

REVIEW: COMMUNISTS ON EDUCATION AND CULTURE

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W. John Morgan, **Communists on Education and Culture, 1848-1948**,
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 250 pp, hb, £50, ISBN 0-333-
48586-6.

Many will consider this a strange work in so far as communism appears to be a long spent force from the standpoint of the twenty-first century. However, Morgan's book is one of history. He invites us to consider the thinking and the works of a chosen group of communists in their times and in their different contexts. His book is written for the general reader rather than the academic specialist. Morgan looks at the period between 1848 and 1948. The beginning of the period is marked by the publication of Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto.

The relationship between communists and education is far from simple. Marx's work of 1848 was not much concerned with education. It was designed to explain simply the oppressive, class-dominated structure of capitalist society. Class domination extended to the state itself. The oppressed workers had, therefore, to overthrow this state and the oppressors by revolution. In the Communist Manifesto, Marx argues that 'the communists have not invented the intervention of society in education; they do but seek to alter the character of that intervention and to rescue education from the influence of the ruling class.' After the revolution, Marx thought that children would be taught freely in public schools, that there would be some combination of education with industry (controlled by society rather than one class) and that exploitative child labour would be ended.

Communists, however, were much more concerned with the education of adults. The particular concern of Communists was the place of education in helping workers to understand both the nature of capitalism and how to

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organise in order to overthrow it. Those discussed were all involved in this enterprise, as in London was Marx.

Writing in the late nineteenth century, Marx thought that Capitalism would be overthrown after it had achieved all it could. This economic system would take society's development as far as it could. Then its own internal contradictions, in particular the irreconcilable interests of workers and capitalists, would lead to its overthrow and its replacement. Marx thought that this transition might be peaceful in Britain because of its relatively democratic traditions. Elsewhere he predicted violent revolution.

Most of those discussed in Morgan's book were confronted by conditions of economic collapse, famine, illiteracy and war. In the cases of Lenin and Mao, society was largely based in 'pre-capitalist' conditions. While education was generally seen as vital, it also easily became the servant of war effort and rapid industrialisation. Marx had written that 'men make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing.' Morgan attempts to assess his chosen communists in the difficult circumstances in which they worked.

Morgan considers 1848 to mark the beginning of the 'communist movement'. This movement was, however, always a divided and difficult one. Many movements for social change – religious, socialist, nationalist, feminist – came to have their divisions, disagreements and factions. Communists, however, took this to extreme levels. The author argues that communist thinkers are often considered out of historical context when actually it was the 'hard and often murderous reality of the communist movement' that gave their works meaning and against which these individuals should be understood.

The period covered by this book ends with communism established internationally and perhaps at its strongest point. The USSR had played a major role in defeating Nazi Germany, and in the post-war settlement it extended its control into much of Eastern Europe. China was under communist control. In countries such as France and Italy communism was a major force.

Some readers may find Morgan's selection of 'communists' somewhat controversial. The choice of 1948 means that there is no place for Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, Tito and the communists who worked to help end apartheid in South Africa. There is no place for Allende. The two main criteria for selection – being a major figure in the communist movement and making a

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significant contribution to education – leave no place for women, which Morgan explains and regrets.

The book is in three sections. The first of these aims to provide as much Marxist theory and communist history as is necessary to create context for the general reader. Morgan's exegesis is as clear as may be found and is also likely to be of value to students of society and its social movements during this period (as well as to students of education).

The second section looks at four 'international communists': John Maclean, Antonio Gramsci, George Lukacs and Mao Zedong. Maclean is now most remembered in poetry and in song, rather than for any enduring political or educational legacy. Sorley MacLean, Hugh MacDiarmid and Sydney Goodsir Smith all wrote poems inspired by the Glasgow revolutionary. There is likely to be a rendition of Hamish Henderson's song 'The John Maclean March' when Scottish socialists get together. Maclean is remembered for his strenuous activity for an internationalist Scottish socialism and against the First World War. Central to both efforts was his belief in the need for independent working class education. Maclean died in 1923 at the age of 44. In a short life, he was celebrated internationally. Along with Lenin, Trotsky, Liebknecht and others, Maclean was made an honorary President of the First All Russian Congress of Soviets. Later he was appointed Bolshevik Consul in Glasgow. There could not, at this time, be higher accolades. Maclean, however, quickly parted company with Lenin and those who formed the Communist Party of Great Britain. Maclean wanted Scotland to have its own Communist Party, and one which would not be dependent in any way on Russia.

Lukacs left a large body of writing, particularly on culture and aesthetics. He was involved in radical theatre in his native Hungary. In his early work he seemed to be opposed to Bolshevism on ethical grounds but became a member of the Communist Party almost as soon as it was formed. In the brief Hungarian socialist experiment of 1919, Lukacs was centrally involved in attempts to fundamentally change educational and cultural politics. Lukacs was, however, a very controversial figure. Many regarded his attempted reforms as hopelessly idealistic. Later, others saw him as an apologist for Stalinism. Morgan is clear and even-handed in his treatment of these differing interpretations.

The third part of this book focuses on three 'soviet communists': Lenin, Trotsky and Gorky. The last of these is remembered primarily as a radical

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writer who saw much of his work as part of a struggle for socialist change (Hugh MacDiarmid was to argue that Scotland needed its own Gorky). However, he also played a role in education through the school for socialist thinkers, which he ran in Capri between 1907 and 1913. Morgan deals with the contrast between this early radicalism (Gorky had written in 1902 that no Russian writer should be friends with a Russian government, of whatever kind) and his 'materially comfortable final years of collaboration with the Stalinist regime' clearly and even-handedly.

The seven chapters on the selected communists are well-researched, clearly written and well-balanced. If there are weaknesses, then perhaps one is the treatment of Mao Zedong. The cut-off date of 1948 means that the later impact of Mao's regime on education and culture is not addressed. Another may be the last chapter where Morgan might have developed his own conclusions which seem to suggest that Communists generally failed in their attempts to maintain popular support for their policies, but that the early and very radical aspirations for free, universal and compulsory education are now in the mainstream, at least for those countries which have adequate resources.

Morgan's book is a valuable assessment of the impact that a diverse range of 'communists' had on education. It is clear, well researched and accessible to the general reader. It will be valuable in assisting critical discussion of education and social theory.

September 2005