Pedagogies of Revolt

Whereas in the preceding chapter I discussed the different groups of intellectuals that assisted in the formation of the workers’ movement, in the following chapter I investigate the different forms – technical, cultural, and directive – and modes – colonization, commodification, and solidarity – of assistance provided by these intellectuals.

Forms of Assistance

When they engaged with the Mahalla strike movement, traditional intellectuals such as journalists and lawyers, human rights and political activists, writers and artists, offered the emerging worker subject different forms of assistance: technical, cultural, and directive. Although of crucial importance for the sustenance and reproduction of the strike movements, technical assistance, such as organizing material and practical support and legal aid for individual strikes, did not have a developmental impact on the workers’ activity from the perspective of subject formation. Cultural assistance, on the other hand, in its broadest sense, played a fundamental role in developing the worker subject. Three forms of cultural assistance can be discerned: connection, projection, and integration.

Firstly, because of their social function, mobility, and position as intellectuals in civil society at large, non-proletarian actors could more easily generalize the experiences, methods, and lessons from one ‘horizontal’ instance of struggle to another. They acted as liaisons between organic proletarian intellectuals, literally mediating the internal communication and consciousness of the decentralized worker subject. Even though workers were still ‘physically’ confined to the particular instances of their separate protests, their struggles became conceptually connected through shared demands and practices. This type of assistance was not only spatial, but also temporal. Traditional intellectuals sometimes acted as an auxiliary reservoir of the collective memory of the working class: when ‘old’ proletarian intellectuals were, for whatever reason, cut off from the embryonic ‘fresh’ organic layers, then traditional intellectuals

1 Cf. Chapter 7.
such as political activists, journalists, writers, and so on, transferred class experiences to the new generation.2

This form of cultural assistance can be described as connection. With regard to concept formation in ontogenesis, Vygotsky observed a transition from syncretism to thinking in complexes. Put simply, this developmental process contains the connection of objects on the basis of objective bonds and relations, based on association, function, sequence, and so on. Transposed to the domain of proletarian sociogenesis connective assistance brings experiences from different spatial and temporal instances of struggle together and allows workers to share their competences and methods. It mediates the horizontal, reciprocal learning process between workers, enabling them to instruct one another and push their mutual development forward. However, “[…] there is no hierarchical organization of the relations between different traits of the object […] the structural center of the formation may be absent altogether” (Vygotsky 2012, 124). Connective assistance creates relations between worker projects, but it does not organize them as a cohesive whole.

Secondly, by a ‘vertical’ projection of individual worker struggles into the sphere of national civil society, e.g., in the media, traditional intellectuals made the spatially isolated strikes directly contemporaneous to the lives of many workers. Through the mediation of, especially, newspapers articles and blog posts, workers got to know that their comrades in other companies struck to overcome problems similar to their own. They realized that they shared the same goal and that the objective of their strike activity was, for all purposes, the same. Traditional intellectuals enabled workers to imagine and generalize themselves as a coherent and cohesive working class despite the fact that they were far from organized as a national workers’ movement. Furthermore, this projection influenced the attitudes of other societal actors towards the workers, calling them ‘back to class’.

This form of cultural assistance can be described as projection. With regard to concept formation in ontogenesis, Vygotsky noted that the ‘bridge’ between thinking in complexes and thinking in real concepts was the pseudoconcept: “[…] the appearance of a concept that conceals the inner structure of a complex” (Vygotsky 2012, 127). When faced with a ready-made concept, children cannot directly absorb it, but they build complexes around it: “What we see here is the complex that, in practical terms, coincides with the concept, embracing the same set of objects. Such a complex is a ‘shadow’ of the concept, its contour” (Vygotsky 2012, 130). Transposed to the domain of proletarian

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2 Interview with Hisham Fouad, Giza, 26 October 2010.