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MARLON MIGUEL 

The Product of Circumstances Towards a Materialist and Situated Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT: This chapter analyses the meaning of a materialist education. After a brief presentation of the Marxist principles behind such an education, I focus on the figure of the Soviet educator Anton Makarenko, and the way he mobilized the notions of ‘milieu’ and ‘circumstances’ to rethink his pedagogical practice. Instead of a directive education based on the relation between master and student, he conceived of education as being constructed through a collective milieu.

KEYWORDS: collective education; materialism; circumstance; milieu; reform school; juvenile delinquents; Gorky colony; Makarenko, Anton; Marx, Karl

The Product of Circumstances

Towards a Materialist and Situated Pedagogy

MARLON MIGUEL

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I would like to address what could be called a *materialist education*. In order to do that, I first need to briefly remind the reader of some of the main principles of this form of education according to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. While these two authors did not write extensively on the question of education, they did open up interesting new paths of thought concerning the relationship between a materialist education and the notion of ‘milieu’, which were later developed in more detail by other thinkers and practitioners. After this, I will focus on the work of the Soviet educator Anton Semyonovich Makarenko (1888–1939). The similarities between Marxist principles — in particular those of the young Marx concerning the shaping of the human through the transformation of its material conditions of existence — and Makarenko’s ideas and practice are too pronounced to be accidental and indeed, as the reader will see, they formed an important

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basis for the Soviet pedagogue's writings. One can argue that these Marxist principles constituted the atmosphere in which Makarenko's thought could emerge.

I am particularly interested in the connection between education and the notions of 'milieu', 'circumstance', and 'situation' which are employed by the materialist educator. Makarenko argued that education should be conceived as a constructed and collective milieu instead of a directive relationship between master and student. He thought that the pedagogical process is mediated by this milieu and, furthermore, that it also allows for a materialist critique of fatalism in education, which should be understood as the idea that students are fated to be a certain way and cannot change. In this way, he worked towards an emancipation from the idea of pre-determined fates — much in vogue at the time — attributable to subjects based on their social background and conditions as well as their personal histories and trajectories.

MARX AND ENGELS ON EDUCATION

Interestingly, Marx's third thesis on Feuerbach connects education or upbringing (*Erziehung*), revolutionary practice, and the notion of 'circumstances' (*Umstände*). This well-known fragment will work as a kind of leitmotif for my argument in this chapter. Marx, along with Engels, who revised and rewrote this text in 1888, claim that:

The materialist doctrine that men [humans, *Menschen*] are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated. Hence, this doctrine is bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society (in Robert Owen, for example).

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionising practice.¹

1 Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', ed. by Friedrich Engels, in *MECW [Marx & Engels Collected Works, see abbreviations]*, v (1976), pp. 6–8 (p. 7).

Even if Marx did not extensively discuss education, the term appears several times in his work, particularly in his collaboration with Engels. According to them, education constitutes a central problem concerning the overcoming of capitalism and of bourgeois values. Interestingly, education often appears as an indirect procedure or force over individual subjects (those who are to be educated) instead of a direct one. That is why it is frequently related to the question of the environment and of the material conditions, in sum, of the circumstances as outlined by the third thesis: if humans are the product of circumstances, then education must imply the transformation of circumstances and of the educators themselves. Marx and Engels present in this thesis a conceptualization of materialism and address a crucial problem: how the forces and relations of a society's mode of production constitute the material conditions that shape the human and that need to be transformed?²

The question of education is evoked three times in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in particular to highlight the importance of a social and free education for all children. Furthermore, Marx and Engels emphasize — and again this echoes the *Third Thesis*, however this time accentuating 'economic relations' — that human beings' ideas, views, and conceptions can only change if the conditions of their material existence are also transformed.³ In spite of the well-known 'epistemological breaks' taking place in Marx's work around 1845–46 where he places a larger emphasis on economy, the question concerning the transformation of the conditions of material existence can already be traced back to *The Holy Family*. In this text the authors claim that 'materialism is connected with communism and socialism'⁴ and that

2 In 'Principles of Communism', the draft for the *Manifesto*, Engels claims that 'the common management of production by the whole of society and the resulting new development of production require and also produce radically different humans [*ganz andere Menschen*]' (Friedrich Engels, 'Principles of Communism', in *MECW*, vi (1976), pp. 341–57 (p. 353); 'Grundsätze des Kommunismus', in *MEW* [*Marx-Engels-Werke*, see *abbreviations*], iv (1977), pp. 361–80 (p. 376)).

3 'Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man's ideas, views, and conceptions, in one word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life?' (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', in *MECW*, vi (1976), pp. 477–519 (p. 503)).

4 Karl Marx, *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism*, in *MECW*, iv (1975), pp. 3–211 (p. 130).

only a *re-arrangement* of the empirical world (*die empirische Welt einzurichten*) will bring about the humanization of human beings: ‘If man is shaped by his environment [or surroundings, *Umgebung*], his environment must be made human.’ Later on, Engels, in his book *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (a part of his *Anti-Dühring*, published separately), pursues this problem of the relation between humanization and environment, again returning to Robert Owen⁵ and connecting the environment to education:

Robert Owen had adopted the teaching of the materialistic philosophers: that man’s [*Menschen*] character is the product, on the one hand, of heredity, on the other, of the environment of the individual during his lifetime, and especially during his period of development.⁶

All in all, the materialist approach to education stressed by Marx and Engels must take into account the alteration of the milieu – in the German version of the text quoted above, Engels introduces the interesting term ‘*umgebenden Umstände*,’⁷ something as the ‘surrounding

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- 5 Owen’s theory, based on his experiences managing cotton mills at New Lanark, emphasizes the notions of ‘environment’ and ‘circumstances’ connecting them to the formation of an individual’s character. In his *A New View of Society* (1813), one can read how social suffering is born out of ‘the inattention of mankind to the circumstances which incessantly surround them’ (Robert Owen, ‘Essay One: Any general character may be given to any community by the application of proper means’, in *A New View of Society or, Essays on the Principle of the Formation of the Human Character, and the Application of the Principle to Practice* (London: Cadell & Davies, 1813) <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/economics/owen/index.htm>> [accessed 12 September 2020]. The problem of the relation between circumstances and the formation of character seems to have indeed been in vogue at that time. Stuart Mill, for example, using what he calls an ‘ethology’, also insists on the correlation of these terms, but in order to redress the concept of ‘necessity’ and to emphasize how a free individual can mould his character: ‘His character is formed by his circumstances [...] but his own desire to mould it in a particular way, is one of those circumstances, and by no means one of the least influential’ (John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive* (New York: Harper, 1882), p. 1022 <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/27942/27942-pdf.pdf>> [accessed 12 September 2020]; see also Terence Ball, ‘The Formation of Character: Mill’s “Ethology” Reconsidered’, *Polity*, 33.1 (2000), pp. 25–48 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3235459>>). However, the differences between both thinkers are very important. Whereas Stuart Mill insists on the individual decision over circumstances, Robert Owen emphasises the determinative power of circumstances, the importance of education, and the notion of ‘co-operation’.
- 6 Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, in *MECW*, xxiv (1989), pp. 281–325 (p. 294); *Anti-Dühring*, in *MECW*, xxv (1987), pp. 1–309 (p. 249).
- 7 Friedrich Engels, ‘Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft’, in *MEW*, Ixx (1987), pp. 189–228 (p. 198).

circumstances’ — in order to act upon the subjects and to aim at a real transformation. If heredity — or more broadly, we could add, genetic inheritance — constitutes an element of the composition of character, it remains only one factor of the subject’s development. In this sense, Engels anticipates and avoids a certain danger concerning the naturalization of character.

The third thesis on Feuerbach underlines the transformation of circumstances related to ‘rational understanding,’ whereas other texts emphasize how a rearrangement of the surroundings, empirical sensibility, and habits are the real key to transformation. Indeed, a materialist education seems to me to indicate the necessity of transforming the body and sensibility of the subject of education, and even their desires and needs. This is precisely what Marx notes in the *Grundrisse* (the chapter on Capital), in a section that addresses the ‘circuits’ of capital — that is, he notes that the critique of capitalism must go through the fact that this system shapes one’s needs and constantly produces new needs that ensure new commodities are vital to one’s existence.⁸ Therefore, education must not only address this problem critically and intellectually, but also sensibly, by learning how to re-shape desire (or the ‘needs’) in order to modify capitalism’s functioning or ‘circuits.’

As a consequence of this focus, some of Marx and Engel’s texts seem to open a stimulating space inside a very Germanic tradition where education, emancipation, and formation always appear either as a direct and formative action over subjects (*Erziehung*) or as the development of an internal image (*Bild*) corresponding to their intellectual and rational progress (*Bildung*). In the text for the First International in 1864, Marx claimed that he saw three aspects within the term ‘education’: the ‘mental education,’ the ‘bodily education,’ and ‘technological training.’ He also introduced a theme that would establish a new and

8 ‘This necessity is itself subject to change, in that needs are produced just as much as products and the various craft skills. [...] The more the needs which are themselves historically produced, the needs produced by production itself, the social needs which are themselves the OFFSPRING of SOCIAL PRODUCTION and INTERCOURSE — the more these needs are posited as *necessary*, the higher the development of real wealth. Considered as *physical matter*, wealth consists merely in the multiplicity of needs’ (Karl Marx, *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*, in *MECW*, xxviii (1986), pp. 49–537 (p. 451; emphasis in the original)). On this subject, see also Glenn Rikowski, ‘Marx and the Education of the Future’, *Policy Futures in Education*, 2.3–4 (2004) <<https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2004.2.3.10>>.

important tradition in pedagogical theories and would go on to have a long history of its own: the theme of ‘polytechnic training.’⁹ Although the first aspect listed by Marx is ‘mental education’, it is important to emphasize the breach opened up by his work through the recognition that to educate is more than only forming the mind (*der Geist*). His ideas were to play a crucial role in the elaboration of theories and practices concerning education, particularly in the Soviet Union.

MAKARENKO AND *THE PEDAGOGICAL POEM*

The role played by circumstances in education, which is explicitly evoked in the third thesis, had strong repercussions in the history of pedagogical practices and was taken over by important educators, psychologists, and thinkers as a basis for their practices.

In this essay I will focus on one such pedagogue: Anton Semyonovich Makarenko.¹⁰ Because of his connection to Stalinism he was, it should be said, quite a polemical author. Furthermore, his educational practice was often dismissed as being simply associated with military and disciplinary methods. However, one should note that in

9 ‘By education we understand three things. Firstly: Mental education. Secondly: Bodily education, such as is given in schools of gymnastics, and by military exercise. Thirdly: Technological training, which imparts the general principles of all processes of production, and, simultaneously initiates the child and young person in the practical use and handling of the elementary instruments of all trades. A gradual and progressive course of mental, gymnastic, and technological training ought to correspond to the classification of the juvenile labourers. The costs of the technological schools ought to be partly met by the sale of their products. The combination of paid productive labour, mental education, bodily exercise and polytechnic training, will raise the working class far above the level of the higher and middle classes’ (Karl Marx, ‘Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council’, in *MECW*, xx (1985), pp. 185–94 (p. 189)).

10 I used the following translations of *The Pedagogical Poem* to write this essay: *The Road to Life (An Epic of Education) in Three Parts*, 3 vols (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House 1955); *Poème Pédagogique. En Trois Parties*, 3 vols (Moscou, Éditions en Langues Étrangères, 1953); *O Poema Pedagógico* (São Paulo: Editora 34, 2012); *Poema Pedagógico* (Spain: Omegalfa/Biblioteca Libre, n.d.) <<https://www.omegalfa.es/downloadfile.php?file=libros/poema-pedagogico.pdf>> [accessed 12 September 2020]. Not reading Russian, my access to the original sources and to the Russian critical literature on his work is very restricted. I would like to thank the help of Elena Vogman with the comparison of passages of the original text, which can be found here: <http://makarenko-museum.ru/Classics/Makarenko/Makarenko_A_Pedagogic_Poem/Makarenko_Ped_poema_full_text.pdf> [accessed 12 September 2020].

his work there is an interesting and ambiguous transition from a more experimental moment to a more authoritarian one which takes places between his two major works — *The Pedagogical Poem* (1935) and *Flags on the Battlements* (1938).

With these observations in mind, I have turned my focus to the consequences and possibilities derived from his ‘theory’, as well as the ways it was renewed, in particular in the French post-war context, by important figures surrounding the French Communist Party¹¹ or in the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and the Latin American context.¹² I would also like to mention that what I call his ‘theory’ is in fact an *anti-theory* and it appears, at first, as a refusal of the available pedagogical principles of his time.

Poem and (Anti)theory: Circumstances and Materialism

I would like to begin by outlining the context in which Makarenko worked. At the end of 1920, he was invited to head a juvenile colony

11 I have in mind the reception of his work by, among others, authors such as Henri Wallon, Louis Le Guillant, Irène Lézine, and Fernand Deligny. These names are part of an important constellation around a social network with maladjusted young people created in 1948 in France and called La Grande Cordée. Irène Lézine, psychologist, translator, and activist of the French Communist Party (PCF), was responsible for the introduction in France of authors such as Lev Vygotsky and Makarenko. At some point, the PCF wanted to turn Deligny into a sort of ‘French Makarenko’. Besides their own books and articles, they all took part in *Enfance*, a journal created in 1947 which was initially directed by Wallon. The journal synthesized the current debates around childhood and once again actualized problems such as that of ‘character’. All of these thinkers mobilize the notion of ‘circumstances’ in a particular way. For Deligny, the educator is a ‘creator of circumstances’ (Fernand Deligny, ‘Les Vagabonds Efficaces’ (1947), in his *Œuvres* (Paris: L’Arachnéen, 2017), pp. 161–221 (p. 212), available at the platform *Encontro Deligny*: <<https://deligny.jur.puc-rio.br/index.php/livros-e-publicacoes/>> [accessed 12 September 2020]). Wallon developed a materialist psychology that emphasizes the influences of situation and of milieu on the development of the subject (Henri Wallon, *De l’Acte à la Pensée* (Paris: Flammarion, 1942)). All of them are interested in de-naturalizing the notion of ‘maladjustment’ (*inadaptation*), showing that diagnoses should never isolate individuals from the social circumstances where their cases evolve. For a development of these questions, I refer to Marlon Miguel, *À la marge et hors-champ: L’humain dans la pensée de Fernand Deligny* (Université Paris 8, 2016) <<https://www.theses.fr/2016PA080020/document>>; Marlon Miguel, ‘Pour une pédagogie de la révolte: Fernand Deligny, de la solidarité avec les marginaux au perspectivisme’, *Cahiers du GRM*, 14 (2019) <<https://doi.org/10.4000/grm.1696>>.

12 See René Capriles, *Makarenko: o Nascimento da Pedagogia Socialista* (São Paulo: Scipione, 1989).

by the Public Education Department in Ukraine, which was called the Gorky Colony.¹³ Situated six kilometres from Poltava, the colony was to receive children and adolescents — many of them orphans — for social re-education. The context was tough: the revolution had taken place and the civil war had just finished in the region, leaving people in very miserable conditions. The Public Education Department conceived of Makarenko's task not only as the re-education of these 'young offenders' but also as an experiment to educate the 'new man' in new ways. The young people sent to the colony were more or less dangerous, often very violent people who had committed infractions such as theft, robbery, and organized crime. The first pages of *The Pedagogical Poem* describe the complete distress of Makarenko before the student body. They were resistant to any pedagogical process and, in addition, the material conditions were hardly favourable: the colony simply possessed an unheated, abandoned hangar, which was falling apart. They had neither clothes nor shoes for the kids, nor enough food to feed everyone.

In this wretched state Makarenko was helpless, and he felt that the 'pedagogical science' he acquired reading books (Pestalozzi, Rousseau, Natorp, Blonsky, etc.) offered 'no method, no means, no logic — nothing'¹⁴ to help him deal with the context. In this situation, he decided not to follow any pre-conceived theory, dogma, or received ideas, and

13 The name was given only sometime after its creation and was inspired by the readings of Maxim Gorky that took place in the Colony. When the kids discovered that the life of Gorky had been similar to theirs, they took him as a sort of model for their own lives: 'They were stunned by the story, suddenly struck by the idea: "So Gorky was like us! I say, that's fine!" This idea moved them profoundly and joyfully. Maxim Gorky's life seemed to become part of our life. Various episodes in it provided us with examples for comparison, a fund of nicknames, a background for debate, and a scale for the measurement of human values' (Makarenko, *The Road to Life*, I, pp. 135–56). Here Makarenko is not so far from a principle that was fundamental for Paulo Freire's pedagogy: to associate the *conquering of words* with the *conquering of the world* — i.e. the re-appropriation of one's own history and the transformation of the world goes through an acquisition of a certain language. In practical terms, for Freire, in order to learn a word, one must learn its historical, cultural, and political dimensions. Freire associated the educational process with the construction of a political consciousness that would help the pupil to free themselves from oppression and become agents of their own history: 'There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world [...]. To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it' (Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2005), pp. 87–88).

14 Makarenko, *The Road to Life*, I, p. 179.

instead to take what I would call a *materialist stance*, that is, he learnt from daily practices to build his store of hands-on experience, and invented solutions according to what the circumstances gave, presented to him, or demanded.

Indeed, the recurrence of the word ‘circumstance’ (Обстоятельство) in *The Pedagogical Poem* is very striking. Makarenko claimed that every important invention concerning the Colony came from the observation of a certain set of circumstances. His usage of the word — just like with Marx and Engels — certainly mirrored the historical, economic, and social conditions; however, in contrast to their thought, Makarenko referred to a far smaller scale, namely to the singular conditions of the Colony or the kids’ trajectories, in sum, the actual *situation* he found himself in. Hence, Makarenko’s use of the word referred to a singular position in time and space; it was meant to be attentive, present, and alert to what was happening — to reflect his stance right there, right in the middle of the experience, at each moment. Interestingly, the word employed by the author, Обстоятельство, is built in exactly the same way as the German word used by Marx: *Umstand*. ‘Об’ is for ‘Um’, ‘Circum’ (accusative form of circus, ‘circle’, ‘ring’, ‘around’), as стоят for ‘stand’/‘*stehen*’, ‘stance’, ‘standing’, coming undoubtedly from the Latin *stantia*.¹⁵ And this etymology precisely reflects the attitude that the educator, following Makarenko’s opinions, should have: to stand in the middle of the situation and to learn, immanently, what to do from it. Finally, if we remain on the grounds of etymology and follow the sequence of metaphors emanating from this word, we may remark upon the interesting way Makarenko found to work on the transmission of his thought, that is, through the form of *stanzas*. He prefers to write not a doctrine, a theory, a manual, or a kind of reproducible knowledge, but rather a description of his experiences in an immanent literary form — *The Pedagogical Poem*, written between 1925 and 1935, and describing his thirteen years of work at the Gorky Colony, is precisely a literary work, a prose poetry.

The Pedagogical Poem can be read as a kind of anti-theory. However, Makarenko nevertheless presents a horizon or a guiding principle

15 It seems, indeed, that the Russian word was ‘fabricated’: it is a loan translation, a *calque*, deriving from the German and French words.

on top of which the whole experience can be built: the creation of what he calls a ‘real collectivity’. This means that the educator must be attentive to the ‘embryos’ or the ‘sprouts’ of the collectivity, which are often unpredictable, but may appear all of a sudden and should be saved, ‘cherished at all costs’ — these embryos constitute the most ‘important circumstances’ that have to be taken into consideration and analysed during the pedagogical process.¹⁶

Collectivity and Social Glue

The collectivity is the target of a doubly circular movement. On the one hand, it is the task of the educator to educate the children and adolescents so that they learn to act collectively. This learning is not so much that of reason, but rather the learning of a (new) model of sensibility, of a certain *sense* of the collective. This sensibility refers to the perception and observation of the surroundings, of the ‘milieu’ (среда, another important word in Makarenko’s work), and also relates to the series of prefixes ‘um’/‘Об’/‘circum’.

This capacity to perceive what is around you, this capacity to perceive what cannot be seen, what is made in the other rooms, to perceive the tonality of life, this capacity of orientation. [...] The real Soviet citizen must be able to sense what happens around him with all his nerves, almost unconsciously.¹⁷

In this extract one can also perceive an echo of Marx and Engel’s insistence in *The Holy Family*, which I outlined earlier, on the ‘world of senses’ and the necessity of rearranging the empirical world so that humans’ become aware of themselves. Makarenko, however, gives an even greater insistence on the development of the subject’s sensibility and perception, and on their capacity to perceive beyond the limits of their individual space.

On the other hand, and this is the second crucial point, it is not so much the educator who is responsible for educating but rather the juvenile collectivity itself that will (re)educate the children:

16 Cf. Makarenko, *The Road to Life*, 1, Chap. 8, a chapter named precisely ‘Character and Culture’.

17 Anton Semyonovich Makarenko *apud* Irène Lézine, A. S. Makarenko, *Pédagogue Soviétique (1888-1939)* (Paris: PUF, 1954), p. 39, my translation.

The task of the educator is not at all to educate. It is repugnant to good sense to think that a dozen cultivated individuals gathered by chance at the Gorky colony would be able to educate one hundred and thirty delinquents. [...] It is not the educator who educates, but the milieu.¹⁸

The collectivity is thus the product of a long process which is based on this double progressive movement: Firstly, the formation of a type of sensibility (and thus of habits, customs, rituals, and traditions) that goes beyond one's individual perspective and that allows for the progressive production of the *social glue* tying these individuals together. Secondly, thanks to the daily collective activities, there is an improvement of this same sensibility and the capacity of the individuals to relate to each other. To claim that it is the milieu that educates means that the real process through which one is educated is correlated to the tensions inside the collective activities and the way they are resolved. That is why Makarenko was often accused of placing the collectivity at the centre of his pedagogy and not the (individual) child, of not following the 'reign of psychology' but rather that of work.

Makarenko's main antagonist throughout *The Pedagogical Poem* is the Public Education Department and its abstract pedagogical science. What he wants to emphasize is that there should be no knowledge or moral principle that precedes the solution of the problems emerging from the pedagogical situation. That is why he strategically makes use of different methods without transforming them into pedagogical axioms. For example, sometimes Makarenko describes the use of military strategies and even of disciplinary methods (such as the organization of the children in lines and 'detachments', or the practice of gymnastics); at other times, to the reader's surprise, he may even beat a child and become very authoritarian. However, and this constitutes the crucial point, he does not defend any of these attitudes as principles; on the contrary, he even claims that violence should be avoided at all costs, as it is, in the end, not really useful to create a collective culture. If he describes these moments, it is to show that they may appear as reactions to certain circumstances and show the incapacity of the

18 Anton Semyonovich Makarenko, 'La Colonie de Poltava dite Colonel Gorki (1925)', in *L'Éducation dans les Collectivités d'Enfants* (Paris: CEMEA, Les Éditions du Scarabée, 1956), p. 57, my translation.

educator — in this case, himself — to deal with the pupils. Indeed, the absolute non-moralistic tone of *The Pedagogical Poem* is very striking, as its narrative follows the flow of human affects and expresses the perseverance to understand and try to deal with them.

To Sunder the Covenants of Fate: The Critique of Characterology

This non-moralistic tone is constantly present in Makarenko's text, which also demands, in turn, a non-moralistic reading. His tone is deeply connected to his refusal of a psychological, behavioural, and characterological approach to educating children. In the colony, common phrases such as 'delinquent' and 'morally handicapped' were, for example, banned from the everyday vocabulary — instead, they used the plural noun 'colonists'. This does not mean, however, that these terms disappeared in his *text*; on the contrary, he made use of them to subvert or satirize them.

Furthermore, he applies the idea of an *active forgetting* of the children's past: 'I considered that the principal method for the re-education of delinquents should be based upon a complete ignoring of the past, especially past crimes.'¹⁹ Makarenko, going against the ideology of his time, de-naturalized delinquency and detached it from a medical status that had the tendency to essentialize and classify children according to an innate character or personality. He further radicalized this position — fighting, as he claimed, against his 'own instincts' — by choosing not to even read the children's records as they were sent to the Colony. To correlate an act (stealing, fighting, drinking, betting) to a character fault would mean not taking into consideration the hard and miserable *circumstances* in which these kids and adolescents grew up. That is why Makarenko minimized these acts so much and instead emphasized that the Colony would be precisely the place to create another set of habits. In this same sense, Makar-

19 Makarenko, *The Road to Life*, 1, p. 383. Some lines later, the text follows: "The usual pedagogical logic at that time aped medicine, adopting the sage adage: "In order to cure a disease, it must first be known." This logic sometimes seduced even me, not to mention my colleagues and the Department of Public Education [...]. As far back as 1922 I had asked the Commission not to send me any more personal records. We quite sincerely ceased to interest ourselves in the past offences of our charges, and with such success that the latter soon began to forget them themselves' (ibid., pp. 383–84).

enko's text rarely describes what the intimate and internal personality of his pupils was supposed to be; he prefers to describe, their abilities, techniques, physical aspects, tones of voice, style, the pace of their walk and speech rhythms, etc. This does not mean that Makarenko does not create descriptive categories in the Colony, but that they are operational and mobile ones that are used to describe the situation in which individuals find themselves and not to essentialize them.

This question of forgetting the past, which was so active in the Colony, is reminiscent of an Althusserian phrase that could very well be a definition of materialism: *ne plus se raconter d'histoires*.²⁰ This definition was inspired by Althusser's readings of Lucretius and a new pact of the nature capable of 'sundering the covenants of fate'.²¹ With it, Althusser pointed to the impossibility of giving a closed, definitive, essential, and determined meaning to things, bodies, and individuals. To put it even more strongly, he highlighted the impossibility of locking an individual into their past determinations. This does not entail a total freedom of things or a refusal of necessity — quite the contrary, in fact — but it does emphasize the ever-possible reconfiguration of things through *encounters*.²²

Whether one speaks of *encounters* or *circumstances*, what is at stake in this excellent case study is the need to free the miserable kids from the inevitable fate that was determined for them by tribunals, social re-education centres, and prison, where they were repeatedly labelled 'young offenders', 'delinquents', 'morally handicapped', and 'hereditary bums'.²³ Certainly, there is a rhetorical aspect to Makarenko 'forgetting of the past' — for it is less a question of a denial of the past than an attempt to fight against the prescribed fate assigned by the medical

20 'Never to tell myself stories, which is the only "definition" of materialism I have ever subscribed to' (Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts Forever: A memoire* (New York: New Press, 1993), p. 169).

21 Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. by William Ellery Leonard (New York: Dover, 2008), I, p. 18.

22 Cf. Louis Althusser, 'Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre', in his *Écrits Philosophiques et Politiques*, ed. by François Matheron, 2 vols (Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1994–95), I (1994), pp. 539–79.

23 Once again, Makarenko struggles with the pseudo-scientific literature that tried to create a systematic characterological classification. 'Several efforts have been made in learned works to draw up a satisfactory system for the classification of human characteristics [character], and the greatest pains taken to allot an "amoral" and "defective" place for the waifs' (Makarenko, *The Road to Life*, III, p. 105).

and socio-juridical apparatuses. Indeed, part of the pedagogical process was to *reconnect* past memories and experiences with something new. In this sense, it is interesting to see, for example, how Makarenko acknowledges the kids' dexterity, what skills they learned in the streets (theft, for example), which could then be translated and used productively in the Colony. This translation became possible through new circumstances, activities, and work.²⁴ As we are going to see, the theatre, which became an important activity of the Colony, was also a place where the kids, playing with life and death both joyfully and with hatred, reconnected to and re-translated their past memories.

The Organization of the Collectivity

This leads to the question of the organization of the Colony which I will briefly present before moving on to my conclusion. First of all, there was an emphatic steering away from the practices of other juvenile re-education centres of the time in which Makarenko insisted on the importance of the Colony's contact with the external world. The colony was meant to be a more or less open space without enclosures or violent surveillance. This led to two important consequences: if they wanted to, the colonists could leave the colony, but in this case they needed to assume responsibility for going back to their past lives of thievery, street life, etc.; furthermore, instead of removing the youths from society, the contact with the external world — such as villages, cities, and farms in the vicinity as well as local commerce and workshops — was a crucial, common dimension of the re-education process. Not only did the colonists regularly deal with the external world in matters concerning the Colony, but people from the outside could also come to the public events taking place at the Colony such as festivities and weekly theatre presentations.

24 Here the forgetting of the past meets another element, which is the praise of the movement and of the constant change of circumstances seen as fundamental to the collectivity: 'I thought of the strength of the colonists' collective, and suddenly I realized what was wrong. Why, of course — how could I have taken so long to discover it? It had all come about because we were at a standstill. A standstill can never be allowed in the life of a collective. [...] The universal law of general development was only just beginning to show its true strength. The forms ruling the existence of a free human collective implied progress [or *movement* forward]. The forms ruling death — a standstill' (ibid., II, p. 278).

Secondly, Makarenko, echoing Marx's polytechnic education, proposed a combination of work and education. This was not only a principle *per se* but an essential need for survival. With almost no financial support and miserable beginnings, the colony was forced to develop its own economy. Its first main activity, therefore, was agriculture to produce what to eat. Later on, however, they held many workshops (engine workshops, for example), music and particularly theatre activities, etc. The Dzerzhinsky Commune, which Makarenko would also run, and which is described in the third part of *The Pedagogical Poem*, became famous for its massive production of FED cameras, which were similar to the Leica ones.

Thirdly, the different activities were organized according to 'detachments',²⁵ that is, a certain number of kids (girls and boys mixed) were allocated a certain function (planting beetroots, searching for firewood in the forest, cleaning spaces, the staging of theatre plays, etc.). Each detachment had a 'commander', who was someone without privileges but who was very skilled in a specific function and therefore responsible for the discipline of the group, the tools they used, and for the quality of the service they provided. Besides these detachments with a definitive role, there were also 'mixed detachments', which were temporary and included people from other detachments for a provisional and precise task. A detachment always had a commander even if it only had two people in it. Finally, there was a 'soviet of commanders' that would take and discuss the decisions concerning important affairs of the Colony, as well as the election and renewal of the commanders. These elections were accompanied by long discussions and debates. The soviet of commanders was guided by the aspiration that each colonist should be a commander of a mixed detachment at least once.

With this system of detachments, Makarenko aimed at creating an 'extremely intricate chain of subordination in the colony, in which it was impossible for individual members to become unduly conspicuous, or to predominate in the collective'.²⁶ The development of the

25 The word is associated rather with self-management and guerrilla than with verticalized and militarized principles. "The word "detachment" was an expression used in that period when the waves of revolution had not as yet been diverted into the orderly ranks of regiments and divisions. Guerrilla warfare, especially in the Ukraine, where it was so long-drawn-out, was carried on exclusively by detachments' (*ibid.*, 1, p. 348).

26 *Ibid.*, p. 357.

detachment system points towards the structuring of the collectivity according to organizational self-management and polytechnic principles. Besides the system of detachments, a collective popular tribunal was also created to judge problems in the Colony such as theft.

Among the many inventions described by Makarenko, I find the theatre practice developed at the Colony especially interesting. After around the third year of its existence, theatre became a central activity, with the staging of around forty plays per winter in a hangar transformed into a stage and an auditorium for six hundred people that included the local population living near the Colony. There were several mixed detachments that saw to different functions such as acting, wardrobe requirements, heating, scenery, lighting-, sound-, and stage-effects, cleaning, operating the stage curtains, etc. The kids performed all these different activities and Makarenko played the role of the director and prompter. Since they usually had one week to prepare a play of sometimes four or five acts, it was impossible to learn all the text by heart. Thus, the emphasis was on directing how to move oneself in the space, which gestures to use, etc. Makarenko writes that he ‘attributed great importance to the theatre, since through its agency the colonists’ way of speaking was greatly improved, and their horizons broadened.’²⁷

Indeed, the theatre appears to have offered a perfect set of circumstances in which the juvenile collective had to find solutions to staging complex plays in a very short time. The tensions that emerged and the object of the debates inside the collective constituted a crucial part of the pedagogical process. Moreover, it provided an opportunity of practicing the different tasks of subordination, command, and the development of techniques, without which the final result (i.e. the play) would have been impossible. Finally, the theatre process also educated the sensibility related to the perception of space, the movement of bodies and the coordination of gestures — essential elements in the creation of the collectivity.²⁸

27 Ibid., II, p. 82.

28 Here I should mention another experiment of this period concerning theatre, which seems even more radical: Asja Lācis and the infantine proletarian theatre. In 1918, Lācis started to work with war orphans in Orel and thought that theatre could be a way to ‘awaken’ them. She divided the group of children into several sections (painting and drawing, music, technical construction (of props, buildings, figures, animals, etc.), rhythm and gymnastics, diction, and improvisation). According to Lācis, whereas

CONCLUSION

Makarenko's work is not straightforward, especially given the fact that he wrote a literary rather than a theoretical account of it. At the same time, it is precisely for this reason that his work is so interesting and remains of importance today. Writing a poem and not a doctrine was the way he found to describe the struggles of an exceptional situation in an immanent and hence also materialist way. In the light of this case study one can ponder if every pedagogical situation, dealing as it does with singular and unique living creatures, will not inevitably prove to be exceptional. In a way, a literary work is able to open up paths of communication, to encourage others to experiment and to invent, instead of confining experience to a set of rules that dictate how to proceed as a manual would do.

Among the paths opened by Makarenko, one of the most important is how he struggles to de-naturalize and de-essentialize individuals, and to emphasize how individuals are always *the products of circumstances*²⁹ rather than the products of models prescribing what they

bourgeois education is geared toward individual development and the final product (the play itself), communist education aims at a 'collective aesthetic form', it insists on the process and the situation as the main pedagogical tools and on the development of the collective rather than of each individual. Finally, the pedagogical process should emphasize the observation and the learning both of the educator and the pupils. 'Our starting point for both educators and those who were to be educated was observation. The children observed objects, the relations of objects and people to one another, and their changeability. The educators watched the children to see what they accomplished and how far they could productively apply their skills. Observation was not only practiced and developed through drawing, painting, and music inside the studio but also outside of it. Early in the morning, and again in the evening, we went outside with the children and made them aware of how colours changed through distance and time of day, how different the sounds and noises were in the morning and evening, and how silence can sing' (Asja Lācis, 'A Memoir', *South as State of Mind*, 9 [Documenta 14#4] ([2017]) <<https://www.documenta14.de/en/south/>> [accessed 12 September 2020]).

- 29 In 1999, the French choreographer Xavier Leroy created a very striking performance-lecture hybrid called *Product of Circumstances*, where he combined his double trajectory as researcher in both molecular biology and choreography. After his PhD, he finally abandoned biology in favour of dance, precisely because of the naturalization of a model body and the way academic work seemed so sterile to him. However, in the more traditional dance scene he also found a very crystallised notion of the body. The expression 'product of circumstances' puts into relation both the elements constituting his biographical path that transformed him into a very particular dancer/choreographer and the critique of a unified, biologized, modelled and essentialized conception of body.

should be or become. A characteristic of a materialist education, or even of materialism *tout court*, is precisely to start from the actual and singular situation, to refuse a 'modelled' conception of the human and to take into account the circumstances, whether historical and macro or individual and micro, before proceeding to analyse and judge.

Re-reading Makarenko also affords us an opportunity to rethink how to build a collective, how to think about the materiality of what he likes to call *social glue*, and how to fabricate it. It is a question of building a common horizon at however small a scale — in Makarenko's case, that of the Colony —, one which should be able to help transform society at large. Indeed, the misery of the traditional bourgeois educational system is to have forgotten the importance of the collective construction.

Perhaps the main distinction between our educational system and the bourgeois one lies precisely in the fact that with us a children's collective is bound to develop and prosper, to visualize a better tomorrow, and to aspire to it in joyful, common efforts, in gay, steadfast visions. Perhaps therein lies the true pedagogical dialectics.³⁰

30 Makarenko, *The Road to Life*, II, p. 302.

Marlon Miguel, 'The Product of Circumstances: Towards a Materialist and Situated Pedagogy', in *Materialism and Politics*, ed. by Bernardo Bianchi, Emilie Filion-Donato, Marlon Miguel, and Ayşe Yuva, *Cultural Inquiry*, 20 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 145–62 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-20_08>

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