracia. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2018.

12 Associação Nacional dos Dirigentes das Instituições de Ensino Superior - ANDIFES. Orçamento das Federais. Disponível em: <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrjoiZWE0YTQzY2EiN2RjMS00NDZlKlWEwZTYtNzViN2Q1OGVmOGRlIiwidCI6IjMyMTEyODk1TEwNzItNDZlZS04MjVjLWExNzlhNmYyMzFiNiJ9>, access: 21/11/2025

within the framework of the financialisation of education, the decline in contracts did not entail a reduction in transfers; on the contrary. The stock of public debt securities held by FIES enabled gains until 2022 (Graph 2).

Graph 2
Public funds transferred to the private sector through implicit subsidies to the Brazilian Federal Student Education and Credit Fund (FIES)
(constant values, National Treasury Secretariat)

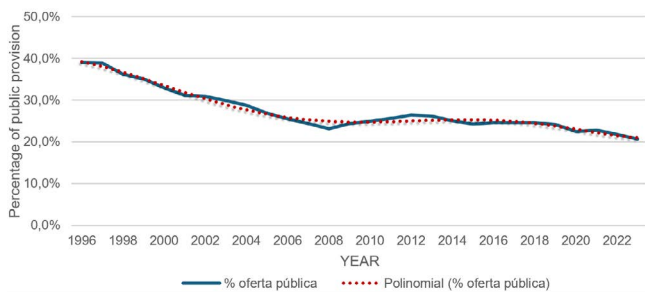


Source: INEP: 5th Monitoring of the Brazilian National Education Plan¹³

Graph 2 confirms that it was not the invisible hand of the State that drove the exponential expansion of the private-mercantile sector, to the detriment of the expansion of public institutions (Graph 3). Currently, less than 8% of newly enrolled higher education students attend a public institution. According to the Brazilian National Education Plan, at least 40% of newly enrolled students in higher education should be at least 40% in public institutions.

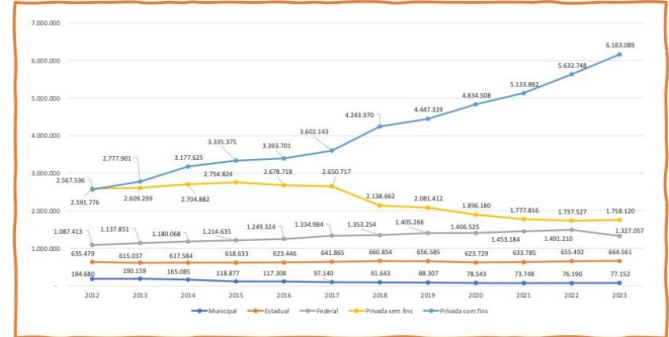
With the decrease in enrollment in public institutions (Graph 3), aggravated by budget constraints (Graph 1), and with incentives resulting from the transfer of public funds to the private sector, it is the private-commercial sector that is driving the expansion of Brazilian higher education (Graph 4).

Graph 3
Share of the public sector in the provision of higher education



Source: Censos do Ensino Superior INEP, organised by Bielschowsky, 2023.¹⁴

Graph 4
Expansion of enrollments by public, private, and private-mercantile segments (2012–2023)

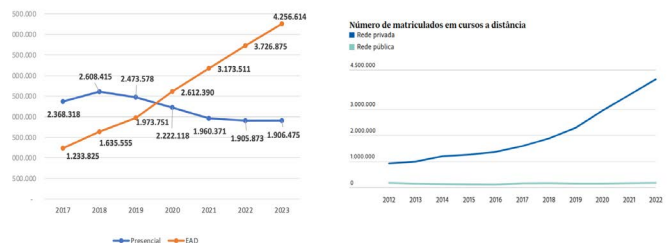


Source: INEP (2024)¹⁵.

The decline in FIES contracts triggered an environment of uncertainty in educational business, expressed in falling share prices of major groups. As a result, under pressure from investors fearful of losses, new strategies of mercantile expansion were consolidated, encompassing both higher education and basic education. Thus, the feverish process of acquisitions and mergers among educational groups between 2005 and 2024 (505 acquisitions, according to KPMG¹⁶), leveraged by funds and private equity firms and intermediated by the wholesale banking sector—especially Itaú BBA, Bradesco BBI, BTG Pactual, XP Investimentos, and Bank of America—assumed new configurations.

A crucial aspect stemming from the crisis of public financing was the segmentation of market “niches.” Corporations, which until then had been supported by FIES, chose to differentiate their higher education offerings: a) for the upper classes, a few high-tuition in-person courses, such as medicine, for example; b) for the most impoverished working classes, massive low-quality distance learning undergraduate courses (Graph 5): over 60% of these courses have a rating of 1.5 out of a total of 5.0 in the Ministry of Education’s precarious assessment, indicating that they fail to meet the minimum requirements.

Graph 5
Trend toward conversion from in-person education to distance education



Source: INEP (2024)¹⁷

13 INEP. Resumo técnico do Censo Escolar da Educação Básica – 2024. Brasília: INEP, 2025.

14 INEP. Censo do Ensino Superior 2023. DF: INEP 2024; Bielschowsky, Carlos (coord.). Expansão da Educação Superior no Brasil: análise das Instituições Privadas. São Paulo: SoU_Ciência, 2023.

15 INEP. Censo do Ensino Superior 2023. DF: INEP 2024.

16 KPMG, Fusões e Aquisições 1o Trimestre de 2025, junho de 2025.

17 INEP. Censo do Ensino Superior 2023. DF: INEP 2024.

These trends allow for three partial conclusions.

I. First, commodification immediately and directly affects the most pauperised and expropriated fractions of the working classes. Approximately 80% of higher education students—most of them from more pauperised fractions—study in private institutions. Roughly 70% of private enrollments are linked to large corporations. Indeed, the private sector offers around 22 million places in distance education programs¹⁸, far exceeding student demand. The growth of distance education programs has been truly exponential: in 2010 there were 750,000 enrollments; by 2023, 4.3 million. Currently, *65% of newly enrolled higher education students are already studying remotely*. Even the remaining in-person courses have become hybrid: Ordinance No. 2117/2019, issued by the Bolsonaro administration, allowed for the expansion of distance learning courses to up to 40% of in-person courses. This percentage was modestly redefined by Decree No. 12,456/2025, which now allows for distance learning courses to comprise 30% of the total course load and, worse, creates a hybrid model with a mere 30% of the course load being in-person.

II. There are approximately 2,500 higher education institutions in the country, and only eight of them account for more than 65% of distance learning enrollments. Publicly traded corporations (Cogna, Vitru, Yducs, SER, Ânima, Afya, Cruzeiro do Sul) and large privately held corporations (Universidade Nove de Julho -Uninove, Universidade Paulista - UNIP) account for a large portion of these institutions, confirming the centralisation and concentration of capital and the formation of monopolies.

III. The current commodification is driven by investment funds and private equity firms that, in practice, drain like vampires the acquired institutions and, above all, the work of their professors: classes are scripted by primers and teaching materials that do not involve faculty creativity; evaluations are increasingly done with robots; and curricula are managed by algorithm-customised competencies. Institutional command is displaced to the select sphere of boards of directors, whose seats are held by investors and whose decisions are governed by the temporality imposed by stock market dynamics.

Commodification of basic education

Unlike higher education—where 80% of students are enrolled in the private sector—in Brazil compulsory basic education¹⁹ is predominantly public and free of charge, serving around 80% of students.

The comprehensive turn of large corporations toward basic education is a recent but consistent phenomenon. Between 2000 and 2024, the public sector lost 1.8 million enrollments, totaling approximately 38 million students (2024). Over the same period, the private sector grew from 7.5 million enrollments (14.7% in 2000) to 9.5 million (20.2%)²⁰.

As important as the expansion of private schools—driven by

a rapid process of capital concentration carried out through aggressive acquisitions of schools and school networks by corporations since 2016—is the growing interest of holding companies in the production of platforms and “teaching systems” for the entirety of basic education. This segment encompasses pedagogical materials; platforms offering customised lessons designed to comply with the new curriculum elaborated by capital’s entities and structured to discipline teaching labor; as well as systems and platforms for school assessment and management.

Holding companies such as COGNA/ VASTA and ARCO have created subsidiaries specialised in teaching “systems” and labor platforms, initially going public on NASDAQ. All major publicly traded groups—COGNA, SALTA, BAHEMA/BIOMA, ARCO, and SEB—operate in the sector of teaching “systems” and platforms. Publishing houses within the COGNA holding company are responsible for approximately 40% of the textbooks in circulation across the country’s 180,000 basic education schools. A large share of municipalities has already contracted “systems” and platforms from these corporations for use in their schools.

In this way, corporations define the bases of what is thinkable in the everyday life of schools, expropriating the creative and intellectual dimension of teaching labor. As a result, students from working-class backgrounds experience a downgrading of access to scientific, technological, and cultural knowledge, being adapted to simple and precarious labor and deprived of the subjective and socially necessary formation required to confront the ongoing barbarism.

The need for children to be physically present in institutions so that the labor power of parents and guardians could be freed was a very concrete experience during the interruption of in-person classes in schools throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Digital education has emerged as a new watchword for virtual schooling. Corporations seek to dissociate it from distance education, which is associated with a technological stage already nearing exhaustion and deemed unviable in basic education. Digital education is enabled by new technological bases associated with telecommunications (especially 5G), artificial intelligence (machine learning), big data, and algorithms, and is distinguished by the growing customisation of courses. Consequently, this new business niche is based on the possibility of customising courses according to student profiles and, at the same time, performing them (the student profiles).

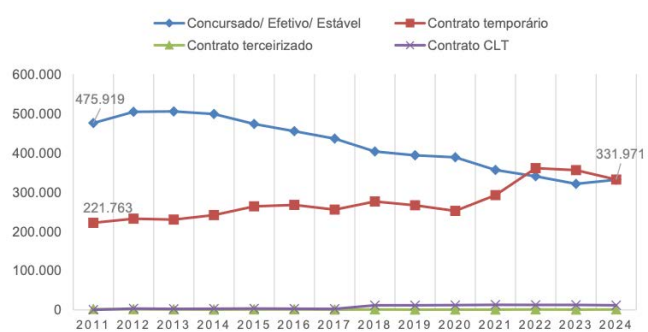
Accordingly, although students in basic education remain physically present in schools, pedagogical activities can be increasingly reconfigured through digital education. The objective of corporations is to convert schools and classrooms themselves into spaces virtualised by systems and platforms in which the precarisation of labor is complete, as illustrated in Graph 6.

¹⁸ Busnardo, F. de M. G. et. al. O Ensino Superior a Distância no Brasil: onde estamos e para onde queremos ir?. Ead Em Foco, v. 14, n. 2, p. e2230, 2024.

¹⁹ Since 2009, compulsory basic education in Brazil has covered the age range from 4 to 17 years. It is divided into early childhood education (ages 4–5), elementary education (ages 6–14), and secondary education (ages 15–17).

²⁰ INEP. Resumo técnico do Censo Escolar da Educação Básica – 2024. Brasília: INEP, 2025.

Graph 6
Teachers in state schools with stable and precarious contracts (2011–2024)



Gomes de Sousa, 2025²¹.

Educational holding companies particularly target the public sector, marketing systems and platforms for use in public schools. Another trend gaining prominence is the *outsourcing of the administrative management* of public schools. In states governed by the far right—such as Minas Gerais, Paraná, and São Paulo—corporations aim to outsource the very pedagogical management of schools, bringing them closer to charter schools. Thus, public schools could portray themselves as schools with the “quality” standards of corporate education systems, displaying the “brand name” of one of their labels.

Private Apparatuses of Hegemony of capital and forms of consciousness of the working classes

The private apparatuses of hegemony (PAH) of capital are, ultimately, condensations of ideological forces with well-defined economic interests, determined by their founders—namely, large corporations, with particular prominence given to financial institutions such as banks, investment funds, and the like. These financial groups are active in enabling acquisitions, designing *business models*, carrying out initial public offerings, and conducting corporate restructurings. For this reason, they have achieved an extraordinary presence in the educational field. Their PAH function as collective intellectuals that organise a horizon compatible with the control of education, in its entirety, by capital.

The conglomerates of Private Apparatuses of Hegemony of big capital²², the agency of International Organisations (IOs), and governments committed to the austerity demanded by the General Staff of Capital across different countries act as organisers of a new global educational order. There is an ongoing coordination among PAH and corporations that, despite political frictions—particularly with the far right, and conflicts of varying relevance depending on national conjunctures—aims to promote and disseminate their educational conceptions through a myriad

of Civil Society Organisations of Public Interest subordinated to these PAH conglomerates. In Brazil, this is especially evident in organisations such as Todos pela Educação (All for education, in literal translation) and the Lemann Foundation, which operate at municipal and state levels and are increasingly present across a growing number of countries. PAH conglomerates influence the creation of new education laws, new curricular guidelines, and assessment systems; in short, they define the social function of education within national states, whose ideological cement is provided above all through the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank.

In the case of public universities, the function equivalent to that of corporate PHA has been performed by endowment funds, which increasingly influence university life. A recent example of this is the pressure exerted by Zionism, through endowment funds, to dismiss Ivy League university presidents who were considered lenient in their repression of student protests against the genocide in Palestine in the United States in 2024²³. In Lula da Silva’s third administration, the Ministry of Education is run by Lemann Foundation²⁴ in partnership with *Todos pela Educação*. In state and municipal governments, the undisputed leader is the conglomerate PAH *Todos pela Educação*, which has strong ties to the Itaú-Unibanco holding company (and to financial groups, major media outlets, big tech companies [Google, Apple, Meta, Amazon, Microsoft - GAFAM], mining companies, agribusiness, and industry). With regard to curriculum guidelines and secondary education reform, *Todos pela Educação* has established an alliance with the Lemann Foundation and, in partnership with the organisation Movimento pela Base (Movement by the Base, in literal translation) has developed the National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC for its initials in Portuguese). Together, they structured an extensive and capillarised network of PAH, steering the educational conceptions of state and municipal secretaries of education and enabling their proposals to reach 38 million students in more than 140,000 public schools nationwide, according to the 2024 Basic Education Census.

Since 2007, *Todos pela Educação* and its associated PAH have been operating on several fronts: inclusion of Brazil in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA/OECD); creation of a Basic Education Development Index (IDEB, in the Portuguese acronym), benchmarked on competencies, to be used in each of the 143,000 public schools; development of a new BNCC, which shifted the curriculum focus toward competencies, especially social-emotional skills, resilience, entrepreneurship, life projects, and other neoliberal precepts²⁵; redefining literacy, with a focus on the “right age” and “skills” that have nothing to do with the critical use of language; reforming secondary education by hollowing out propaedeutic training and strengthening vocational training dissociated from scientific training; encouraging the use of technologies that can expropriate teachers’ knowledge²⁶, consistent with the objective of the

21 GOMES de SOUSA, Artur. Zonas de silêncio nas relações de trabalho docente Na educação básica brasileira (2011–2024). Tese de Doutorado. Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2025.

22 Fontes, V. O Brasil e o capital-imperialismo: teoria e história. 2 ed. Rio de Janeiro: EPSJV/Editora UFRJ, 2010.

23 Leher, R. Liberdade de cátedra: limites impostos pelo capital e pela extrema-direita na educação dos EUA. In: IRISMANN, A.; COUTINHO, J. A. (org.). O futuro da universidade: perspectivas críticas sobre a liberdade acadêmica, precariedade e autonomia universitária. São Paulo: Lutas Anticapital, 2024.

24 The Lemann Group, led by Jorge Paulo Lemann and his partners Marcel Telles and Carlos Alberto Sicupira, operates across multiple sectors, notably beverages, food, retail, finance, and education. Its more prominent companies include AB InBev (the world’s largest brewery), Kraft Heinz (one of the largest food and beverage companies), Restaurant Brands International (owner of Burger King, Tim Hortons, and Popeyes), and Lojas Americanas. The group’s investment fund, 3G Capital, plays a central role in its acquisition and management strategies. Gera Venture Capital focuses on education. The Lemann Foundation trains leaders and operates as a PAH in shaping educational policy.

25 Areosa, J. Os efeitos iatrogênicos das técnicas de gestão. Cadernos de Psicologia Social do Trabalho, 25, 1-17, 2022.

26 Antunes, R. (Org.). Iceberg à deriva: O trabalho nas plataformas digitais. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2023.

corporations discussed in the previous subsection.

All these prescriptions align with corporate interests, which in effect appropriate them, given that corporations do not systematically develop their own pedagogical conceptions. These proposals also enjoy support from governments led by the Workers' Party, as well as from right-wing parties and, with nuances, from far-right parties that govern a significant part of Brazil.

The teaching profession is becoming increasingly de-intellectualised and deprofessionalised²⁷ (through flexible contracts and task-based pay)²⁸; currently, 90% of future teachers undertake distance learning at the higher education level. In schools, due to the use of technologies and workbook-style materials in classrooms, teaching work ceases to be creative. Teachers' conditions have been further aggravated by successive State reforms. This reality has resulted in the *precariousness of teaching work*, a situation that cannot be separated from the actions of capital's APHs, which seek to expropriate teachers' knowledge and weaken the political power of the profession, a situation aggravated due to the fact that major trade union sectors representing education workers have adopted the agenda of capital.

Trade union adherence to capital

A first line of resistance and struggle against the manifestations of capital in education has been led by education workers and students. At present, education workers—numbering more than 100 million members—constitute a segment of the working classes that stands among the global vanguard of struggles. It is undeniable that year after year, fierce struggles arise, filled with criticism of *certain* neoliberal measures across the entire world.²⁹ Millions of women and men workers fight daily for better working conditions, higher wages, public recruitment through competitive examinations with stable contracts, and the right to a career that enables full dedication to educational work; they oppose neoliberal measures based on technocrat-driven evaluations, defend academic freedom, and fight for migrants' rights. In short, these struggles seek to obstruct the most severe consequences of capital's offensives.

Nevertheless, labor relations in recent decades—generally precarious, shaken by the intensification and expropriation of labor accelerated by the technological replacement of teachers, as well as the influence of postmodern epistemological relativism—are compromising the political power of education workers, a situation that has repercussions on the social consciousness of the category.

However, the concepts most trade unions have regarding education, unionisation, organisation, and strategy are not being

developed as alternatives to the capital order. Education International (EI)³⁰, the largest global trade union organisation, offers a living example of this condition. IE reproduces fundamental aspects of education promoted by capital, albeit with selective anti-neoliberal overtones, focusing on *petty politics*³¹, conjunctural confrontations, and, above all, a propensity to negotiate within the exclusive spheres of power of the power blocs³².

At its 10th Congress, held in Buenos Aires from July 29 to August 2, 2024, EI approved resolutions that fall squarely within the agenda of capital's PAH conglomerates, as well as of international organisations such as the United Nations (Millennium Development Goals, among others), the World Economic Forum, and the OECD. EI—and the unions that predominantly lead it—claim to be engaging in “high politics,” whereas their actions unfold within the realm of *petty politics*. In the case of capital's agencies, the situation is quite different: they work to restrict trade-union struggles to the sphere of *petty politics* and thereby succeed in consolidating *their high politics*. The difficult correlation of forces in global education confirms this assessment.

Indeed, the resolutions of EI's 10th Congress propose that the problems of education and of teachers' working conditions will be resolved through the *joint* efforts of governments, trade unions, and corporations, within the framework of the failed United Nations system³³. Notably, EI claims the relevance of their actions at the World Economic Forum, the very forum that brings together a significant portion of the General Staff of Capital to manage neoliberal austerity worldwide. Hence, EI corroborates the proposition that the underlying problem is not the offensive of capital, removing (or attempting to remove) the unions associated with it from the internationalist struggle against the order of capital. The Resolutions Document³⁴ associates neoliberalism solely with conservatism, the far right, and extractivism, as if neoliberalism were not the very system of capital accumulation in the present era—one that is also present in governments deemed progressive³⁵, a theme ignored by EI.

Overall, the document does not focus on the decommodification of education or on the need for an educational program embedded in the strategic and autonomous plan of the working classes. Instead, it posits solutions through an educational agenda concerted with capital, hence the pedagogical proposals such as “resilient societies,” “schools as symbols of resilience,” “education as a global public good” (a position advocated by the World Bank), “global governance,” “resilient” teachers, social-emotional skills, and the diversification of education. It is unequivocal that such resolutions suggest that educational problems could be overcome within the bounds of the order of capital, at a historical moment marked by the relentless advance of austerity that has been devastating public education and the living conditions

27 Novoa, A. (Org.). *Profissão professor*. Porto: Porto Editora., 1995

28 Leher, R. e Moreira Da Silva, A. Mercantilização financeirizada da educação, ensino superior a distância e jornadas de trabalho jamais vistas. Dossiê Fim da Escala 6x1 e Redução da Jornada de Trabalho. 2025.

29 An overview of relevant strikes around the world can be found at:

Global Rights Index. Right to strike, 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.globalrightsindex.org/en/2023/violations/right-to-strike>. Accessed on: Jun 30 2025; Timeline of Strikes in 2023, Wikipedia. Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_strikes_in_2023. Accessed on: Jun 30 2025.

30 Education International brings together more than 32 million teachers and education workers, organized in 383 unions across 178 countries and territories. It is the main representative body of education professionals worldwide, present on all continents.

31 Gramsci, A. *Cadernos do cárcere*. Caderno 8, § XXVIII, 1931–1932.

32 Poulantzas, N. *O Estado, o poder e nós*. In: Balibar, E.; Poulantzas, N. et al. (org.) *O Estado em discussão*. São Paulo: Edições 70, 1981.

33 Bello, W. *A dying multilateral order*. 28 jun. 2025.

34 *Internacional da Educação. Resolução del 10º Congreso Mundial, Buenos Aires, Argentina, del 29 de julio al 2 de agosto de 2024.*

35 Saad Filho, A. *Morais, L. Brasil: neoliberalismo versus democracia*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2018.

of education workers. In an interview about the Resolutions, EI President Susan Hopgood (2024) states that:

“...here has never been a moment like this (...). The importance of teachers to the achievement of quality education for all has not always been universally recognised. But now, because of our campaigns, our advocacy and coalition building, there is a strongly shared belief that solving the teacher shortage crisis is a critical global priority. (...) [We are] reaching out to be part of global governance, including advising organizations like the WHO (World Health Organisation) and the World Economic Forum. The UN High Level Panel on the Teaching Profession (...) looked at the education crisis and a sustainable path forward and essentially said that global policy and governance and the world’s teachers are in this together: governments must increase investment in public education systems, including quality teacher training and professional development, guarantee labor rights and decent working conditions, involve teacher unions in policymaking and trust and respect teachers and their professional expertise.”³⁶

IE’s 10th Congress Resolution does not associate the presence of financialised educational corporations with the precariousness of work resulting from the unprecedented intellectual expropriation of teachers. Nor does it specify that contemporary educational corporations are financialised holding companies listed on stock exchanges and operating technologies customised by algorithms. Instead of foregrounding confrontation with corporations, it emphasises themes whose hegemonic meanings have been defined by the dominant pedagogy:

“Technology in general and AI in particular are changing the world of work, highlighting the importance of a diversified and high-quality education that provides students with social-emotional skills, critical thinking capacity, collaborative aptitudes, and problem-solving skills. These competencies are difficult to teach and assess through technology and AI.”³⁷

Characterising AI as something that aims at quality education is only plausible in terms of the pedagogy of capital imbued with social-emotional skills, as the Resolution acknowledges. Even more subservient is the defense of collaboration with corporations that, in practice, categorically reject any national regulation and refuse to address the performative character of algorithms, threatening legitimate governments with destabilisation:

“Strengthen the capacities of affiliated organisations to collaborate with technology companies in determining content and methodologies that enable professional learning and teaching.”³⁸

The supposed counterpoint provided by postmodern criticism, also present in the EI Resolutions, has in turn proved incapable of confronting the advance of capital. In fact, it often corroborates the scientific and cultural impoverishment of schools on behalf of an epistemological relativism in which “everything is discourse

and discourse is everything,” as if nothing existed outside it and signs lacked materiality in social relations and, objectively, in class struggles³⁹.

In the disputes surrounding the discourse, what stands out is the defense of pedagogical practices that are supposedly critical of far-right fundamentalism, but which distance teachers and students from the arena of struggle against the totalising force of capital. As if the far right were a reality unrelated to capital. Indeed, the far right conveniently directs its actions against the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) agenda. Nevertheless, defending this agenda against the far-right forces, without considering their roots in class struggles, limits the debate to rhetoric. Such an approach ignores, for example, that the far right is strongly linked to big capital, which is actively engaged in hollowing out the scientific and cultural education of the most exploited segments of the working class.

Despite occasional clashes, the far right and big capital converge in their attempt to reframe education by stripping its scientific, technological, artistic, and cultural substance. It is not possible to ignore the fact that in recent years the links between capital and the far right have become increasingly explicit, showing that the latter is not something external to the capital order⁴⁰. The widespread support of United States big tech companies for Donald Trump and of the ruling bloc for the election of Bolsonaro in 2018 and Milei in Argentina confirms the relevance of the thesis that fascism is inseparable from imperialism and the agency of big capital.

The major trade union struggles that continued to defend public education became essentially defensive and sectoral. As a result, they lacked the utopian-strategic force to confront education under the domination of capital. Furthermore, the concerns summarized by Adorno in his important manifesto *Education after Auschwitz* (1965)⁴¹ are not even outlined in a context in which, dramatically, the same questions can be asked about the technocratic trivialization of genocide in Palestine, worsened in 2024 and 2025, and also about the gradual advance of the far-right movements, including neo-fascists, in many parts of the world.

Public education as a political strategy of the working classes

Educational corporations, conglomerates of capital’s PAH, international organizations, and far-right initiatives converge in seeking to defeat the perspectives of public education grounded in the unitary school of labor⁴² and in the self-organisation of schools and universities.

Despite relevant encounters within the World Social Forums and struggles against Free Trade Agreements, it has not yet been possible to organise alternative internationalist agendas in favor of public education from the strategic perspective of the working classes. It is necessary to emphasise that this has not always been the case. In other historical contexts, public education

36 CONFEDERAÇÃO NACIONAL DOS TRABALHADORES EM EDUCAÇÃO – CNTE. Mesmo com ataques e retrocessos, nossa solidariedade é maior do que nunca, avalia Susan Hopgood, no 10º Congresso Mundial, realizado na capital argentina de 26 de julho a 2 de agosto de 2024.

37 Internacional da Educação. Resolución del 10º Congreso Mundial, Buenos Aires, Argentina, del 29 de julio al 2 de agosto de 2024.

38 Internacional da Educação. Resolución del 10º Congreso Mundial, Buenos Aires, Argentina, del 29 de julio al 2 de agosto de 2024, p. 37.

39 McNally, D. “Língua, história e luta de classe.” In: Wood, E. M.; Foster, J. B. (Org.). *Em defesa da história: marxismo e pós-modernismo*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 1999, p. 33.

40 Mattei, C. *A ordem do capital: como economistas inventaram a austeridade e abriram caminho para o fascismo*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2023.

41 Adorno, Theodor. *Education After Auschwitz*. *Filosofia osvity*, Philosophy of Education. 25. 82-99, 1965.

42 Gramsci, A. *Cadernos do cárcere*. *Caderno 12*, § XXIX, 1932.

occupied a place within the high *politics*⁴³ of the proletariat.

Although earlier references can be found, it was within the International Workingmen's Association (IWA, 1864–1872) that education came to be conceived as an integral component of the proletariat's class-struggle *strategy*, aspiring to confront the order of capital from an internationalist standpoint. Particularly notable were the contributions of Marx and De Paepe, who conceived public education as a significant dimension of class struggles⁴⁴.

Marx's defense of public education⁴⁵ rests simultaneously on four foundations: (i) without public education guaranteed by the state, it would not be possible to provide basic education for the entirety of the working classes; (ii) common public education must break with localist worldviews based on family values and local life contexts, aiming to insert new generations into secular and lay life through science, art, and culture as universal rights; (iii) the education of the working classes cannot be detached from the educational principle of labor—a complex theme present throughout Marx's writings on education and later developed by Lenin, Gramsci, and Mariátegui with the concept of the unitary school; and (iv) in confrontation with liberal-bourgeois conceptions, Marx argued that defending the state's duty does not mean attributing to the state the role of educator of the people—on the contrary, a theme later developed in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875)⁴⁶.

The crux of the heated debates within the IWA and, subsequently, in the Commune concerned how (and whether) it would be possible to ensure that public schools—conceived as a duty of the state—could be self-determined by educators, students, and popular councils, thus materialising Marx's proposition that one must categorically reject the state itself acting as the educator of the people.

This political-strategic perspective on education was practiced by the working class as an experiment in the vibrant experience of the Paris Commune of 1871. The socialist conception of public education was further developed during the educational experience of the 1917 Russian Revolution, particularly between 1917 and 1924, prior to the consolidation of Stalinism within the Commissariat of Education. From 1917 onward, movements such as *Proletkult* sought an entirely new education, without a dialectical overcoming of the most advanced revolutionary experiences of the bourgeois revolutions⁴⁷. On the other hand, Lenin, Krupskaya, Trotsky, and Lunacharsky defended the need to incorporate elements inherited from bourgeois education, science, technology, art, and culture. In the case of education, as in Condorcet, a commitment to public, secular, free education—fully grounded in coeducation and dedicated to forming non-submissive citizens within universal cultural horizons that transcended *particularisms* and *localist* conceptions of culture—was vigorously defended within the Commissariat of Education. The defense of incorporating the educational principle of work that rejects the separation between intellectual and manual labor, as well as the

commitment to socialist education, however, aimed to overcome it (the bourgeois education, even if radical) due to its class limits.

The revolutionary experiences were extremely important in removing the issue of education from the exclusive domain of pedagogues, giving it a prominent place in the political strategy of training the working class as a “class for itself”—a necessary condition to ensure that each and everyone could become organizers of the new socialist society. This prism guided educational thought in the early years of the 1917 Revolution; Gramsci's elaborations on the unitary school; struggles against colonialism in Africa and Asia; the Cuban Revolution; the student movements of 1968—not only in the United States and Paris, but also in Mexico, in October 1968 at Tlatelolco; the Carnation Revolution; the early years of the Sandinista Revolution; the Penguins movement in Chile; the Zapatista *caracoles*; the occupations of schools and universities—such as the occupation of the National Autonomous University of Mexico—and, in Brazil, the struggles against the counter-reformation of secondary education and the new capital-oriented curricular bases, as well as the ongoing educational struggles of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) and many dispersed experiences that, in different ways, seek to forge an education beyond the order of capital.

It is undeniable that workers are aware that education is traversed by class struggles. However, there are no proper political means to forge a national-popular will based on internationalism that would make it possible, on the one hand, to develop comprehensive knowledge about the various expressions of capital's systemic offensive on education—it is necessary to know the enemy in all its forms—and, on the other hand, to forge unifying ideas capable of inspiring and mobilising educational struggles from the perspective of the class for itself. Around the world, Marxist research groups and critical scholars in general are seeking to understand capital's systemic offensive against education. Many of these collectives are linked to education workers' unions, student collectives, and social movements. However, without the organisation of collectives, unions, and left-wing parties, critical theory loses its vigor and transformative power; after all, universities and intellectuals cannot replace the leading role of the working classes. The debate on the role of the state in the development of the economy is a necessary and decisive one in order to create alternatives to the barbarism of capital in a new destructive stage of wars and the destruction of the socio-metabolic living conditions of peoples■

43 Gramsci, A. *Cadernos do cárcere*. Caderno 8, § XXVIII, 1931–1932.

44 Musto, M. (org.). *Trabalhadores, uni-vos! Antologia política da I Internacional*. São Paulo: Boitempo; Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2014.

45 Marx, K. *Resoluções do Congresso de Genebra* (1866). In: Musto, M. (org.). *Trabalhadores, uni-vos! Antologia política da I Internacional*. São Paulo: Boitempo; Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2014.

46 Marx, K. *Crítica do Programa de Gotha*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2012.

47 Leher, R. A pedagogia socialista nos processos revolucionários, organizações políticas e movimentos sociais. In: CALDART, R. S.; VILLAS BOAS, R. L. *Pedagogia socialista – legado da revolução de 1917 e desafios atuais*. São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2017.

Roberto Valdés Puentes* Vygotsky and the Pedagogy of
Contents: Deconstructing the
Sacralisation of Processes

ABSTRACT

In the context of contemporary education, characterised by the emptying of disciplinary content in favor of active methodologies and competencies (as proposed in the Brazilian National Common Curricular Base, or BNCC), Lev Vygotsky emerges as a key critical interlocutor. Although he did not explicitly defend a “pedagogy of content,” his cultural-historical theory demonstrates that effective, educational processes necessarily depend on the mediation of systematised knowledge, especially scientific concepts and language. Vygotsky overcomes the false dichotomy between content and process by showing that cognitive development occurs when content knowledge is actively and mediately appropriated, rejecting both content-based traditionalism and empty activism. Thus, his work provides the basis for a pedagogy that, without denying the importance of innovative methodologies, reintroduces content as the structuring axis of teaching practice and emphasizes the irreplaceable role of the professor in the intentional mediation of knowledge.

KEYWORDS

BNCC
Vygotsky
pedagogy of contents
theoretical concepts
sacralisation of processes

* Federal University of Uberlândia, Brazil

1. Introduction

The context of global education has been characterised since the last two decades of the 20th century by the hegemony of process-centered pedagogies and the marginalisation of disciplinary content, representing an educational paradigm that prioritises how learning occurs over what is learned, thereby relegating disciplinary knowledge to a secondary level.

These process-centered approaches emphasise active methods (project-based, problem-based, or experiential learning), competencies and skills (focusing on “know-how” as seen in Brazil’s National Common Curricular Base), individualisation (personal learning rhythms and styles), and the teacher as facilitator rather than transmitter of knowledge—exemplified by constructivism (Jean Piaget and followers), meaningful learning (David Ausubel and followers), and project-based pedagogy (Fernando Hernández, Philippe Perrenoud and followers).

A synthesis of Brazilian statistical data and research links these pedagogical approaches to observed challenges in the national educational landscape. According to Consed¹, 100% of state curricula (2018-2020) include constructivist principles such as “learning to learn.”² The 2019 Prova Brasil showed that schools using “active methods” (based on constructivism) performed 15% worse in 5th grade math than schools with structured instruction.³ In teacher training, 78% of pedagogy programs prioritise Jean Piaget as their main reference⁴.

Over 60% of the textbooks approved by the PNLD (National Textbook Program) in 2023 use David Ausubel’s “meaningful learning” in their methodology⁵. A UFMG (2021) study of 200 schools found that only 34% of teachers could effectively apply the theory in practice due to conceptual gaps. While over 40% of urban schools reported using “project-based pedagogy” (School Census 2022), only 18% provided specific teacher training⁶.

The Fundação Carlos Chagas (2020) study found that projects without content systematization reduced science performance by 22%⁷. According to SAEB itself, in 2021, it was confirmed that students from schools with “pure active methods” (without structured content) scored 30 points lower in Portuguese (9th grade) compared to students from schools with hybrid approaches. Finally, 89% of teachers report difficulties in reconciling “projects” with the requirements of results⁸.

In summary, process-centered pedagogies have created at least three serious problems for Brazilian education. First, the emptying of content, manifested in the replacement of systematised

knowledge with vague “skills”. Second, the illusion of autonomy, characterised by the idea that students can develop theoretical and critical thinking without an adequate conceptual foundation. Third, the widening of inequalities, expressed in the fact that families with cultural capital can fill the gaps left by schools, while children from poorer backgrounds cannot.

The present article, based on theoretical research from Lev S. Vygotsky’s (1896-1934)⁹ work on the intrinsic relationship between mental development and collective learning, addresses the problem of the sacralisation of processes as a mechanism that weakens the appropriation or assimilation of systematised knowledge. It is argued that Vygotsky, while valuing mediation, collaboration, and learning methods, provides foundations for a pedagogy of content by emphasising cultural tools (scientific concepts and language).

Through an analysis of his thought, it is shown how Vygotsky emerges as a fundamental critical interlocutor for contemporary pedagogical debate. Although he never explicitly proposed a “pedagogy of content,” the author establishes a productive dialectic between content and process by defending systematised knowledge as the structural axis for the didactic organisation of collective school learning processes.

Vygotsky’s theory of psychical development and the role of appropriate learning in this process is based on key concepts such as Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), mental development, ideal psychological age, developmental dynamics, absolute and relative success, mediation and cooperation. According to the author, students’ psychological development is intrinsically conditioned by the historical, social, and cultural circumstances that school learning creates and enables. These conditions maintain a dialectical relationship with learning content, from which pedagogical methods consequently emerge.

The article is divided into three parts. The first deals with Lev S. Vygotsky’s critique of the sacralisation of process-centered pedagogies. The second examines the emergence of content-centered pedagogies and Vygotsky’s place within them. The third examines the main premises underlying Vygotsky’s pedagogy of content.

Development

1. Vygotsky’s Critique of the Sacralization of Process-Centered Pedagogies

Lev S. Vygotsky, a prominent theorist of cultural-historical

1 Consed. Conselho Nacional de Secretários de Educação. Alinhamento dos currículos estaduais à BNCC: monitoramento 2018-2020 (Alignment of state curricula to the Brazilian National Common Curricular Base (BNCC): Monitoring report 2018-2020). Brasília: CONSED, 2020. Disponível em: <https://www.consed.org.br>. Acesso em: 09 de abr. 2025.

2 Consed. Conselho Nacional de Secretários de Educação. Alinhamento dos currículos estaduais à BNCC: monitoramento 2018-2020 (Alignment of state curricula to the Brazilian National Common Curricular Base (BNCC): Monitoring report 2018-2020). Brasília: CONSED, 2020.

3 Brasil. Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (INEP). Resultados da Prova Brasil 2019: análises pedagógicas por metodologia de ensino (Prova Brasil 2019 Results: Pedagogical Analyses by Teaching Methodology). Brasília: INEP, 2020, p. 157.

4 Brasil. Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (INEP). Censo da Educação Superior 2022: divulgação dos resultados (Higher Education Census 2022: Results Release). Brasília, DF: INEP, 2023.

5 Brasil. Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (INEP). Censo da Educação Superior 2022: divulgação dos resultados (Higher Education Census 2022: Results Release). Brasília, DF: INEP, 2023.

6 Costa, M. F. et al. Desafios na implementação de teorias pedagógicas em contextos escolares: um estudo em 200 escolas brasileiras (Challenges in Implementing Pedagogical Theories in School Contexts: A Study Across 200 Brazilian Schools). Belo Horizonte: UFMG/Faculdade de Educação, 2021. 45 p. (Relatório de Pesquisa).

7 Fundação Carlos Chaga. Impacto de metodologias ativas no desempenho escolar: análise longitudinal do SAEB (2017-2019) (Impact of active methodologies on school performance: Longitudinal analysis of SAEB (2017-2019)). São Paulo: FCC, 2020. 78 p. (Série Pesquisas Educacionais, n. 45).

8 Brasil. Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (INEP). Censo da Educação Superior 2022: divulgação dos resultados (Higher Education Census 2022: Results Release). Brasília, DF: INEP, 2023.

9 Vygotsky, Lev S. Desenvolvimento mental no processo de aprendizagem coletiva: seleção de artigos (Mental Development in the Process of Collective Learning: Selected Articles). (1935). São Carlos: Pedro & João, 2024.

psychology, provides a critical foundation for analysing pedagogies that overly privilege learning processes—such as radical constructivism, project-based learning, or self-directed teaching models—especially when these approaches underestimate three crucial elements: social context, pedagogical mediation, and guided cognitive development.

In their view, the development of higher psychological functions occurs through the assimilation of cultural tools (language, conceptual systems, symbolic representations), a process that is intrinsically dependent on skilled social interactions. In this sense, approaches that overvalue educational processes—whether through the discourse of “learning to learn,” unstructured active methodologies, or radical versions of constructivism—risk: (1) relegating the collective learning of systematised knowledge (such as consolidated mathematical and scientific knowledge) to a secondary role; (2) idealising spontaneous discovery, ignoring that the acquisition of complex concepts requires deliberate intervention in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD); (3) fostering the illusion of absolute autonomy, as if learning could dispense with specialised mediation; and (4) stimulating the fetishism of the “active method,” which leads to activity without meaning.

According to Vygotsky, practical activity should never be rejected; however, he warned that “learning by doing” has value only when theoretical concepts are internalised¹⁰. He criticised empty processes based on playful or “hands-on” activities without theoretical reflection for their superficiality and lack of problematisation, leading students to repeat actions without understanding the underlying concepts.

He also criticised the illusion of neutrality in such processes, since they ignore that all learning is culturally situated, as well as the psychological reductionism present in certain process-based pedagogies (such as those based on theories of natural learning or spontaneous development). These approaches overlook that higher psychological functions (such as logical memory, abstract reasoning, conceptual generalisation, and reflection) are socially constructed—they do not occur naturally¹¹.

Moreover, Vygotsky argued that the role of school is to accelerate development through collective learning—not merely to accommodate individual pace—by seeking a balance between process, content, and mediation. Thus, without denying the importance of processes, he insisted on a dialectical relationship: learning processes must be mediated, since content is neither “given” nor “transmitted,” but rather reconstructed by the learner with social support¹².

2. *The emergence of content-focused pedagogies: Vygotsky’s place*

Content-based pedagogies (also called Renewed Traditional Pedagogies) are educational approaches that prioritise the systematic transmission of scientific, cultural, and disciplinary knowledge,

but with a critical perspective that differs from passive traditionalism. They are positioned in opposition to methodologies that focus exclusively on the student or the learning process.

These pedagogies emerged as the dominant educational model between the 18th and 19th centuries and gained strength with the organisation of national education systems in the modern era. Their historical roots go back to the 17th and 18th centuries, influenced by the Scientific Revolution (René Descartes, Francis Bacon) and the Enlightenment, which advocated education as a vehicle of reason and progress; the systematic organisation of knowledge (as exemplified by Diderot’s encyclopedias). They were strengthened in the 19th century with the rise of mass public schooling, which responded to the demands of the Industrial Revolution (training a skilled workforce) and the needs of nation-states (training citizens). Finally, they were further consolidated by Auguste Comte’s positivism, which promoted the exact sciences as the foundation of progress, and Johann Friedrich Herbart’s “pedagogical instruction” through formal teaching steps (preparation, presentation, association, systematisation) with an emphasis on moral and intellectual content.

In the 20th century, content-based pedagogies were subject to criticism and reformulation. In the 1920s and 1930s, it was challenged by proponents of the New and Active Education movements (John Dewey, Maria Montessori) for its content-focused model, although these critics were unable to eliminate it. In the 1960s and 1970s, movements such as liberatory pedagogy (Paulo Freire and his followers) problematised the alleged neutrality of content while acknowledging its fundamental importance in the emancipation process.

Today, hybrid models, such as socio-interactionism, combine content with active mediation. Despite sustained criticism, content-based pedagogies continue to be present in public education systems (through common curriculum standards); preparatory courses (for civil service exams and university entrance exams); and technical disciplines (such as medicine and engineering).

Paradoxically, even critical pedagogies (such as those developed by Dermeval Saviani and José Carlos Libâneo) recognize that there can be no real emancipation without systematised knowledge. Saviani would write: “The acquisition of systematised knowledge is a prerequisite for intellectual autonomy.”¹³

José Carlos Libâneo, one of the main theorists of critical-social pedagogy, argues that systematised knowledge is a fundamental tool for intellectual and social emancipation. His work articulates influences from L. S. Vygotsky, D. Saviani and K. Marx, criticising both traditional content-oriented approaches and the spontaneism of active pedagogy. Referring to the social function of the school, Libâneo stated that educational institutions must guarantee access to “objective knowledge” (scientific, artistic, philosophical) that is not spontaneously acquired in everyday life. His exact words are as follows: “The acquisition of objective knowledge is

10 Vygotsky, Lev. *Pensamiento y habla (Thought and Language)*. 1ª ed. Buenos Aires: Colihue, 2007.

11 Vygotsky, Lev S. A pré-história da linguagem escrita (The Prehistory of Written Language). In: Vygotsky, Lev S. *Desenvolvimento mental no processo de aprendizagem coletiva: seleção de artigo (Mental Development in the Process of Collective Learning: Selected Articles)*. (1935). São Carlos: Pedro & João, 2024, p. 179-226.

12 Vygotsky, Lev S. A pedagogia e a psicologia (Pedagogy and psychology). In: VIGOTSKI, Lev S. *Psicologia pedagógica (Educational psychology)*. São Paulo: ArtMed, 2003b, p. 37-45.

13 Saviani, Dermeval. *Escola e Democracia (School and Democracy)*. Campinas: Autores Associados, 1983.

a condition for effective political participation¹⁴ and “Access to systematized content is not a privilege, but a social right”¹⁵.

Content-based pedagogies present as main characteristics: first, **the focus on objective knowledge** (they value consolidated knowledge - mathematics, sciences, history, literature, etc.), **the central role of the teacher** (the educator is seen as a mediator of knowledge, responsible for selecting, organizing, and transmitting contents), **a rigid curricular structure** (follows defined programs, with clear objectives and standardized evaluations), and **expository methods** (lecture-based classes, structured exercises, and repetition for retention).

Five of the main proponents of content-based pedagogy, from a critical perspective, are David Ausubel (United States), Jerome Bruner (United States), Antoni Zabala (Spain), Dermeval Saviani (Brazil), and José Carlos Libâneo (Brazil). The approach advocated by Saviani and Libâneo is based on the theories of Ausubel, Bruner and Zabala, but also differs in aspects such as the function of the school, the structuring of the content and the role of the teacher.

Although these authors present different theoretical emphases on these aspects, these thinkers converge in valuing systematised content as the central axis of the pedagogical process. Saviani and Libâneo conceive of the school as a strategic institution for the systematic transmission of scientific and cultural knowledge in order to overcome social inequalities. Ausubel, on the other hand, bases his theory on meaningful learning, a process through which new knowledge is connected to pre-existing cognitive structures in a non-arbitrary and substantive way. Bruner develops the spiral curriculum proposal, which involves the progressive revisiting of content at increasingly higher levels of cognitive complexity. Zabala, while not abandoning the importance of conceptual foundations, directs his proposal toward organizing content from a competency-based perspective.

However, Saviani and Libâneo differ from the others in terms of the purpose of education, the nature of the content, and the methodology adopted. While they see school as an instrument of social transformation (with Marxist emphasis), Ausubel and Bruner focus on individual cognitive development (psychological approach), and Zabala seeks a balance between content and applied competencies (socio-constructivist influence).

Regarding the nature of content, Saviani and Libâneo prioritise content as historical products to be critically mastered, Ausubel as logical structures to be hierarchically assimilated, Bruner as tools for thinking (emphasis on processes), and Zabala as content integrated into practical situations (contextualized learning).

Finally, from a methodological perspective, Saviani and Libâneo

emphasise dialogic expository teaching and rigorous systematisation. Ausubel, on the other hand, emphasises the use of advance organizers (such as summaries and concept maps); Bruner, guided discovery learning; and Zabala, flexible didactic sequences and interdisciplinary projects.

It is in this context that we can place Lev S. Vygotsky and his work. In fact, we do not consider Vygotsky as a representative of traditional content-based pedagogy, but rather as a theorist who reinterpreted the role of content from a socio-cultural perspective. Thus, he would integrate the group of Ausubel, Bruner, Zabala, Saviani, and Libâneo — all of whom advocate content-based pedagogies with a critical perspective. Indeed, he could be considered the foremost precursor and ultimate exponent of this group.

However, what was Vygotsky’s role within critical content-based pedagogies? Vygotsky was a critic who opposed traditional models while valuing cultural content, rejecting rigid and decontextualised curricula, unidirectional expository methods, and the notion of passive knowledge transmission. Moreover, he argued that cultural contents (language, scientific concepts, and symbols) are essential cognitive tools for the development of higher psychological functions, and that schools must systematise access to these contents — but through active mediation (ZPD).

In summary, Vygotsky cannot be classified as a traditional content-focused educator, but his theoretical legacy provides the foundation for a reconstructed content-based pedagogy—where knowledge and the learning process are dialectically integrated. Next, we will examine this Vygotskian legacy along three central axes: (1) the role of content learning in students’ psychological development; (2) the dialectical relationship between content (knowledge) and learning methods (processes); and (3) its didactic materialisation through school organisation and teacher mediation, particularly through the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

3. Foundational assumptions of Vygotsky’s content-based pedagogy

In L.S. Vygotsky’s conception of human psychological development, the relationship between mental development and learning—or “developmental learning”, as this theory came to be called in the 1970s—occupied a crucial place¹⁶.

From the very beginning of his intellectual and academic training, Vygotsky demonstrated clear and advanced conceptions of education and pedagogy that, in essence, underwent little change throughout his work. Drawing on his mentor P.P. Blonsky (1884-1941), he defined education as early as the 1920s as “a planned, organised, and prolonged influence on the development of an organism”¹⁷. Pedagogy, in turn, was understood by Vygotsky as the

14 Libâneo, José Carlos. *Democratização da Escola Pública: Pedagogia Crítico-Social dos Conteúdos* (Democratization of Public Schools: Critical-Social Pedagogy of Contents). São Paulo: Loyola, 1990.

15 Libâneo, José Carlos. *Didática* (Didactics). São Paulo: Cortez, 1994, p. 81.

16 Davydov, Vasili V. *Atividade de estudo e aprendizagem desenvolvimental* (Study Activity and Developmental Learning). In: PUENTES, R. V.; CARDOSO, C. G. C.; AMORIM, P. A. P. (Orgs.). *Teoria da atividade de estudo: contribuições de D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davidov e V. V. Repkin* (Study activity theory: Contributions from D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davidov, and V. V. Repkin). Curitiba: CRV; Uberlândia: Edufu, 2019, p. 249-266; Davydov, Vasili V. *Teoria do desenvolvimento da aprendizagem (Developmental Learning Theory)*. Moscou: Intor, 1996; Puentes, Roberto Valdés. *Uma nova abordagem da aprendizagem desenvolvimental* (A New Approach to Developmental Learning). In: PUENTES, Roberto Valdés; CARDOSO, Cecília Garcia Coelho; AMORIM, Paula Alves Prudente. (Orgs.). *Teoria da atividade de estudo: contribuições de D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davidov e V. V. Repkin* (Study activity theory: Contributions from D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davidov, and V. V. Repkin). Curitiba: CRV; Uberlândia: Edufu, 2019, p. 31-54; Davydov, Vasili V. *Atividade de estudo e aprendizagem desenvolvimental* (Study Activity and Developmental Learning). In: PUENTES, R. V.; CARDOSO, C. G. C.; AMORIM, P. A. P. (Orgs.). *Teoria da atividade de estudo: contribuições de D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davidov e V. V. Repkin* (Study activity theory: Contributions from D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davidov, and V. V. Repkin). Curitiba: CRV; Uberlândia: Edufu, 2019, p. 249-266; Davydov, Vasili V. *Teoria do desenvolvimento da aprendizagem (Developmental Learning Theory)*. Moscou: Intor, 1996; Puentes, Roberto Valdés. *Uma nova abordagem da aprendizagem desenvolvimental* (A New Approach to Developmental Learning). In: PUENTES, Roberto Valdés; CARDOSO, Cecília Garcia Coelho; AMORIM, Paula Alves Prudente. (Orgs.). *Teoria da atividade de estudo: contribuições de D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davidov e V. V. Repkin* (Study activity theory: Contributions from D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davidov, and V. V. Repkin). Curitiba: CRV; Uberlândia: Edufu, 2019, p. 31-54.

17 Vygotsky, Lev S. *A pedagogia e a psicologia* (Pedagogy and psychology). In: VIGOTSKI, Lev S. *Psicologia pedagógica* (Educational psychology). São Paulo: ArtMed, 2003b, p. 37-45.

science of education, responsible for “determining with precision and clarity how this influence should be organised, what forms it may take, what procedures it employs, and what its orientation should be”¹⁸.

Several aspects of these concepts reveal Vygotsky’s thinking at this time. First, the concept of education expresses a dynamic process—an influence resulting from a particular type of activity. Thus, education is not the activity itself, but rather its process and outcome. Second, it becomes clear that the effect of this organised influence is not directed toward learning as a product, but toward the development of the organism (the human person), thus emphasising the developmental nature of education as conceived by the author. This is in contrast to previous theories of learning, which did not have the development of the person as a central goal¹⁹.

Thus, even if—in this initial phase—the specific content of the development sought by education was not yet fully established, it became clear that only that education could be considered good which intentionally sought to exert a positive influence on the development of its participants. In this way, one of Vygotsky’s basic hypotheses about the relationship between education and development was defined for the first time, which was later developed as a theory by his students under the name of “developmental learning”²⁰.

In L.S. Vygotsky’s conception of pedagogy, its fundamental role in defining the nature, content, methods, procedures, and direction of educational influence on development stands out. This concept is based on pedagogical psychology, which, according to Blonsky, “studies the application of psychological knowledge to the process of education and learning”²¹. Thus, from this perspective, pedagogy determines both the content and the form of educational influence.

In his mature period, Vygotsky’s studies focused on the development of higher psychological functions, making fundamental contributions through the concepts of sign, psychological tools, semiotic mediation, and the process of internalisation. His study of the formation of these functions reveals a particular interest in the content of childhood learning, especially the genesis of children’s thinking and, more specifically, the construction of scientific concepts. The focus of his analysis shifted decisively to the intrinsic dynamics of development—course, content, stages, and transformations—while privileging the study of both process and product.

Vygotsky made a fundamental distinction between learning content and school subject matter, in contrast to the contemporary

tendency to treat them as synonymous. For the author, content represented the ultimate goal of learning—the higher psychological functions to be developed through the proper organization of educational processes. As a paradigmatic example, he proposed that in the early elementary grades the essential content should be the development of theoretical thinking, especially the formation of scientific concepts.

In his view, school subject matter constituted the body of specific disciplinary knowledge that, when collectively appropriated by students, created the necessary conditions for the assimilation of the underlying content, the latter understood as systems of concepts and modes of mental action.

Thought and Language (1934), the monograph History of the Development of Higher Psychological Functions (1931), and the article “Problems of Learning and Intellectual Development in School Age” (1933) represent the culmination of Vygotsky’s theoretical elaboration of human development, developmental education, pedagogy, and the role of the teacher.

Through a well-founded critique of both the subjectivist and objectivist psychological approaches of his time, Vygotsky (1993) proposed three basic concepts for studying child development from a historical-dialectical materialist perspective: (1) the cultural development of behavior, (2) higher psychological functions, and (3) mastery of one’s own behavioral processes²². His innovative approach analysed the genesis of higher functions through cultural and historical laws, thereby transcending the then-dominant naturalistic paradigm prevalent in both metaphysically oriented interpretive psychology and biologically based psychoanalytic theories.

Vygotsky²³ set a theoretical milestone by demonstrating that the development of higher psychological functions in child ontogeny follows a dialectical pattern that integrates the two evolutionary lines of human phylogeny—the biological and the historical-cultural—and transforms them into a single, complex process. From this perspective, the child’s cultural development occurs simultaneously with organic transformations, in a relationship of mutual determination.

In the ontogeny postulated by the author, the child’s activity system at each stage of development is doubly determined: (1) by the level of organic maturation and (2) by the degree of appropriation of content or cultural tools (language, scientific concepts, and symbolic systems). This revolutionary conception overcame the dichotomous views that prevailed in his time.

In the year following Vygotsky’s death, the collective work Mental

18 Vygotsky, Lev S. A pedagogia e a psicologia (Pedagogy and psychology). In: VIGOTSKI, Lev S. Psicologia pedagógica (Educational psychology). São Paulo: ArtMed, 2003b, p. 37-45.

19 Vygotsky, Lev S. Aprendizagem e desenvolvimento intelectual na idade escolar (Learning and Intellectual Development at School Age). In: Vygotsky, L. S.; Luria, A. R.; Leontiev, A. N. Linguagem, desenvolvimento e aprendizagem (Language, Development and Learning). 11ª edição. São Paulo: Ícone, 2010, 103-118.

20 Davydov, Vasilii V. Atividade de estudo e aprendizagem desenvolvimental (Study Activity and Developmental Learning). In: PUENTES, R. V.; CARDOSO, C. G. C.; AMORIM, P. A. P. (Orgs.). Teoria da atividade de estudo: contribuições de D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davidov e V. V. Repkin (Study activity theory: Contributions from D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davidov, and V. V. Repkin). Curitiba: CRV; Uberlândia: Edufu, 2019, p. 249-266; Repkin, Vladimir V. Aprendizagem desenvolvimental e atividade de estudo (Developmental learning and study activity). In: PUENTES, Roberto V.; CARDOSO, Cecília G. C.; AMORIM, P. A. P. (Orgs.). Teoria da atividade de estudo: contribuições de D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davidov e V. V. Repkin (Study activity theory: Contributions from D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davidov, and V. V. Repkin). Curitiba: CRV; Uberlândia: Edufu, 2019, p. 365-406; Puentes, Roberto Valdés. Uma nova abordagem da aprendizagem desenvolvimental (A New Approach to Developmental Learning). In: PUENTES, Roberto Valdés; CARDOSO, Cecília Garcia Coelho; AMORIM, Paula Alves Prudente. (Orgs.). Teoria da atividade de estudo: contribuições de D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davidov e V. V. Repkin (Study activity theory: Contributions from D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davidov, and V. V. Repkin). Curitiba: CRV; Uberlândia: Edufu, 2019, p. 31-54.

21 Vygotsky, Lev S. A pedagogia e a psicologia (Pedagogy and psychology). In: VIGOTSKI, Lev S. Psicologia pedagógica (Educational psychology). São Paulo: ArtMed, 2003b, p. 37-45.

22 Vygotsky, Lev S. Historia del desarrollo de las funciones psíquicas superiores (The history of the development of higher mental functions). Obras escogidas (Complete Works). Tomo III. España: Visor, 1993.

23 Vygotsky, Lev S. Historia del desarrollo de las funciones psíquicas superiores (The history of the development of higher mental functions). Obras escogidas (Complete Works). Tomo III. España: Visor, 1993.

Development of Children in the Process of Education: Selected Articles (1935) was published, bringing together seven of the author's foundational texts, five of which were written during the period of his theoretical maturity. In these works, Vygotsky—supported by empirical evidence—proposed a new approach to solving the two fundamental problems regarding the reciprocal relationship between learning processes and the development of the human psyche (understanding this relationship in general from a dialectical perspective; identifying the specific characteristics of this interrelationship during the school age): his theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

This innovative theory posits that while there is a relationship between the actual level of development and the potential capacity for learning, it is methodologically inadequate to limit the analysis to a single level of development when examining the dynamics between these processes. To properly understand this dialectical relationship, it is necessary to consider at least two levels of development—an essential condition for identifying the patterns of interaction in each particular case.

Vygotsky (2005) made a fundamental distinction between two levels of development: (1) the actual level of development, which corresponds to the higher psychological functions already consolidated by the child as a result of previous developmental processes; and (2) the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which represents the developmental potential that the child can achieve through pedagogical mediation or cooperation with peers, later internalising these acquisitions autonomously.

Beyond this contribution, Vygotsky formulated a revolutionary thesis about the role of learning in psychological development. He vehemently criticised educational models that focused exclusively on developmental stages that had already been achieved, considering them incapable of advancing cognitive development. He postulated that properly organised learning does not merely follow or stimulate development, but rather determines, anticipates, and constitutes it:

“...an internally necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing human psychological functions [...] Pedagogy must orient itself not toward yesterday, but toward tomorrow's child development.”²⁴»

Vygotsky did not succeed in empirically verifying the actual role and effect of learning on development in practice. The definition, content, structure, formation process, and role of the specific activity that organises and implements “real learning” as an essential element of the developmental process remained only as hypotheses to be tested experimentally later by psychologists, educational theorists, and methodologists associated with his work—such as A.N. Leontiev, D.B. Elkonin, and V.V. Davydov, who developed activity theory as a concrete extension of Vygotskian propositions about developmental learning.

However, Vygotsky emphasised essential aspects of this relationship that became integral to all subsequent psychological-pedagogical proposals. Three elements deserve particular attention: learning content, communication, and cooperation. Collaboration is the innovative element that characterizes the Vygotskian concept of developmental learning. Nevertheless, the primacy of content remains. In his text “The Problem of Collective Learning and Mental Development in School-Age Children” (1933/34), he emphasized that the crucial difference between general collective learning and school learning is that in the latter the assimilation of the foundations of scientific knowledge is the primary objective.

It is known that this process of collective learning, just as it occurs before school age, differs substantially from the process of school-based collective learning, which is concerned with the assimilation of the foundations of scientific knowledge.²⁵ (Emphasis added).

In contrast to active methods, Vygotsky consistently emphasised the fundamental importance of assimilated knowledge content for children's psychological development. The very problem of collective learning and mental development was formulated and resolved by Vygotsky through the distinction between “everyday concepts” and “scientific concepts,” which for him was the central paradigm of the relationship between social learning and cognitive development. As he noted: “[...] in essence, the problem of everyday concepts and especially scientific concepts is precisely the problem of collective learning and development...”²⁶.

The centrality of content in Vygotsky's work and thought in analysing the role of collective learning in psychological development is widely recognized by most of his followers. As Elkonin²⁷, who was his student and one of his principal collaborators, notes:

“The central idea of L.S. Vygotsky is that the key developmental achievements of school age, associated with intellectual development—consciousness and mastery of psychological processes—arrive ‘through the gateway of scientific concepts’ (VYGOTSKY, 1956, p. 247). Thus, according to L.S. Vygotsky, decisive advances in development were primarily related to the content of collective learning. In this way, he approached Pedagogy not so much from the perspective of developing and applying ‘effective collective learning methods,’ but rather through its content—particularly the scientific nature of the content (the ‘methods’ themselves being derived from the content).”

Beyond the content-methods relationship that was essential to Vygotsky's theory of collective learning and mental development, he also examined the connections between skills and concepts. His highly original insight was that skills and concepts only become general and theoretical, respectively, when they develop together. Skills that develop apart from concepts remain specific, while concepts without skills remain spontaneous. In his critique

24 Vygotsky, Lev S. Aprendizagem e desenvolvimento intelectual na idade escolar (Learning and Intellectual Development at School Age). In: Vygotsky, L. S.; Luria, A. R.; Leontiev, A. N. Linguagem, desenvolvimento e aprendizagem (Language, Development and Learning). 11ª edição. São Paulo: Ícone, 2010, p. 114

25 Vygotsky, Lev S. Desenvolvimento mental no processo de aprendizagem coletiva: seleção de artigo (Mental Development in the Process of Collective Learning: Selected Articles). (1935). São Carlos: Pedro & João, 2024, p. 60-61.

26 Vygotsky, Lev S. Избранные психологические исследования (Selected Psychological Research). Moscou: APN RSFSR, 1956, p. 251.

27 Elkonin, Daniil Borisovich. Интеллектуальные возможности младших школьников и содержание обучения (Intellectual capacities of early elementary students and the content of collective learning). In: PUNTES, Roberto Valdés (Orgs.). Lev S. Vigotski e a aprendizagem coletiva desenvolvimental: contribuições de D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davydov e V. V. Repkin (Lev S. Vygotsky and developmental collective learning: Contributions from D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davydov, and V. V. Repkin). 3ª edição. São Carlos: Pedro & João, 2024, p. 111.

of Maria Montessori for overemphasising methods and specific skills in writing development at the expense of content integrity, Vygotsky²⁸ wrote:

In addition, the rigor advocated by Montessori—even with the most advanced and effortless literacy methods—cannot be explained by the notion that collective reading instruction cannot be a school discipline. Rather, it stems from how all these methods fail to account for what matters most: instead of written language proper, they merely equip children with writing skills...

Here we see precisely the weakest point of Montessori’s method. For her—as we noted earlier—writing is a purely muscular activity, and consequently, her children produce content-free texts.

[...]

When we read the texts of Montessori’s children and admire their penmanship, we cannot escape the impression that there are children who have learned to press the keys but remain deaf to the music their fingers evoke.

Vygotsky argues that the primary psychological achievements of the school age period—especially the conscious mastery of one’s own mental processes—are achieved primarily through the acquisition of systematic scientific concepts that function as vectors of intellectual development. Reinforcing Vygotsky’s thesis, Elkonin²⁹ warned that if empirical knowledge remains the core content of collective learning in schools, then no matter how active and effective the teaching methods may be, they will fail to influence the basic psychic functions of students.

The theses on the role of content in mental development were elaborated primarily in the sixth chapters of *Thought and Language* and *The Development of the Mind in the Process of Collective Learning: Selected Essays*, where Vygotsky argues that scientific concepts (mathematical, historical, and grammatical) — because of their systematised nature—require conscious awareness, in contrast to spontaneous or everyday concepts. By engaging with these concepts in school, the child not only acquires knowledge, but also profoundly restructures his or her thinking and develops tools for self-regulation of cognitive processes such as memory, attention, and reasoning. In this regard, Vygotsky³⁰ recognized that scientific concepts, with their hierarchical system of relationships, become the fundamental mediators for the conscious mastery of psychic processes. It is through them that the child attains higher forms of thinking.

Addressing the significant differences between every day and scientific concepts in terms of the conditions under which they emerge, Vygotsky emphasised that the most critical aspect lies in the fact that school-based collective learning of scientific concepts occurs through the assimilation of a system of scientific knowledge:

It seems to me that the very nature of school-based collective learning—which enables the child, for the first time, to acquire a system of scientific knowledge—differs so fundamentally from the conditions in which the child’s initial concepts emerge that we are justified in supposing the developmental trajectory of scientific concepts follows a distinct path.³¹

Throughout his work, Vygotsky emphasised that scientific concepts (mathematical, linguistic, historical, etc.) constitute “the royal road to reflexive consciousness.” This is because they do not merely convey information, but become the structural core of such consciousness, reorganising the very architecture of children’s thinking. By internalising systems of scientific concepts, the child does not simply accumulate knowledge—he acquires new psychological tools that radically transform his mental operations: from thinking tied to concrete, fragmented experience to generalised, systematic thinking and, above all, thinking that is conscious of its own processes.

For example, by mastering the mathematical concept of “ratio,” the child does not just learn to solve proportion problems—they begin to perceive quantitative relationships in the world that were previously invisible. Similarly, when they learn historical concepts such as “revolution” or “mode of production,” they develop the ability to critically analyze society beyond common-sense explanations.

This transformation is not automatic: it requires deliberate instruction that reveals the logical relationships between concepts, mediated by social interactions (with teachers and peers) and anchored in the zone of proximal development. Scientific concepts thus have a dual psychological and social function: they are both instruments of cognitive emancipation and levers for critical participation in culture.

In the 1982 Russian critical edition of *Thought and Language*, the original sentence reads: “Осознание приходит через научные понятия” (“Reflexive consciousness comes through scientific concepts”).

According to Vygotsky, everything else is derived from content: types of relationships, forms of organisation of the learning process, methods of learning, communication and cooperation. He advocated the primacy of content over method, arguing that content determines form (method) because scientific concepts (as content) have their own logical structure that requires specific mediations. In his view, the hierarchical structure of scientific concepts requires a method of learning that reveals their internal relationships, which cannot be reduced to mechanical exercises. For this reason, teachers must be guided by the logical nature of the concept itself, as it determines the steps of its conscious assimilation³²).

On the dialectical relationship between content, its structure and

28 Vygotsky, Lev S. *Desenvolvimento mental no processo de aprendizagem coletiva: seleção de artigo* (Mental Development in the Process of Collective Learning: Selected Articles). (1935). São Carlos: Pedro & João, 2024.

29 Elkonin, Daniil Borisovich. *Интеллектуальные возможности младших школьников и содержание обучения* (Intellectual capacities of early elementary students and the content of collective learning). In: PUENTES, Roberto Valdés (Orgs.). *Lev S. Vygotski e a aprendizagem coletiva desenvolvimental: contribuições de D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davydov e V. V. Repkin* (Lev S. Vygotsky and developmental collective learning: Contributions from D. B. Elkonin, V. V. Davydov, and V. V. Repkin). 3ª edição. São Carlos: Pedro & João, 2024.

30 Vygotsky, Lev S. *Pensamento e Linguagem* (Thought and Language). São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2001.

31 Vygotsky, Lev S. *A pré-história da linguagem escrita* (The Prehistory of Written Language). In: Vygotsky, Lev S. *Desenvolvimento mental no processo de aprendizagem coletiva: seleção de artigo* (Mental Development in the Process of Collective Learning: Selected Articles). (1935). São Carlos: Pedro & João, 2024, p. 238.

32 Vygotsky, Lev S. *Pensamento e Linguagem* (Thought and Language). São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2001.

methods of learning, Vygotsky³³ wrote:

“The objective of pedagogical research in this area is to establish the internal structure of school subjects from the child’s developmental perspective and to transform this structure along with the methods of school-based collective learning.” (Emphasis added)

As a practical example, Vygotsky argued that in learning fractions (content), the method cannot be mechanical, but must explore part-whole relationships, following the internal logic of mathematics. This is why he also criticized generic methods for ignoring the essence of content. In *Thought and Language*, he explicitly contrasted the different nature of mathematical (algebra) and linguistic (grammar) concepts. Significantly, he recognised that each conceptual system requires specific methods because its logical structure determines the paths of assimilation.

In the article “On Psychological Systems” (1930), he was more direct in his criticism of methodological standardisation. According to him, applying identical procedures to heterogeneous conceptual domains means ignoring the inherent psychology of each content³⁴.

In an attempt to reconcile didactics with the psychological development of students, Vygotsky formulated the idea of specific methods for different contents, the relationship between the structure of knowledge and its assimilation process, and the inadequacy of universal methods for all disciplines. In the article entitled “The Psychology and Pedagogy of the Handicapped Child” published in the Russian edition of the *Collected Works*, Vygotsky³⁵ somehow asserted that the central problem of didactics is to find the method that corresponds to the psychological nature of the content to be learned.

Vygotsky’s idea encapsulates the core of his cultural-historical theory as applied to education, establishing a revolutionary pedagogical principle for his time (and still relevant today).

Final Considerations

Vygotsky did not develop a ready-made “pedagogy of content,” but rather established theoretical premises that dialectically related content and processes, advocating systematised knowledge as the structural axis of developmental learning.

The basic premise of his proposal is to consider content as a cultural tool of human mental development. According to him, systematised knowledge (school subjects) function as cultural instruments that mediate the development of higher psychological functions—especially theoretical thinking and scientific concepts in early school age.

However, Vygotsky represented a critical strand of content pedagogy—a tradition later developed by scholars such as David Ausubel, Jerome Bruner, Antoni Zabala, Dermeval Saviani, and José Carlos Libâneo. He opposed traditional content pedagogy by arguing that learning is not mere transmission but rather active

appropriation of symbolic tools (language, scientific concepts, etc.). At the same time, he opposed “process-oriented” pedagogy by advocating the dialectical relationship between content and methods. According to him, there is no dichotomy between what learned (content) is and how it is learned (method).

Vygotsky argued that mastering scientific content reorganises thinking because learning new concepts transforms previous ones. Moreover, he maintained that this content must be learned within the zone of proximal development (ZPD)—that is, at the boundary between what students have already mastered and what they can learn through mediation, imitation, and cooperation. From his perspective, schools should provide cognitive challenges that go beyond current development, but with intentional teacher support, peer interaction, and appropriate instructional resources.

According to the author, content pedagogy has helped deconstruct the sacralisation of process by prioritising scientific concepts that promote theoretical and deliberative thinking. However, unlike traditional content-focused approaches—which view knowledge as mere information accumulation—the Vygotskian approach frames it as: (1) a dialectical process (content \square development), and (2) cultural mediation (a tool for transforming consciousness). For example, a teacher helping students learn fractions does not limit instruction to algorithms, but: contextualizes their historical use, poses real-world problems, and facilitates peer debates.

For Vygotsky, pedagogy must be grounded in content—and that content, in turn, must embody a critical, mediated, and developmental approach—breaking with the “banking” model of education. Content should not be an end in itself, but a tool for thinking; instead of vertical transmission, active reconstruction by the learner through mediation; instead of spontaneous concepts, theoretical concepts linked to social practice.

In conclusion, Vygotsky makes a unique contribution by proposing a third pedagogical path—one that rejects both the rigidity of traditional content-centered education and the spontaneity of radical active pedagogies or those that are exclusively process-centered—and shows that systematised content, when combined with social mediation, becomes indispensable for the intellectual and subjective emancipation of students. His proposal directly attacks both didactic models based on traditional content pedagogy and active methodologies, arguing that the ideal model lies neither in processes nor in content alone, but in their dialectical synthesis. Mere practical activity, divorced from scientific conceptual systems, fails to promote the development of higher psychological functions ■

33 Vygotsky, Lev S. O problema da aprendizagem coletiva e do desenvolvimento mental na idade escolar (The problem of collective learning and mental development in school age). In: Vygotsky, Lev S. *Desenvolvimento mental no processo de aprendizagem coletiva: seleção de artigos* (Mental development in the process of collective learning: Selected articles). (1935). São Carlos: Pedro & João, 2024, p. 75.

34 Vygotsky, Lev S. *Pensamento e Linguagem* (Thought and Language). São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2001.

35 Vygotsky, Lev S. *Obras Completas*. (Complete Works). Tomo V. Moscou: Pedagogika, 1983, p. 204.

An interview of Raquel
Varela and Roberto Leher
with Carlos
Fernández Liria*

"Teaching is a relationship, and children and young people have been convinced not to learn."

We interviewed Carlos Fernández Liria¹, one of the most original and thought-provoking thinkers in education. In this interview, he attacks the notion of competencies, presented with a leftist veneer that he considers "delusional," questions a school emptied of scientific subjects, and recalls how all this aims to disqualify students (depriving them of the possibility of a profession) to serve as a precarious, flexible, and alienated workforce that characterizes present capitalist society. He argues that school is not for feeding moral preachings, whether of citizenship or entrepreneurship, as the intellectuals of capital want. He advocates that teachers return to fighting for their academic and teaching freedom, affirming their status as intellectual organizers of science, art, and culture at all levels – against governments, corporations, the OECD, the World Bank, and UNESCO, which turn schools into laboratories for adapting young people to the market, destroying the teaching profession. He is a staunch advocate for a transformative, egalitarian, and democratic school system that is public, free, and universal, truly committed to the systematic rigor of teaching and learning processes capable of ensuring the historical and critical education of new generations.

* Carlos Fernández Liria (born 1959) is a Spanish philosopher and professor at the Complutense University of Madrid. Interview conducted via Zoom by Raquel Varela and Roberto Leher in February 2025. Raquel Varela is a professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of the Nova University of Lisbon (FCSH-UNL), a historian and researcher. Roberto Leher is a professor of public policy in education and former rector of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ)

Raquel Varela (RV) Carlos, in your book *Escuela y Libertad* (Ed. Akal, 2024)¹, you argue that school is not a daycare or a social assistance setting, but rather a place of teaching and learning. You also state that school should not be left-wing or right-wing, but a state school. In Portugal and many other countries, the left, which calls itself progressive, advocates, for example, the teaching of citizenship, as if the historical struggles for civil, political, and social rights were not systematic concerns of history, sociology, and philosophy—disciplines that are losing space in the curriculum to the so-called teaching of citizenship. The far right, in turn, condemns the subject of citizenship, thus establishing a superficial controversy that obscures the emptying of the aforementioned disciplines of History, Sociology, and Philosophy. How does your book discuss these different views?

Carlos F. Liria (CFL): This latest book is an attempt to create a tool for the left to think about an appropriate education programme. The idea came from our intervention in the Education Group of the Sumar coalition. There was an education group we participated in, and we were horrified because they were trying to develop a left-wing program – creating a left-wing school! We tried to make them understand that state schools were an invention of the working classes that had to be defended tooth and nail, but that there was no need to defend the school as left-wing. What the left has to do is defend state schools and defend the plurality that characterizes these state schools. Because if the left falls into the trap of trying to defend a left-wing school, it is actually opting for a model that is very good for the right, because if the left creates left-wing schools, the right creates right-wing schools. And then Opus Dei can create an Opus Dei school, and Jehovah’s Witnesses too.

And this is the model that in Spain is called a “concerted school” (*escuela concertada*). This school has private management but is financed by the state. The left must defend a public-school model against the concerted school, whether left or right. (...) So, if someone has Opus Dei parents, they will put their children in an Opus Dei school with gender segregation, making us believe that the whole world belongs to Opus Dei, in such a way that the child will think like those in Opus Dei, will have Opus Dei teachers and Opus Dei classmates, and this is locking the children in an ideological, also totalitarian, prison, (...) and the young people completely confuse the limits of the universe with the limits of Opus Dei. (...) What we want with state school is to protect the right of children to free themselves from their parents to free themselves from the sectarian ideological dictatorship of family indoctrination they receive in their family, and this right can only be guaranteed by the state school.

RV: In your books, including your discussion on the teaching of philosophy, you go a little further and argue that there is, so to speak, a universal knowledge, enlightenment, and understanding – teaching as a universal legacy of the Enlightenment referenced in the idea of universalism. As you say, this also goes against the thinking that has remained dominant in the parliamentary left, which is the idea of the isolation of identities, of the fragmentation of social subjects, as if society were an aggregate of individuals each with their own particular knowledge.

Roberto Leher (RL): Carlos, you speak of a disinterested school,

which is precisely not a doctrinaire school. Does your reflection resemble Gramsci’s elaboration on the disinterested (or formative) school?

CFL: Absolutely. I believe that the main right of a citizen is to know that objective things exist, that there is a horizon of objectivity. Of course, nobody has the truth in their hands. Nobody has received divine enlightenment. But in the public sphere, things are discussed – debated and counter-argued. And there is an effect of objectivity. Not everything is relative; this idea that everything is relative is a postmodern ideology that suits neoliberal flexibility.

I always tell my students this: when Einstein wrote his famous formula on the board: $E = mc^2$, that is, energy (E) equals mass (m) times the speed of light (c) squared, a student raised his hand and said: “And what is that good for? Will it be used?” And Einstein supposedly replied: “I hope not. But it’s beautiful!” Subsequently it served a purpose, and also an atrocity – to build atomic bombs. But in principle, science must aim to know in order to understand in a disinterested way. As you stated, Roberto, as Gramsci said.

There is a scientific objectivity to which young people in school are entitled – disinterested knowledge. This is not the definition of philosophical knowledge; it is the philosophical definition of knowledge in general. Disinterested theoretical knowledge in general.

RV: In 2018, the Essential Learnings Law in Portugal², which is the same one applied in several countries due to the influence of the OECD, EU, etc., aimed to reduce the curriculum, fragmented and distorted the History curriculum and, conversely, offered alienating guidelines on how teachers should teach children not to be racist, to promote tolerance and good coexistence among peoples. I tell my students: “So we’re not going to teach Nazism and imperialism, because they aren’t good coexistence between peoples?” It’s like changing the teaching of history into a moral sermon. An allegedly progressive mass. Should I teach the history of colonialism and imperialism, contextualizing that biology, and its so-called scientific pretension about the differences between the black brain and the white brain, were functional for imperialism to colonize peoples? No, I must teach students that they should be good people, tolerant, and not racist, as if racism could be overcome by moral preaching, a reality detached from imperialism.

CFL: Absolutely true. The same thing happened to us here. These citizenship education subjects started to emerge. They say the function of the school is to form good citizens. I believe that’s not the role of the school. School has to ensure knowledge, and that has an effect on the formation of good citizens. We are teachers in schools or universities, not preachers. We leave that to religious sects or communities that, in one way or another, have their ethical prescriptions. We, mathematics teachers, I think we have to explain mathematics, and that is very formative. That’s very good for having good citizens. A History teacher or professor has to explain history. A Philosophy teacher has to explain philosophy. No teacher needs to transform their subject into

¹ Co-written with Javier Mestre, *Escuela y Libertad – Argumentos para defender la enseñanza frente a políticas educativas y discursos pedagógicos demenciales* (Ed. Akal, 2024).

² Decree-Law No. 55/2018, of July 6.

some kind of indoctrination or moral training for their students. That kind of training is done by religious sects or families at home. At school, students will learn that there is a disinterested perspective, an objectivity that transcends different relativisms, different familiar, sectarian, religious viewpoints, etc. No, we must not lose sight of the connection between state school and objectivity.

These subjects are, in fact, a fatal trap. It started with the formation of good citizens and ended up being replaced by subjects that, in reality, aim to create good customers and good businesspeople, good entrepreneurs. The subject of Education for Citizenship in Spain, when the right wing began to govern, was replaced by the formation of an entrepreneurial spirit, entrepreneurship.

In other words, it's no longer about forming citizens aware of their rights, but entrepreneurs, being flexible in the jungle of the job market. It's about forming a human capital that is functional for the needs of the business market – an entrepreneur is a self-employed businessman, but in reality, he is nothing more than a worker who has lost his rights. They are employees who have no union or professional association behind them, nor a collective agreement to protect them. And, for that, they must have a very flexible life. If a company needs you on the other side of the world, you must be able to go to the other side of the world, regardless of whether you have certain rights as a citizen – those rights disappear. You simply become flexible human material at the service of business needs, which, incidentally, are completely insane business needs – it's a suicidal job market. A disposable job market that transforms state schools into disposable schools through these subjects.

RV: Leonor, the daughter of the King and Queen of Spain, went to study at a prestigious school in England that prohibited the use of cell phones or iPads, even during recess, and the curriculum was unified until Year 13, with greater emphasis on exact sciences, humanities, and social sciences in the morning and experimental teaching, arts, sports, theater, and community involvement in the afternoon. After three years, she had to take a critical philosophical essay exam. The ruling classes put their children in this type of school and, at the same time, flood state schools with iPads and cell phones, where children are being prepared to operate machines.

CFL: In Spain, we experience this in a frightening way. The most recent example is something called DUA (*Diseño Universal para el Aprendizaje*, or Universal Design for Learning), an educational system developed by the Bill Gates Foundation. It's no coincidence that Microsoft has a lot to do with it. It's the most postmodern and neoliberal conception of school imaginable. Each student, they say, is a different world; there's no need to pay attention to diversity because we are all different. Diversity is the norm. There is nothing common, and therefore, the ideal would be for each student to be in front of a computer with an algorithm that adapts to their special needs and mentality, but which, in reality, moulds the student's profile, enclosing them in a bubble and separating them from the rest of the class.

The teacher's role would be simply to walk around among the students to see if they have any problems with their comput-

ers. In other words, the teacher effectively disappears. I can't conceive of anything more dystopian and crazier. Their parents desperate, because our children won't stop consuming Instagram and TikTok and arrive at school and get locked in a computer bubble in front of a screen! To such an extent that they no longer have contact with other students or teachers.

There are always new pedagogical “methods,” trying to reinvent the wheel. However, what do the best studies and research say about what works best in school? That the best approach is a teacher who explains knowledge by interacting with their students, that is, what is usually called exposition, a teacher who simultaneously dialogues with students about the content they are teaching (...) and without cell phones or computers. We spend a fortune replacing schools, but they are nothing special: with a blackboard and a piece of chalk, a teacher can be sufficient and more than sufficient to teach mathematics, history, philosophy, or languages.

Meanwhile, the elites send their sons and daughters to old-fashioned schools because they know perfectly well that they are good. This is because, naturally, private schools [aimed at the elites] did not obey the orders of the World Bank and the World Trade Organization.

RL: In the OECD and also in the World Bank, it is possible to observe a central axis in the construction of educational policy, which is the right to learning. But is it possible to learn without teaching, without teachers, without intentional directive guidance or instruction? Another point is the existence of think tanks, such as the World Bank, whose ideas about teacher training and the nature of teaching reach the university, spreading the notion that teachers and professors do not need to carry out intellectual work of organizing culture, of intentionally organizing culture, of critical dialogue with their students.

CFL: I totally agree, Roberto. In the book on school or barbarism, we analyse the plans made by the OECD, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and UNESCO since the 1970s, at the primary, secondary, and university levels (Bologna, for example). The most important documents forged in this sense at the OECD are those from the 1990s. Capitalists realized that there were billions of dollars/euros sitting idle that had no commercial profitability and began a process of commodification of education that hasn't stopped. It started in primary and secondary education. It became very clear that it was necessary to transform the Enlightenment school, committed to the socialization of knowledge, into a kind of primary education to prepare students for the job market. So, what's the point of degrees? And for that, it was also necessary to modify the university, making courses increasingly shorter.

People would graduate with a moderate level of education, trained to work in anything, to be flexible, and to be willing, as they say, to engage in “lifelong learning”. All this means you have no title – qualification, profession – to defend in the market, because you simply are nothing. Everyone has to adapt to what is demanded at all times, according to the whims of the job market, right? And then it was international organizations, such as the OECD, the World Bank, and the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade³), that began working on the concept of a

³ Predecessor to the WTO.

school that would teach not knowledge, but skills and abilities. It was the Bologna Process. What was called European convergence – the propaganda was that the university was being put at the service of society. But whenever the school is placed at the service of *this society*, it is effectively placing itself at the service of *this society*, that is, at the service of the business world.

The goal of putting the university at the service of society was to put it at the service of the market, that is, to commodify it. And, for that, the entire network of degrees and academic qualifications had to be dismantled. All that feudal rigidity, they said... Departments and professorships were disintegrated into research units, whose members have to go to the market to sell their labour every four or five years. Furthermore, you don't receive public money unless you have previously obtained private funding. If Bayer, for example, puts 10 euros into your research project, then the State will give you 100 euros, because it's a project that has private interest for a pharmaceutical company. Which means that Bayer is receiving 100€ in state funding for this research, that is, 100€ of taxpayers' money, plus the researchers who will work at Bayer and will be paid with taxpayers' money, that is, with the money of other workers. It's a masterstroke to use public universities as ATMs so that companies can siphon off public money and finance themselves with taxpayers' money. This puts money intended for education at the service of the business world, both at the secondary and higher education levels. It's a plan that has existed since the 1970s, but it only began to be implemented in a truly serious way in the 1990s.

RL: Today in Brazil, 60% of new students starting higher education begin their studies through distance learning, and the majority of those enrolled are from the working class. This represents a process of concentration and significant monopolization of the education of the working class. There are approximately 2,500 higher education institutions in Brazil. However, only 10 groups controlled by investment funds and with shares traded on stock exchanges, including the NASDAQ in New York, hold 60% of student enrolments in higher education. There is a monopolization of the education of the working class by these companies, and I believe this is a very important point to consider when reflecting on the meaning of public education. Could Gramsci's ideas about the unitary school, which rejects the separation between those who think and those who execute, help us reflect on the university?

CFL: The best way for the market to get rid of all those—professional associations or unions—that can control it is to say that there are no more degrees. This fundamentally happened with the Bologna Process. The ultimate goal was that there would be no university degrees. There was talk of a card with a magnetic stripe where each person would have a personalized curriculum of the courses, degrees, and master's degrees they had taken in their life. Each worker would have to negotiate their working conditions face-to-face with their curriculum with employers; in other words, it's a way for union struggle to disappear.

RL: Is it possible that the left would defend a project like this? What is happening?

CFL: The issue is that this commodification of the university has been disguised as a wonderful educational revolution with leftist pedagogical connotations. There would be no more dictatorship, no more authority of the professor. These things we've heard

since 1998 simply mean that international organizations intended to get rid of professors because there are supposedly pedagogical methods that no longer require them. Or else they are trained in these new pedagogies (gamification, projects, etc.) that are apparently the latest fad of the left. This comes disguised as anti-authoritarianism, as anti-discipline.

Everything is turned upside down because, to begin with, it presupposes that school was a disciplinary institution of surveillance and punishment. A kind of Foucauldian total institution, on the same level as barracks, asylums, or prisons. School was not that. School was the opposite. It was a great achievement of the working classes, a beautiful institution. The best contribution of the working classes to the history of humanity, the right of children to free themselves from their parents and to know scientific objectivity, and to know that the world extends beyond the limits of their family. In the famous Pink Floyd song from the album *The Wall*, where it says "Hey, teacher, leave them kids alone," the school was presented as a penitentiary institution. We're already starting off on the wrong foot. It's very easy for some gentlemen who call themselves pedagogues to appear destroying this disciplinary institution, to remove the figure of the professor and academic authority from the path.

RV: For us, as for a lawyer or a doctor, academic freedom is freedom over the real of work. It has already been almost completely destroyed in high school education, and now they are doing it in universities, with the State determining course content, essential learning, and curricular flexibility. And the replacement of career paths, of the professorship, with managerial professors. For this, an entire anonymous evaluation system was structured without any dialogue being foreseen, in the form of "the customer is always right." This opened space for grade inflation, turning the university into a company selling certifications (the courses do not correspond to real knowledge). The postmodern left, which denounces the school as a space of class domination, defends these mechanisms as "defence of the student," instead of defending pre-Bologna courses, democratic management, and career paths. Furthermore, they defend that research should follow what the EU dictates, the 2030 Agenda, and the content to be investigated, opening the flank to the far right to determine what is taught. It is not normal for the UN agenda to dictate what a university professor does, no matter how progressive they may be.

CFL: Since the 1990s, the teacher has become an enemy, a suspicious, lazy, criminal, corrupt, and, in any case, authoritarian person. This [post-modern] left would be there to defend us from the teacher or professor. Thus, the backbone of the state school system is mortally wounded – without academic freedom and job security, without the guarantee that teachers are effectively public employees, there is no state school. And this goes against flexibility, which is a word that the left has also bought into. What we want is not this flexibility, but what is called academic freedom. For this, stability in public service is necessary, which must be guaranteed because a teacher or professor cannot be dismissed while exercising their profession. They do not need to comply with any government plan because they have academic freedom. This academic freedom must be defended as something sacred. Hence this idea of transforming the teacher/professor into a character suspected of some kind of crime.

Secondly, there's the idea that if the school is doing poorly, it's because the teachers/professors don't know how to do their

job and therefore need to be taught by pedagogues. This is also presented as a very leftist notion – you have to put the student at the centre, they say. But of course, putting the student at the centre means removing the teacher from the centre. And above all, eliminating the distance between those who know and those who don't. And this seems very democratic, very good, but for the school it's disastrous. So, naturally, if there's no longer a difference between teacher and student, the teaching and learning processes fall apart. In this supposed equality, the best thing is for everyone to give very good grades, so we look very good in research and prestigious school and university rankings. But, of course, this is the end of academic freedom. Academic freedom must be based on respect for the figure of the professor, and what we have completely lost is respect for the figure of the professor. It was a preconceived plan.

RL: The far-right program in Florida and Texas advocates for schools to be institutions subordinate to the family. Trump's program argues that in the election of school principals only families vote, without the participation of teachers and students, and that parents can freely hire and fire teachers. Meanwhile, in the districts of these states, “families” demanded the removal of 5,600 book titles between 2022 and 2023, including authors such as Tolstoy, Hemingway, García Márquez... As we can see, the weakening of the supposedly authoritarian role of teachers brings “progressive” thought closer to the proposals of the far right in the United States.

CFL: It's the complete opposite of what state schools should be, that is, a system, an institution to free citizens from the totalitarianism and ideological indoctrination of the family. State schools must be safe from family dictatorship, because that's why they were invented. Otherwise, religious sects, or others to which the parents belong, own the children until they turn 18. This is simply destroying the spirit of what this public institution we call school means. And the key is academic freedom. It is fundamental that professors and teachers can truly have academic freedom, which means that they do not depend on any private sect, any private company, or any governmental control, any governmental ideological control.

RV: Many intellectuals no longer want to be teachers or professors. On the other hand, if the teacher is boring, if he is a bit monotonous, distracted, makes a mistake, he is already a bad teacher. The class must be a performance. This is the first issue. Children are inattentive – with the use of cell phones that make them flexible and (supposedly) multifocal. The second is that the teacher is in a degrading position. Children don't read. It's like a destruction of productive capacity, a war, that destroys educational cultural work. Many people are demotivated with the profession because this process of expropriating children's knowledge also means expropriating the teacher. Teaching is a relationship, and children and young people have been convinced not to learn.

CFL: I know many disappointed professors and teachers, abandoning the profession, increasingly depressed, even undergoing treatment for depression, taking pills to cope until they can't anymore and change professions. Their work is far from being respected. It's constantly said that the content is the least important thing because it's already on the internet, which leaves the teacher practically without any function, because they can already look for them on the internet. And then the teacher becomes just a kind of trainer who also has to perform. In principle,

a math teacher should be prepared to teach math. Or a language teacher – they can't perform a circus act while the students learn the language from a YouTuber on the computer.

RV: So, a school that talks more and more about inclusion excludes more and more people.

CFL: School also functioned relatively well as a social elevator, as an equalizer of social differences, where rich and poor are treated equally. On the other hand, the more discredited the state school system becomes, the greater the gap with private education. Thus, each elite aspires to have its own school.

RV: And that means segregation. If the school is in the city centre, it has one program, but if it's in a suburb, it has another. They call this curriculum adaptation. The children have watered-down subjects.

RL: Gramsci said that the more types of schools there are, the less democratic a society is. A society that has schools for poor children, children from working-class backgrounds, separate schools for urban and rural areas, is not a truly democratic society.

CFL: Gramsci was right. I once jokingly suggested, because I knew it was unattainable, that anyone holding public office, from the Prime Minister to the highest-ranking city councillor or the cabinet minister's son, should send their children to a state school assigned by lottery within a reasonable range. Because, of course, if what happens is that the most impoverished social classes, where students don't have space to study, can't be helped by their parents because the parents are working, if all this human contingent goes to state school, while the middle and upper classes go to subsidized, private schools, that's pure segregation and pure racism. In the end, it becomes social racism where the poor experience a completely different educational reality than the wealthy classes. Let's look at the case of Finland. Why does it work so well? There are very few private schools. About 90% of the population attends state school.

RV: My hypothesis is that Finland borders Russia and has a very small population; they need well-trained personnel to survive as a country. In Madrid or Lisbon, you can send thousands to degraded schools because there are specialized private schools to train leaders.

CFL: I think they'll have plenty of money for education because they can afford certain luxuries that we should also be able to aspire to. But, of course, to begin with, don't segregate between private and state schools.

RV: There are two widespread ideas: one is that school is to help people find jobs – to prepare them for the job market – and the second is that nothing can be democratic and of high quality if it is mass-produced. Raymond Williams argued the opposite. If there is no scale, millions, there is no quality. There are only geniuses of philosophy in Germany because there was a lot of philosophical elaboration in that country. Ultimately, not even private education will be of high quality if there is no quality in public education, because there is no scale.

CFL: I completely agree. Public healthcare has worked much better than private healthcare, and state schools much better than private schools. In fact, when I was a high school teacher,

the public system was much better. State universities have much more prestige than private universities.

RL: It's very interesting that in the schools of revolutions, like in the Paris Commune, workers practiced a school of knowledge where children, for example, not only had to learn what production is, but also how to produce it themselves. Therefore, in the revolutionary process, there were workshops with Manet "on the production process" of art for working-class children, and also workshops where children had to learn the technical and scientific fundamentals of the production process so that the children of the working class could be the leaders and not the followers in the production process.

There is another very interesting point in your reflection on objectivity. Objectivity does not mean ethical neutrality. Racism is inseparable from the formation of capitalism and imperialism, and this allows us to better understand the foundations of racism in today's world. In Brazil there was the "school without political parties" movement, and in the US they persecute Marxist teachers and professors accused of lacking objectivity and being indoctrinators.

The critique of racism is scientific. Biology shows us very forcefully that races do not exist in the biological sense. Race is a political construct. There are no biological races in the human species; there is polymorphism. And there is also a historical, philosophical, and ethical education about the meaning of racism. Therefore, racism is part of the agenda of science, ethics, and philosophy, where we can develop knowledge that radically critiques the foundations of racism. It is necessary to mention that very recently, until the 19th century, and later with Nazism, there was a construction of "racism" based on "scientific evidence," which supposedly was science. The Latino and Black population was considered less intelligent, and the population of European origin was more intelligent. Well, it was science that criticized these foundations; it was the vigorous, ethical, and objective production of science that did so. It is about fighting for good science and not for bad science with scientific fraud, and I believe that this is a fundamental point for the left. We have a historical interest as a class in developing rigorous knowledge in school because rigorous science has an ethical commitment to approaching the truth. As Gramsci said, truth is revolutionary.

CFL: I agree. In other words, I've been saying that schools shouldn't educate in a moral catechism of any kind, neither left nor right. It's true, science has moral and political effects. Does scientific rigor have moral and political effects on the formation of citizens? Yes, of course. That's to begin with what I said, because, naturally, to be racist you need ridiculous scientific foundations, because you can't defend racism from a scientific position. Science has always introduced a political tension into this world that had something to do with a proto-Enlightenment. From the very first moment we have to think, for example, when Meno's slave deduces the Pythagorean theorem in front of Meno and Socrates, and he deduces it on his own, I think the question is posed from the very first moment: whether, in the face of the Pythagorean theorem, slaves and citizens are equal. It has an immediate moral effect, an important political effect. The fact that, in the face of scientific objectivity, we are all equal: the rich, the poor, men, women, black people, white people. This, in a way, introduces into this world a political tension that the Enlightenment and the French Revolution called equality.

RL: There's a very beautiful passage in Brecht's text about Galileo where he talks about the knowledge he was developing. And he says that he wished the butcher's son also had access to that knowledge.

RV: The only thing I wanted to add on this issue is that even when I look at History curricula, the curriculum says that good coexistence between peoples must be taught, and this entails a double problem. The first is that Nazism is not good coexistence between peoples. And that is history. The second is that it places school not only as a place of moral preaching, but in contradiction with the truth, because children, when they leave school, are not in good coexistence, because it is a society deeply divided by social classes and brutal inequalities. So, it's as if the teacher is called upon to lie. Children need to emancipate themselves. In fact, it's the opposite: to emancipate themselves, they need a clash with good coexistence, with the dominant classes. They have to confront the bourgeoisie to achieve good coexistence. So, it's as if the History teacher were a moralist preaching social resignation. It's not just obscurantist; it has a purpose that seems very, very progressive, but in reality, it's the opposite. The teacher becomes an actor. Not someone who tries to understand history in its complexities, but someone who becomes a propagandist.

CFL: When you explain history rigorously and objectively, you learn to form politically and morally. When we understand the true causes that were at stake in each battle, in each war, that shapes us politically. But what distorts it is the catechism of good manners, inspired by I don't know what ideological program from I don't know what party that won the elections ■

Translation by António Simões do Paço

BOOK REVIEW

Manuel António
do Carmo Ferreiro*

School or barbarism: a second warning

Liria, Carlos F., Fernández, Olga G.,
Ferrández, Enrique G. Escuela o barbarie:
entre el neoliberalismo salvaje y el delirio
de la izquierda (Nueva edición actualizada y
aumentada). Madrid: Ediciones Akal, 2023.

KEYWORDS

education
public schooling
educational policy.

1. Introduction

The book by Carlos Fernández Liria, Olga García Fernández and Enrique Galindo Ferrández has, as its very title¹ indicates, two main objectives: first, to expose the conditions of the current educational landscape that make public education, on the one hand, a continuous and progressive institutional project of failure and, on the other hand, a cog in the system of exploitation and precarity of capitalism; and second, to point out to political left movements the various ways in which their educational policies have, in fact, betrayed their values and ideological origins by seeking some kind of compromise with the principles of the market.

Throughout the book, the three authors write in a strong and unambiguous tone, attacking neoliberal thought–turbocapitalism–and the corresponding commodification, exploitation, and oppression of various dimensions of the life of the working class related to education, without sparing criticism of its active participants, such as non-governmental organisations that pressure for changes that predominantly serve capital and supranational blocks that implement them, but also other agents who, seemingly opposed to *capitalist savagery*, end up participating in the process the authors describe as the destruction of public education.

2. The three sections of the book: the origin of public education, current diagnosis and call for resistance

The book can be roughly divided into three sections: an analysis of the origin–historical and ideological–of public education as a republican project (chapters 1 and 2); a detailed diagnosis of the conditions that led to the current–and momentum–of dismantling education in liberal societies (chapters 3 to 7); and a proposal for action and reflection to try to stop or, at least, slow down this movement of invasion and colonisation by the market, without abandoning the dream of returning education to its mission and *raison d’être* (chapters 8 to 10 and the final section titled “Conclusiones inacabadas: la inercia

¹ In English: “School or barbarism: between savage neoliberalism and the delirium of the left”

hacia la desaparición de la escuela”, which means “unfinished conclusions: the inertia towards the disappearance of public education”².

However, with the division proposed here, the intention is not to lead the reader to think that the book consists of a simple linear narrative or a technical brochure for diagnosing the educational machine; on the contrary, the authors make, across all chapters, a huge and necessary effort to expose the complex network of connections between politics, society, education, and the market. What follows will present the main nodes of this network.

2.1. The Enlightenment dream and the origin of public education

The first two chapters present the Enlightenment dream of a society where freedom of thought and fundamental rights are guaranteed, and where humanity achieves progress. For individuals to reach this freedom of thought, the Kantian majority (*Mündigkeit*), it was essential that there be an appropriate, public, universal education separated from the particular interests of society (such as the church, business, and politics), whose function was to transmit the knowledge produced and accumulated by humanity up to that point: only by providing individuals with the (scientific) contents acquired by previous generations could they then think for themselves and, consequently, become free. For this reason, the authors claim, in opposition to the analysis Althusser makes about the role of public education as an *ideological state apparatus*, that public education is, in fact, the only antidote against ideological control, since in it there is no transmission of ideologies, but a transmission of contents regardless of ideology, i.e., the contents are the focus of the educational experience, and the values of the individuals are accessory, something to learn how to live with. It is precisely because the values of the members of the school community are outside the control of the government and school administrative bodies that it is impossible to effectively use public education as an ideological apparatus of the state.

However, since these functions of public education would create conditions for individuals to achieve rational and political emancipation, and consequently threaten the bourgeoisie and the liberal model they put in motion, the Enlightenment school project had to be contained, slowed down, and defeated. Since the French Revolution—which the authors present as the defeat of the Enlightenment dream at the hands of the bourgeoisie class, mistakenly considered by Marxists to be its protagonist—public education has been the target of numerous attacks in order to allow the market logic to prevail and not be contested by a humanity that could, collectively, be rationally emancipated.

2.2. Current diagnosis: the colonisation of education by the market

The following five chapters map the strategic attacks the market has launched and continues to launch on education, from preschool to higher education. For this purpose, the authors present the contours of the global commodification of education, which occurs in three fronts: adapting training to market needs, educating individuals about their role as conscious consumers,

and the progressive privatisation of education. In practice, when talking about adapting curricula to the opportunities of the labor market, the result is a content emptying; when talking about forming citizens who are conscious consumers, the result is a set of behaviors, allied with *greenwashing* tactics, that allow large economic groups to control—through the media—public opinion regarding what is (morally) *good* or *bad* to consume; and, when talking about opening space for private competition in education, often referencing the low quality of public education, or when defending initiatives like the right to choose the type of education for one’s children, not only does it undermine the credibility of public education—an institution that, despite all budget cuts, methodological impositions, and other threats, has successfully made a huge effort to preserve scientific progress in the collective human ideology—but it also destroys the republican, democratic, anti-tyrannical root of public education. When, moreover, talking about *democratising education*, in the sense of reconciling the democratisation of public education (which means placing the necessary conditions for its rational constitution in a state of law within everyone’s reach, i.e., the conditions for creating, maintaining, and participating in the public sphere) with economic rationality (which means the set of principles governing the functioning, discourse, and action of private interests), both democratisation and education are perverted so that the expression *democratising education* means placing the necessary conditions for the satisfaction of private sector needs—and nothing more. In other words, what gets democratised is, above all, ignorance; otherwise, education serves mainly to transmit technical-labor knowledge that allows the dominant class to perpetuate its social control.

But for this selective transmission to be implemented without generating opposition, it needs a justification based—at least apparently—on the objectivity of science. To this theme, the authors dedicate the fourth and fifth chapters, exposing multiple pseudo-scientific strategies serving the dismantlement of education: the attack on said traditional teaching, described as mechanical, rigid, and unappealing to students, which is actually one way of focusing education on content—contrary to student-centered teaching, which claims to adapt to student needs but whose only way to do so is by lowering standards of expectation; the conception of schooling as a total (and totalitarian) process accompanying various dimensions of the individual—not only scientific and cognitive, but also psycho-emotional and moral—transforming it ultimately into an efficient future worker with the necessary coping mechanisms to stay operational, but not with the intellectual tools needed to criticise and modify the political and ideological conditions that produce the material conditions forcing that coping; the continuous (artificial) infantilisation of individuals, corresponding to a *docilisation*—no longer of the bodies, but—of the minds of the 21st-century workers; the rising precarity—through salary cuts and freezes under the guise of economic crises, excessive bureaucracy under the guise of digitalisation, etc.—and the persecution of teachers through the defamation of the teaching profession in the media, portraying it as inherently lazy, incapable of adapting to changes, and too comfortable in a place of social impunity; and an entire set of ideological techniques transforming (the environments of) schools into (environments of) companies, as well as transforming the individual into a self-project in constant reinvention, shaping them from

² Ibid.

compulsory education to a logic of exploitation and subjection to the whims and demands of the market.

Given this, more or less hidden, market influence on how education processes occur, it is clear that this is not a localised phenomenon but a generalised one—many considerations can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to areas like health and justice, essential for the development of a state of law. It is then not surprising that universities have not remained untouched by the turbocapitalist whirlwind that turns everything into capital to be exploited (including, and especially, the so-called *human capital*). Chapters six and seven show how European policies regarding higher education sought to adapt universities to the labor market. To guarantee funding, status, and relevance, universities focused on what could bring a greater return—as if, once again, the acquisition of knowledge were something strange and uncomfortable that had to be negotiated, diluted, or made pleasant—to students: the employability of their courses. The great problem here is that the employability of a course is much more dependent on the aforementioned market whims than on the objective scientific knowledge transmitted within it. Thus, many decisions made by universities (and in their name), by both right-wing and left-wing individuals, constituted steps toward sacrificing the objectivity of scientific knowledge at the altar of the market. Among other measures, they sought to: promote in students the capacity to adapt to new situations, instead of the humility and patience inherent in a genuine scientific attitude; shift from a system of public competitions (open to anyone) to a closed-door evaluation system by *expert panels*, effectively privatising the evaluation of professors and research centers; homogenise and shorten curricula to an international standard, without, in the end, guaranteeing the time for maturation and consolidation of the necessary scientific perspective for a deep contribution to human knowledge (see that courses like Law or Medicine keep resisting the reduction to the usual three plus two, precisely due to their scientific rigor).

Faced with this desolating diagnosis, according to which neoliberalism has metastasized into virtually all sectors of education, the authors acknowledge major defeats, blaming right-wing policies for obvious reasons, but also—and perhaps more sharply—left-wing policies that, between trying to keep faithful to their ideological origins and promising to defend public interests against private greed, not only failed to defend public education but actively participated in its fragmentation. However, the authors do mention: there are those who fight, who resist the turbocapitalist incursions, despite all difficulties. Therefore, it is—at least for now—not time to give up and resign. It is, as in all times of oppression and repression, time to fight for what has been lost.

2.3. Call for resistance: notes for a *less worse* future

What path should education take so that the future is not what the book's authors have warned us about for the second time? In the last three chapters, the authors discuss principles of action—and a few specific measures—that will allow us to reverse the present educational situation. In particular, the authors reflect on the role of knowledge in education, in the organisation of society and in the formation of that rationality which, returning to Kant, constitutes the passage to majority for individuals.

Scientific and objective knowledge must return to the center of educational activity. For this to happen, the so-called educational sciences must aspire to the same scientific rigor as other disciplines, and their professionals (those seriously committed to defending public education) must be involved in the process of reevaluating the role of pedagogy in creating educational strategies. Public education must be protected from socioeconomic realities, so that teaching does not replicate and perpetuate its biases, nor be *democratised* by the market. It is necessary, in order to break the trend of mercantilisation in education, to give philosophy a prominent place; philosophy is the discipline that questions knowledge itself, and in doing so, proposes to be interested in what things *are*, rather than what they *allow*. This inaugurates or deepens an appreciation for truth, beauty, justice, among others, but also—not surprisingly—for knowledge.

In Chapter 10, the authors present a minimal proposal—much more modest than what they would ideally like to propose, but the bare minimum to halt the suicidal trajectory of education—which they describe as *the return of what was taken away*: reflecting on the various attacks identified throughout the book, this proposal does not defend more than the reversal of those very measures that implemented the attacks. Thus, the authors advocate for the urgent need to: suffocate subsidised education, restricting it economically and legally, forcing it to hire teachers who passed the public education admission process but didn't get a position, etc.; combat the widespread notion that schools should be able to solve all societal problems (for example, it's crucial to clarify that making young people *more employable* does not solve the structural unemployment problem); defend the principle of specialisation, according to which teachers must be specialists in what they teach, and should teach exactly what they are specialists in—instead of producing specialists in teaching who, by chance, also have training in a subject; strengthen orientation offices, whose work makes it possible to address the complexity of the public school environment; stop romanticising the Finnish model, whose positive results did not prevent it from being replaced by competence-based education. The authors also note that, like other previously presented proposals, some of these measures could be implemented at zero cost, so potential criticisms regarding their economic viability are ineffective.

The final section, “Conclusiones inacabadas: la inercia hacia la desaparición de la escuela” (“unfinished conclusions: the inertia towards the disappearance of public education”), contains considerations and outpourings from the authors about the relationships between politics, economy, philosophy, and education. In their defense of public education, they reference Socrates' speech before the court that condemned him to death. The Greek philosopher questioned his audience whether it was worthwhile to defend life at the cost of losing what makes life worthwhile; for the authors, the question is whether it is worthwhile to try to defend an evolution of public education at the cost of what makes it public and republican. And as a public and republican institution, education must be conservative precisely so that it does not lose its capacity to educate individuals. And for these individuals to be able to understand the world they live in, it is necessary that they have access to scientific and historical knowledge produced by previous generations and preserved by educational institutions.

The warning repeats: to effectively defend the public school, it is necessary for the left—tendentally oriented towards progress and

change—to reflect on what, truly, is worth conserving: because, amidst so many defeats and amputations suffered by the Enlightenment dream, there is still much to conserve.

3. Conclusion

The authors of this book do not want to waste time or energy trying to tip toe around the issue, nor compromise their position by placing themselves halfway between those they consider responsible for the destruction of education and the betrayal of left-wing values. For these reasons, the tone of the text is accusatory, aggressive, and displays a rejection of any kind of false moderation.

The text seems to have the same reflections—or, at least, very similar—on the same themes at different moments, which, in some way, makes the chapter titles and subtitles less meaningful, and sometimes gives the feeling of a certain thematic repetition in the exploration the authors dedicate themselves to. Perhaps it is an undesired consequence of a text written by three hands, but this repetition, added to the openly and actively hostile tone—albeit justified—against the dominant neoliberalism, may lead the reader, at certain moments, to perceive a more affective than intellectual, more reactive than productive, disposition in the text. However, it might be precisely this tone that is necessary to (re)awaken those who dedicate themselves—and with *dedicate* I don't mean a romantic capitalist euphemism for working, but rather the attitude of those who place not only their technical skills but also their intellectual effort and emotional commitment at the service of public education—in forming the citizens of the future.

The reader of this book will certainly see the current state of education with a different set of eyes, and will understand further not only the justifications for the changes to public education but also the true nature of these changes. It will not be difficult for them, armed with nothing but a scientific spirit and access to publications on education from the last decades, to reflect on the promises repeatedly made around educational innovations, and compare them with the consistently disastrous results that followed. They will also acquire knowledge about the complacency – and even complicity – with which the left got involved in the destruction of public education, and from this knowledge (and never in the reverse sense), they will become more competent in defending the Enlightenment, democratic, and republican dream of an education system that forms truly free citizens ■

OUT OF DOSSIER**Afonso Maia Silva*** The ideological delimitation
of the political left-right
dichotomy in historical research**ABSTRACT**

In this article, I aim to reflect upon and offer insights for the delimitation of the political concepts of 'left' and 'right' for the purposes of historical research. The guiding motive of this exercise is to highlight the need for prior historiographical and conceptual work before incorporating either of these concepts into historical investigation as objects of study. In this article, I present the fundamental criteria and identity markers that allow us to define the two concepts and, briefly, the importance of Conceptual History as a methodological approach for clarifying the object of study. I conclude the article by putting forward a proposal for the delimitation of the two political fields in contemporary Portugal.

KEYWORDS

Left
Right
Political Ideas
Political Thought
Conceptual History
Contextualism

* PhD candidate in Contemporary History (NOVA FCSH). Master's degree in Political Science from University of Minho.

Introduction

The ‘left–right’ dichotomy constitutes a defining feature of contemporary politics on a global scale. Several authors¹ have suggested that the anthropological significance of binary, Manichae-an logic accounts for the widespread adoption of this particular dyad—what Norberto Bobbio², one of the most incisive theorists of these concepts, described as:

“a most banal spatial metaphor, whose origin is entirely accidental and whose function has been merely to name, for the past two centuries, the persistent—and persistent because essential— dichotomous composition of the political universe.”

The origins of this dichotomy are well known and frequently cited³. In August 1789, at the dawn of the French Revolution, opponents of the royal veto over the newly formed Constituent Assembly seated themselves to the left of the Assembly president, while defenders of royal prerogatives sat to the right—a spatial distribution that was repeated in subsequent sessions. Throughout the revolutionary process, the left thus came to be associated with the radical wing of the Revolution, advocating a popular, democratic, and republican form of radical liberalism. The right, conversely, came to represent moderate liberalism, conservatism, and monarchism—political orientations opposed to democratisation along radical lines.

Much reflection and debate have addressed the contemporary relevance of this dichotomy as a classificatory framework for the political universe. That is not the discussion pursued here. Our principal concern lies instead in the historiographical treatment of the dichotomy itself. Regardless of its continuing validity as an analytical tool, the concepts it encompasses—jointly or separately—have become objects of historical inquiry in their own right. ‘Left’ and ‘right’ designate two broad political fields within which coexist, in varying degrees of affinity, political parties, movements, figures, ideas, and proposals that share certain commonalities. Because of their significance, these two fields merit sustained historical investigation. Yet rigorous research requires clarity as to ‘who’ and ‘what’ belong to each of them; otherwise, they risk becoming, in Sartre’s phrase, “two empty boxes”⁴. It thus falls to the historian to delimit these fields at the exploratory stage—a challenge that this article seeks to confront.

The categories of ‘left’ and ‘right’ acquire historiographical significance only through the content they encompass—the substantive elements of the “two boxes.” One might, for instance, investigate how the left conceived and implemented opposition to the Estado Novo dictatorship, or how the right reorganised itself in the aftermath of the

eighteen months of the Portuguese Revolution of 1974–75. Yet such inquiries presuppose an understanding of which agents—individual or collective—fall within each category.

Despite the ubiquity of these concepts, however, there exists no

consensus regarding their precise boundaries. Numerous criteria have been proposed to distinguish them, though with overlapping features. Herein lies the difficulty: the historian must adopt a position amid the profusion of ‘ready-made’ criteria, justifying their choices in defining the object of study.

Why, then, is it so complex to define a pair of concepts so deeply embedded in everyday political discourse? The answer may lie in their origin: as Bobbio reminds us, a “coincidence,” born of a spatial arrangement. Referentiality is the defining mark of this dichotomy—the left exists only in relation to the right, and vice versa. As Bobbio⁵ notes,

“The two terms of the dyad are governed by one another: where there is no right, there ceases to be a left, and vice versa. In other words, there is a right insofar as there is a left, and a left insofar as there is a right.”

For this reason, it is often difficult to identify a common thread—beyond mere spatial coexistence—among the diverse political agents that have historically occupied positions on the left (radical liberals, republicans, socialists, social democrats, Marxists, progressives, etc.) or on the right (absolutist monarchists, conservatives, fascists, Christian democrats, neoliberals, etc.).

Without a distinctive criterion and a clear methodology, any delimitation remains merely referential. If we study the left, we select political agents who positioned themselves to the left of a central axis—repeating the same exercise for the right. While positional reference may constitute one possible criterion, we consider it insufficient. It is, first, a ‘blind’ criterion: if only relative position matters, in political contexts where one side is clearly dominant (as in the ‘rightism’ of post–Warsaw Pact Eastern Europe or the ‘leftism’ of revolutionary Portugal), the demarcation is inevitably distorted. Second, it empties the concepts of intrinsic meaning, since nothing in the identity of political agents would determine them as left or right—only their relative placement within the political field.

We therefore adopt an essentialist stance, seeking a common characteristic or property uniting political agents within each respective ‘family’. Even if little appears to be shared between absolute monarchists and neoliberals, or between radical liberals and Marxists, there must exist some element that allows us to recognise them as belonging to the same category within a dichotomously structured political universe.

This does not, of course, diminish the importance of contextual or referential analysis. To describe a nineteenth-century political actor as ‘anti-egalitarian’ using a twenty-first century conception of equality would be an act of anachronism. We must first apprehend the political universe of the period and, guided by an orienting criterion, delineate the fields of left and right accordingly. For this purpose, we turn to political theory and its various hypotheses to identify the criterion best suited to our research objectives.

1 Bobbio, Norberto. *Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política*. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 27–28; Cunha, P. F. *Repensar a política: Ciência e ideologia*. Almedina, 2007, p. 312.

2 Bobbio, Norberto. *Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política*. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 54.

3 Lipset, S. M. *Esquerda e direita: O conflito ideológico no século XXI*. In J. C. Espada, M. F. Plattner e A. Wolfson (Coords.), *Direita e esquerda? Divisões ideológicas no século XXI*. UCP Editora, 2007 p. 11; Tavares, R. *Esquerda e direita: Guia histórico para o século XXI*. Edições Tinta da China, 2015, p. 26–28.

4 Jean-Paul Sartre apud Bobbio, Norberto. *Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política*. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 28.

5 Bobbio, Norberto. *Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política*. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 37.

Finally, we undertake a brief theoretical excursion into Reinhart Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte* (History of Concepts)⁶, as a methodological proposition capable of enriching our conclusions.

Left and Right: Toward a Delimitation

Several authors have sought to identify the defining features of "left" and "right," with varying degrees of success. Within the scope of this article, we focus on those whose formulations appear most pertinent to our inquiry—António José Saraiva⁷, Rui Tavares⁸, Jaime Nogueira Pinto⁹, and Norberto Bobbio¹⁰, the latter of whom also synthesises insights from other theorists.

Saraiva¹¹ distinguishes left and right by reference to their relationship with the State. According to him,

"...when the State is employed to realise individual freedom and social and economic equality, ultimately tending toward its own negation, a policy of the 'left'—or, if one prefers, a progressive policy—is in operation."

Conversely,

"...when the State serves as an instrument for the preservation of hierarchy and privilege, tending toward its unlimited reinforcement and conceived as something transcendent to individuals—when authority asserts itself as the necessary and immutable antithesis of freedom—then a policy of the 'right,' or a conservative policy, is in effect."

The concepts of 'freedom' and 'equality' frequently arise in this debate. As we shall see, Bobbio also identifies the notion of equality as the decisive dividing line between the two camps, while rejecting the same centrality for freedom. For Bobbio, the latter merely distinguishes moderates from extremists within each camp—a conclusion that is consistent with the divergent understandings of freedom among, for example, Stalinists and the 'New Left', or between fascists and liberals.

Tavares¹² emphasises the "positional, relative, and therefore evolutionary" character of the dichotomy. Among the authors considered, Tavares is the least essentialist and thus most skeptical of any definitive orienting criterion. Nonetheless, he associates the distinction between the two political families with their respective *tempovisions*—their relation to time. For the right, the present represents the fruit and emanation of the past, the normal state of affairs; for the left, the present is a potential turning point toward an as yet undefined and rewritable future¹³.

Yet Tavares later advocates a more particularist, contextualist,

and anti-essentialist analysis grounded in Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblance"¹⁴: the partial or total sharing of a set of features among members of a category. In this framework, identification with either concept becomes almost intuitive, based on the observation of particular traits and the actor's insertion within its 'family'. Although this approach resolves some difficulties, it also falls into the familiar pitfall of anti essentialism: if belonging to the left or right depends on resemblances with other members of the same 'family', one risks an infinite regress toward the 'first left' or 'first right'. This, in turn, may tempt us to revert to purely positional criteria—referring to a 'family resemblance' that links the radical wing of the French Revolution to Scandinavian social democrats or British Labourites, and the conservative wing to Italian Christian democrats or American neoliberals, solely on the basis of relative political positioning. Such reasoning reintroduces the very weaknesses of referential delimitation, unless one identifies common substantive elements within each 'family', which returns us to the central question: which elements?

Nogueira Pinto is among the authors most intent on identifying such elements. For him¹⁵, the right is characterised by anthropological pessimism (the rejection of Rousseau's idea of the natural goodness of humanity), anti-utopianism, anti-egalitarianism ('the right to difference'), defense of property, anti-economicism, nationalism, organicism (the primacy of the concrete historical community and natural societies over the individual), and elitism. The left, by contrast, is defined by anthropological optimism, utopianism, rationalism, evolutionary linearity, egalitarianism, economicism, socialism, and internationalism¹⁶.

It seems evident, however, that by enumerating such an extensive set of attributes, Nogueira Pinto effectively confines both concepts to specific ideological sectors. Contemporary political reality reveals right-wing movements that are anthropologically optimistic, individualistic, economicist, and even anti-nationalist (e.g., libertarian or anarcho-capitalist currents), as well as left-wing movements that are pragmatic, pro property, nationalist, and not necessarily socialist (e.g., radical liberalism, republicanism, social democracy). His typology thus equates the left with socialist internationalism and the right with conservatism—an association that appears both restrictive and historically outdated. Nonetheless, his contrast between egalitarianism and the "right to difference" is of particular analytical value.

In this respect, Bobbio's argument proves decisive. He reviews several possible distinguishing criteria: Jean Lapouze associates the right with religion, the sacred, hierarchy, and traditionalism, and the left with atheism, the profane, egalitarian order, and progressivism¹⁷; Dino Cofrancesco contrasts the right's defense of tradition with the left's aspiration to emancipation¹⁸; Elisabetta Galeotti links the right to 'hierarchy' and the left to

6 Koselleck, R. Uma história dos conceitos: Problemas teóricos e práticos. Estudos Heterodoxos, 5(10), 1992, p. 134-146; Koselleck, R. Futuro passado. Contraponto, 2006.

7 Saraiva, A. J. Dicionário crítico. Editorial Quercó, 1984.

8 Tavares, R. Esquerda e direita: Guia histórico para o século XXI. Edições Tinta da China, 2015.

9 Nogueira Pinto, J. A direita e as direitas. Bertrand Editora, 2018.

10 Bobbio, Norberto. Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política. Editorial Presença, 1994.

11 Saraiva, A. J. Dicionário crítico. Editorial Quercó, 1984, p. 85-86.

12 Tavares, R. Esquerda e direita: Guia histórico para o século XXI. Edições Tinta da China, 2015, p. 44.

13 Tavares, R. Esquerda e direita: Guia histórico para o século XXI. Edições Tinta da China, 2015, p. 41-42.

14 Tavares, R. Esquerda e direita: Guia histórico para o século XXI. Edições Tinta da China, 2015, p. 46-49.

15 Nogueira Pinto, J. A direita e as direitas. Bertrand Editora, 2018, p. 111-115.

16 Nogueira Pinto, J. A direita e as direitas. Bertrand Editora, 2018, p.115-123.

17 Bobbio, Norberto. Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 59-61.

18 Dino Cofrancesco apud Bobbio, Norberto. Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 63-68.

‘equality’¹⁹; and Marco Revelli, while acknowledging that ‘right’ and ‘left’ lack definitive intrinsic meaning, also underscores the inequality–equality axis²⁰. Bobbio²¹ ultimately privileges this last criterion as the most rigorous means of distinguishing the two political fields. The left, he argues, is egalitarian—regarding inequalities among human beings as socially constructed and therefore eliminable—whereas the right is inegalitarian, viewing such inequalities as natural, positive, and thus ineliminable.

Accordingly, political agents traditionally associated with the left have sought to mitigate or abolish political, social, and economic inequalities, though not always with equal emphasis on each dimension. Radical liberals prioritized political inequality; progressives of the ‘New Left’ focused on gender, sexual, and racial inequalities; orthodox Marxists targeted economic inequality. In general terms, however, the left has represented the field that most consistently values equality in each historical period, even when privileging distinct forms of it. Conversely, the right has tended to embody the anti-egalitarian camp. The relative weight assigned to political, social, and economic equality varies greatly: whereas political equality was the principal concern of absolutists, and social equality of conservatives more broadly, libertarian and ‘meritocratic’ liberal currents distinguish themselves from the left mainly with respect to economic equality. Taken together, the right remains, to varying degrees, the more inegalitarian field.

While the ‘equality criterion’ appears most robustly supported by both specialised scholarship and historical-political reality, we must nevertheless recall the importance of contextual specificity and conceptual evolution. The meanings of ‘left’ and ‘right’ have not remained constant across time: they differed markedly in 1834, 1924, 1974, and 2024. In this respect, as previously indicated, Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte*—the History of Concepts—offers an especially valuable methodological tool for delimiting and historicizing these categories.

The Importance of Conceptual History

‘Left’ and ‘right’ are, above all, concepts—abstract, generalising, and at times difficult to operationalise. When we frame them within a broader perspective—namely, within the historical investigation of concepts, ideas, and political thought—we encounter a rich body of scholarship proposing methodological paths through which to interpret our object of study. In this article, I highlight the contribution of *Begriffsgeschichte* (the History of Concepts) to the analysis of this problem, particularly as developed in the intellectual project of the German historian Reinhart Koselleck.

In this methodological framework, the historian focuses on certain terms of the social and political lexicon—words which, due to their centrality, widespread (and often instrumental) use, and their need for theoretical elaboration, have acquired special complexity and density, forming a “polyphony of meanings” that must be deciphered for a totalising understanding. Among the examples cited by the author²² are “State,” “class,” and “History.”

These words possess, even prior to the layers of reflection built around them, an etymological origin—a primary lexical sense anchored in language—that must be disentangled. This interdisciplinary work enables a holistic view of the historical trajectory of the term’s use, preceding even the contemporary meanings subsequently attributed to it.

Reflecting on the origins of the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ allows us to better situate the political “re-signification” of these two words. This historical-linguistic trajectory may be traced through successive ‘generations’ of dictionaries and encyclopedias— indispensable sources for following semantic evolution—as well as through other materials not necessarily academic in nature, such as correspondence, the press, and literary works, which often best reveal the socially attributed meanings of the terms and the dynamics of their mutations. Through this diachronic process, it becomes possible to grasp the mechanisms of continuity, change, and innovation in meaning.

Evidently, it is impossible to engage with the History of Concepts without adopting a transnational perspective, while maintaining an umbilical connection to the linguistic and idiomatic reality under examination. It would be as impossible to trace a history of the concepts of ‘left’ and ‘right’ in Portugal without referring to their ‘re-signification’ during the implementation of Liberalism and their absorption into the Portuguese political vocabulary, as it would be to ignore the diverse etymological origins of the concept across distinct European linguistic contexts.

As Koselleck himself argues²³, the concept assumes a dual function— simultaneously as a linguistic phenomenon and as an indicator of the surrounding reality. The word no longer exists merely as a linguistic fact but serves as a catalyst for new possibilities of interpretation and reconfiguration of that reality. The German historian illustrates this through the example of the term *Bund* (translated as “league” or “federation”), which, in its specific historical context, redefined the possibilities of political union, expanding the ‘horizons’ of thought by allowing for the formulation and naming of a new model of political organisation. Thus, concept and content coexist in a tense yet inseparable relationship.

The relationship between text and context also emerges as central to the historical interpretation of concepts. Koselleck²⁴ conceives it across multiple levels— the paragraph within the context of the page or chapter; these within the context of the work; the work within the author’s intellectual production; and that production within its broader intellectual milieu (itself comprising regional, national, and transnational layers). The interrelation between the text (the written sources through which the concept under analysis may be observed) and the context in which it was produced is therefore essential to discerning the true meaning of the word employed. Indeed, Koselleck²⁵ controversially asserts that no concept is ever conceived theoretically and abstractly in exactly the same way twice—each ‘re-signification’ occurs within a unique spatio-temporal situation, in a specific context that decisively

19 Elisabetta Galeotti apud Bobbio, Norberto. *Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política*. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 68-71.

20 Marco Revelli apud Bobbio, Norberto. *Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política*. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 71-75.

21 Bobbio, Norberto. *Direita e esquerda: Razões e significados de uma distinção política*. Editorial Presença, 1994, p. 84.

22 Koselleck, R. *Uma história dos conceitos: Problemas teóricos e práticos*. *Estudos Heterodoxos*, 5(10), 1992, p. 135.

23 Koselleck, R. *Uma história dos conceitos: Problemas teóricos e práticos*. *Estudos Heterodoxos*, 5(10), 1992, p. 136.

24 Koselleck, R. *Uma história dos conceitos: Problemas teóricos e práticos*. *Estudos Heterodoxos*, 5(10), 1992, p. 137.

25 Koselleck, R. *Uma história dos conceitos: Problemas teóricos e práticos*. *Estudos Heterodoxos*, 5(10), 1992, p. 138.

alters the interpretation of what is recorded in written sources, even when those sources appear formally identical to others produced under different circumstances.

The “History of Concepts” thus allows us to consider the common usage of the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ in defining political fields beyond purely theoretical or politological criteria. In the absence of a universal and objective standard by which to clarify their boundaries, historical-conceptual investigation may assist us in understanding what “the left” and “the right” have represented in each specific epoch and geography.

Left and Right in Portugal

Having proceeded in broad terms thus far, we now turn to a concrete case: whom do we include in our study when we define, as an object of historical investigation, the left or the right in Portugal? We follow the clues provided by the equality criterion and by Conceptual History to reach a conclusion.

The dichotomy entered the political lexicon mainly during the 1830s, in the context of the Portuguese Civil War. As early as 1834, a report from the Ministry of Finance identified the political leanings of Treasury officials as “left,” “right” (the latter divided between “Miguelists” or “fierce Miguelists”, among other curious designations referring to supporters of royal absolutism), and “doubtful”²⁶. By 1835, references to a parliamentary division between “left” and “right” also began to appear more systematically. We may therefore assume that both absolutist monarchists and moderate liberals (“Chartists”) coexisted within the Portuguese right. The heterogeneity of these political fields was thus present from their very origins.

On the right, we may include the intellectual traditions rooted in absolutism and Chartism—whether among the conservatives or “Regenerators” of the Constitutional Monarchy, or among the ultramontane sectors. With the advent of the Republic and the ascendancy of the republican left, the right came to encompass conservative republicans, constitutional monarchists, integralist monarchists, and Catholic traditionalists—forming, in part, the political and social base of the military dictatorship of 1926–1933 and the subsequent *Estado Novo* regime.

Under this anti-parliamentary and authoritarian period, the left was relegated to an oppositional role, while the regime itself revolved around a constellation of right-wing currents—from the national-syndicalist *Camisas Azuis* to the liberal right of the regime’s final years, passing through fascist, *maurassian*, and conservative factions, as well as constitutional and integralist monarchists. With the fall of the *Estado Novo* and the Portuguese Revolution of 1974–75, the right assumed a politically and socially minor position, concentrated mainly among the liberals of the *Partido Popular Democrático* (PPD) and the Christian democrats of the *Centro Democrático Social* (CDS), alongside marginal far-right circles of *caetanist* or *spínolist* inspiration.

As for the left, its roots lie in the *Vintista* tradition (radical liberals), precursors to the ‘Setembrists’, already imbued with democratic and social tendencies. Within this ‘dynastic left’ we find progressive sectors, including the ‘professorial socialists’

of *Vida Nova* at the end of the nineteenth century. Politically, the left also brought together republicans and socialists—the heirs of early nineteenth-century liberal radicalism—as well as anarcho-communists. After 1910, the republican left of the *Partido Democrático* became virtually hegemonic within the republican political system, despite the more collaborative opposition of the socialists and the more confrontational stance of anarcho-syndicalists and maximalist-communists.

During the 1926–1974 dictatorship, the left—largely forced into illegality—was represented by *revirahista* militants, members of the *Seara Nova* circle, followers of Delgado, socialists, and progressive Catholics, though the leading role in opposition activity was occupied by the *Partido Comunista Português* (PCP). In the regime’s final phase, distinct circles of radical left activism began to emerge, primarily influenced by Marxist-Leninist, Maoist, and Trotskyist currents, which expanded further after the April 25th Revolution of 1974. In this post-1974 left, alongside these derivative movements, we find the main currents represented by socialists, social democrats, and communists.

Conclusion

This delimitation is, above all, a working hypothesis that requires confirmation through broader historical-conceptual research. In writing this article, I have encountered a notable absence of theoretical discussion of this question in the Portuguese context. Scholars have studied ‘the left’ and ‘the lefts,’ ‘the right’ and ‘the rights’; yet what does each of these political fields represent? There exists no critical debate, grounded in Political Theory’s conceptualisation of left and right, concerning who and what has belonged to each of these two greats political ‘families’.

This article has sought to outline some initial principles of response. If its conclusions provoke debate, reflection, or even disagreement, its objective will have been achieved—at least by fostering a clearer delimitation of the left and the right in Portugal, capable of guiding political and intellectual historians in their future research ■

²⁶ Sousa, F. A esquerda e a direita em 1834: Os empregados do Tesouro Público. Separata da Revista Bracara Augusta, 32(73–74/85–86), 1978, p. 9–12.

