

Discussion (notes)

Czech version/česká verze 

Ulrikes are here with us: A few notes on the text *Teaching protest and pressure as participation*

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The first quote, which I now comment on, is taken from *From protest to resistance*¹ (1986, p. 6) by the controversial West German far-left activist Ulrike Meinhof, who is associated with violent crimes Red Army Faction (RAF). Meinhof was tried together with other RAF members and, under as yet unexplained circumstances, found hanged in her cell before the final verdict was handed down. To this day, there is speculation as to whether it was really suicide. The quote is at the beginning of Meinhof's text and, in an abridged version, concludes it. In this narrative framework, there is a description of the situation of the protesters who, in the end, have recourse to nothing but violence because their critical voice is not heard. The voice is impotent precisely because it is expressed by mere protest. According to the author, resistance is therefore proving to be a necessity. In the text, resistance is explicitly linked to violence. Before Meinhof concludes her comment with the mentioned quote, the phrase "The fun is over" will be heard. Indeed, the fun is over. A few months later, an elderly librarian is killed when a commando breaks into the library where the prisoner and later RAF leader Baader has been deported. With the help of Meinhof, the commando frees Baader. The action is obviously messed up – no shooting should have taken place; however, the "resistance" may bloom. The RAF is formed, and further assassinations and attempted murders will follow.

A person who would like to write a critique on the text *Teaching Protest and Pressure as Participation* could not find a better opportunity to build his counterargument. In essay form, this text expresses the conviction that the curriculum in schools should include "a mandatory class" in which pupils and students learn how to participate in protest social movements and "how to initiate them and further them" (Nixon & Metiary, 2021, p. 68).² Do we really want to shake our society like this? Should we really lead our pupils and students to violence? Do we want them to resist the educational efforts of our society? The critic could ask such fiery questions and it would certainly attract the readers' attention.

However, we must return to the text more carefully. The word "participation" is in its title. Rosa Parks, who ignited a wave of nonviolent protest against racism, is quoted a few lines further: "I believe we are here on earth to live, grow and do what we can to make this world a better place for all people to enjoy freedom" (p. 66). This hope is a hope "for all people." This hope was an inspiration for M. L. King, who forged a movement that changed the views of most white Americans on the social and political situation of their Afro-American fellow citizens, and eventually they saw their own injustice. Great persons know that the social protest movement is a dragon that must take off for the world to fulfil its hopes.

¹ This is an introductory passage that was inspired by a speech of Fred Hampton, the leader of the Black Panthers: "Protest is when I say I don't like this and that. Resistance is when I see to it that things that I don't like no longer occur. Protest is when I say I will no longer go along with it. Resistance is when I see to it that no one else goes along with it anymore either'. That could be heard – not verbatim – from a black person in the Black Power movement at the Vietnam conference this February in Berlin" (Meinhof, 1968, p. 1).

² If the author's name is not given, I am referring to the mentioned text (Nixon & Metiary, 2021).

But a dragon is not an obedient calf. If the protesters' voices do not reach the rulers' ears, they must change their actions. Not strong enough to fly anymore, but now is necessary to start spewing fire. A little further in the commented text, Malcolm X is quoted: "[E]arly in life, I had learned that if you want something, you should make some noise" (p. 69). Malcolm realized that M. L. King's path could not help change the socio-economic injustice that had its origins in American racism but persisted even after many white Americans fully recognized black fellow citizens' civil rights. It was necessary to make some noise. One of the most famous freedom fighters, Nobel Peace Prize winner Nelson Mandela, operated similarly. Before becoming the winner of the Prize, he had refused Gandhi's path of nonviolent resistance and supported actions that we today call "terroristic." The problem of resistance, violence, and non-violence is much more complicated. That is why we should seriously ask how a terrorist can become a Nobel Peace Prize winner. We should take this question very seriously because the times are coming when many repulsive acts will be a sign of despair and powerlessness. Western society last experienced such a turning point at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, Meinhof became radicalized.

In such dynamic times, it is crucial to seriously consider the social conflicts. Where does violence in society come from? The essence of social life is communication. Real communication leads to the sharing of opinions, the exchange of arguments, and the opportunity to voluntarily change my beliefs if others' views have changed my thoughts, along with the opportunity to insist on my opinion if my opponents cannot sufficiently substantiate their beliefs. Real communication is a never-ending conflict, but its rules do not allow violence. It is thousands of small wars waged by fair means that can prevent real wars, massacres, and revolutions. When Dewey analyzed the modern state, he identified one major failure that repeatedly leads to violence of all different forms. He concluded the whole passage with this sentence: "The belief in political fixity, of the sanctity of some form of state consecrated by the efforts of our fathers and hallowed by tradition, is one of the stumbling-blocks in the way of orderly and directed change; it is an invitation to revolt and revolution" (Iw.2.257).³ Where tradition is mistaken for a sacred taboo of immutability, we transform communication into its parody, and thus modern society inevitably heads toward violence. The "revolutionary spirit" did not cause the atrocities of the French or Bolshevik revolutions. It is exactly the opposite. Where the state is unable to adapt to current events in society, its actions lead to revolutions.. The "revolutionary spirit" is the product of this incompetence.

So who was Ulrike Meinhof? A woman who felt injustice and who had to fight it. A woman who felt that the ruling power was not paying enough attention to her voice and the voice of her fellows. An intelligent, young, and sensitive woman who did not have the courage, patience, and resilience of Rosa Parks. A creative and untameable woman whom no one had prepared for the long journey of resistance. A woman whom no one had prepared for the path of resistance that unites people, and as a result will eventually force the arrogant or blunt power of the rulers to dialogue, thus preventing violence and brutality.

From this point of view, the text we are discussing is significant. It proposes something unheard of, provocative, and visionary. It proposes to introduce a school subject that would teach pupils and students creative protest, teach them to initiate and lead social protest movements that would be able to correct the one-sidedness and injustices of current socio-political structures, and thus prevent otherwise necessary violence. Under this utopianism, however, lies wisdom. Such a subject would be a sign of a healthy society. By introducing or supporting it, the state would declare that it is aware of its need to be continually corrected by its citizens. On the other hand, the youngest citizens would be taught to be responsible for their own state, because thanks to this subject, creative protests and resistance would be presented as responsible care for the state, not as a sword to kill the enemy. In this way, the state and its citizens would become one body. If Ulrike Marie Meinhof felt like being part

³ This is an internationally standardized reference to Dewey's *Collected papers* (Dewey, 1992).

of this body, it would be far more difficult for her to identify herself with Baader and his desperate group.

The school subject that could be called *active civic resistance* would be different from traditional ones. It would not be like physics, chemistry, civics, history, or the native language. However, it would contain in varying degrees knowledge of all these subjects and enable what we have been calling for a whole century – to teach our pupils and students to think comprehensively and in material and social contexts. This subject, unlike the classic ones, has one significant advantage. It goes beyond the academic logic of selection and combination of educational content, which originated in the 19th century and only reflected the needs of the emerging scientific disciplines. On the contrary, it combines teaching areas based on life situations and the needs of the person who is going through their challenges. Moreover, the situations that pupils and students would learn to manage in this subject are central to the maintenance and development of democracy. The logic that selects and organizes the subject's educational content is based on the three most essential conditions of human life in a democratic society: the social character of individual life, communication, and creative, nonviolent dispute resolution.

If we could develop teaching on subjects conceived in this way without losing teaching contents that are vital for human beings, we would restore the original mission of education. We would start with life situations and their management, and only from there would our pupils and students venture into the inhospitable abstract worlds of artificial professional disciplines. As an institution, the school abandoned this natural logic in the 19th century. In that time, educators were carried away by the false ethos of "science" and its disciplinary thinking and forgot that their mission was to teach their pupils and students about life and to cope with life. Today, it is difficult for us to return to this logic because, for several generations, we have been brought up in this inhospitable world of "scientifically" distilled teaching.

This failure of pedagogy is also partly responsible for the existence of such a big gap between the state and public. That is why state officials, along with many teachers and parents, will ridicule the proposed subject and argue against it by referring to "the good old tradition" of teaching. However, there is no "good old tradition." Owing to this fact, other Ulrikes will not receive proper support, will radicalize themselves at this turnaround time, and will resort to violence.

References

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