Folk Schools, Popular Education, and a Pedagogy of Community Action

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What can make pedagogy revolutionary is not just the content, but the process, and the question of who is the teacher and who is the student. There are the dualities—reading/writing, listening/speaking, answering/questioning, accepting/investigating—but in much formal schooling, equal emphasis is not given to both halves of an engaged communicative process. Conceivably, though not always, teaching and studying can exist in a dialogic relationship that in itself is a revolutionary reformulation of the standard classroom technique. Beyond that, occasionally the educational process can lead to further action and to social change. This chapter concerns itself with the act of study as a proto- and prerevolutionary act, an act of questioning and an act of challenging the existing social order. More accurately, this essay addresses historical examples when the act of study was a force advancing a revolutionary process. In fact, the kind of pedagogy I discuss is one in which the student’s actions and questions, and the authority of daily life, are given a primacy that they do not have in static educational models.

In particular, this chapter focuses on two strands of revolutionary pedagogy—one that originated in the folk schools of Denmark and took root in the mountains of Tennessee, influencing the Civil Rights movement as well as generations of labor organizing in the United States and one that originated in the slums of Brazil, took a detour through Portuguese West Africa, and took hold in revolutionary and religious communities in Central America and parts of South America before moving on to the wider developing world. These two strands, the northern thread spun by Danish nationalists and Myles Horton and the southern spun by Paulo Freire and Amilcar Cabral, intertwined briefly before the deaths of Horton and Freire in the 1990s. What ties the two together are themes of freedom, empowerment, and emancipation, on the one hand, and techniques of developing literacy, orality, and knowledge of the community, on the other. It turns out that an understanding and an appreciation of folk culture is central to both. In the
conclusion, I attempt to braid these threads with a third strand, that of folk-life studies, to examine the qualities inherent in a discipline that studies popular culture which make it so suitable for an activist pedagogy. It will be my contention that there is something about these three pedagogical disciplines that in combination make for an education that is truly revolutionary: critical literacy, orality (not in the sense of rote recitation but in the sense of mastering oral skills and being able to wield the spoken word), and knowledge, including self-consciousness, of one’s folk culture.

The Danish Folk Schools and Their Influence

One of the manifestations of Romantic nationalism in Europe was the collection and study of folklore materials, in such nascent nations as Finland, Italy, and Germany. Following the philosophical influence of Herder, proto-folklorists roamed the countryside, collecting songs and tales (Märchen), from peasants, in the process elevating and romanticizing the peasant class within their own society while asserting the nationhood of their own people. But all was not just a matter of nationalism. Another feature of this elevation concerned the education of the peasantry as part of the process of civilizing them and preparing them for political participation in the rising nation. As the influence of monarchies waxed and waned in the decades following the French Revolution, and as national boundaries were being drawn and redrawn, it was also important that the peasants were kept clear about their national and linguistic allegiances. Political and intellectual elites in smaller European countries were concerned about losing national identities and wanted to bolster claims of national autonomy. In the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, devastated nations looked to assert national cultures once more. Some middle-class intellectuals harbored democratic impulses, too, and after the revolutions of 1848 looked to the peasant class as future citizens in post-feudal constitutional societies with bicameral parliaments, at least one chamber of which was to be popularly elected.

In the Scandinavian countries and in Denmark in particular, the task of educating the peasant was part of the work of establishing cultural and linguistic identity. In 1830, Henrik Wegeland, a Norwegian poet, wrote a theoretical essay called “Encouragement to Country Folks to See to Their Own Education” (Paulston 1974, p. x). Similar ideas were developing in Denmark, which had lost land to Germany and which was faced with the spreading influence and increasing use of the German language by its southern elites (Begtrup et al. 1926, pp. 94–95; Coe 2000; Rørdam 1980, p. 40). A Lutheran minister who also happened to be a student of Norse mythology, N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), developed the idea in 1834 that one remedy was a form of popular education not just for elites but for the peasants as well, those who “have to feed themselves and the officials too” (Adams 1975, p. 20; Manniche 1939, p. 84). In that way, while not challenging the idea of monarchism with democracy, at least the rural folk could participate in the strengthening of a Danish nation. Grundtvig established the first of these