

From Marx's philosophy of education to the issue of holistic human development today

Da filosofia da educação de Marx à questão do desenvolvimento humano integral na atualidade

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ABSTRACT

Karl Marx's philosophy of education is not presented as an independent educational theory in a narrow sense, yet it is formed consistently throughout his entire philosophical system, particularly in his theories of human beings, labor, and historical materialism. By analyzing the relationship between education, labor, and socio-economic conditions, Marx develops a critical and emancipatory approach to education oriented toward the goal of comprehensive human development. This article aims to clarify the core arguments constituting Marx's philosophy of education, including his conception of human nature, the role of labor in education, the function of education in social reproduction, and the ideal of comprehensive human development. On this basis, the paper analyzes the theoretical value and practical significance of Marx's philosophy of education in the context of contemporary education, where education is increasingly shaped by market forces and economic rationality.

KEYWORDS: Marx's philosophy of education; education and labor; comprehensive human development; historical materialism; human emancipation.

RESUMO

A filosofia da educação de Karl Marx não se apresenta como uma teoria educacional independente em sentido estrito, mas está presente de forma consistente em todo o seu sistema filosófico, particularmente

em suas teorias sobre o ser humano, o trabalho e o materialismo histórico. Ao analisar a relação entre educação, trabalho e condições socioeconômicas, Marx desenvolve uma abordagem crítica e emancipadora da educação, orientada para o objetivo do desenvolvimento humano integral. Este artigo visa esclarecer os principais argumentos que constituem a filosofia da educação de Marx, incluindo sua concepção de natureza humana, o papel do trabalho na educação, a função da educação na reprodução social e o ideal do desenvolvimento humano integral. Com base nisso, o artigo analisa o valor teórico e a relevância prática da filosofia da educação de Marx no contexto da educação contemporânea, onde esta é cada vez mais moldada pelas forças de mercado e pela racionalidade econômica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Filosofia da educação de Marx; educação e trabalho; desenvolvimento humano integral; materialismo histórico; emancipação humana.

1. Introduction

Education has always been one of the central concerns of philosophy, as it is directly connected to the most fundamental philosophical question: the question of the human being. How a society organizes its educational system reflects its conception of human nature, its vision of human development, and its expectations for the future of society itself. Throughout intellectual history, education has been understood not only as the transmission of knowledge but also as a means of character formation and social order maintenance (Tesar et al., 2022). However, with the development of capitalism and industrial production, education has increasingly come under the pressure of the division of labor, economic efficiency, and market demands. Education tends to be reduced to vocational training serving production directly, while the goal of comprehensive human development is progressively marginalized. This situation gives rise to a fundamental tension between education as a humanistic activity and education as an economic instrument (Peters et al., 2024).

It is in this context that the philosophy of Karl Marx emerges as a profound critical turning point. Marx does not approach education as a neutral or purely technical field, but situates it within the totality of socio-economic relations. For Marx, education constitutes an integral part of the process of social reproduction and is shaped by the mode of production and class structure. Education therefore always bears historical and class characteristics rather than existing as a socially neutral or universally abstract activity (Gan and Bai, 2023). A foundational thesis in Marx's philosophy is his conception of human nature. Marx argues that human essence is not an abstract quality inherent in isolated individuals, but rather the ensemble of social relations. This conception is of particular significance for educational

philosophy, as it rejects purely individualistic approaches that regard education as the development of innate personal capacities detached from social conditions.

From this perspective, Marx maintains that education cannot be separated from concrete socio-economic conditions. Any educational system reflects and serves specific social relations. In capitalist society, education contributes to producing individuals suited to the needs of capitalist production while simultaneously reproducing social inequalities (Aksakallı, 2025). Narrow specialization in education mirrors rigid divisions of labor and leads to the one-sided development of human beings. Nevertheless, Marx does not view education solely as an instrument of domination. He also emphasizes its emancipatory potential when situated within a new social formation in which labor is no longer alienated and human beings are able to develop fully. This dual character gives Marx's philosophy of education its dialectical depth: education is both a product of existing social conditions and a possible means for transforming those conditions. In the contemporary context of globalization, knowledge economies, and the commercialization of education, the issues Marx criticized remain highly relevant. The study of Marx's philosophy of education therefore carries not only theoretical significance but also practical value for envisioning a more humane, equitable, and development-oriented educational system (Orji, 2024).

2. Literature review and Research methodology

2.1. Literature review

In the history of Marx scholarship, academic studies have primarily focused on philosophy, political economy, and scientific socialism. Educational issues typically appear indirectly through analyses of human nature, labor, consciousness, and social reproduction rather than as a distinct educational doctrine. As a result, Marx's philosophy of education is usually understood as an integral component of his broader philosophical framework (Peters et al., 2022). Internationally, many Marxist studies approach education as a social institution closely linked to class relations and modes of production. One line of research emphasizes education's role in reproducing relations of production and social inequality, viewing education in capitalist societies as a mechanism for maintaining class domination. Another approach highlights education's critical and emancipatory potential, regarding it as a space for cultivating critical consciousness and preparing conditions for human liberation. In Vietnam, studies on Marx and education are often associated with applying Marxist thought to the construction of socialist education and human development. However, systematic analyses of Marx's philosophy of education as a coherent theoretical framework, especially from the perspective of comprehensive human development in contemporary contexts, remain limited. This indicates the need for more integrative and in-depth research (Nguyen, 2024).

2.2. Research methodology

This article primarily employs a historical-philosophical research method. Through close analysis of Marx's and Engels's canonical texts, the study identifies key arguments related to education, human beings, and labor. Analytical and synthetic methods are used to organize these arguments into a coherent theoretical structure. In addition, hermeneutic interpretation is applied to clarify the philosophical meanings of central concepts such as human nature, labor, alienation, and comprehensive human development. Finally, a comparative and critical approach is employed to assess the value and limitations of Marx's philosophy of education in relation to contemporary educational issues.

3. Research results

3.1. Marx's conception of human nature and its educational implications

One of Marx's most foundational contributions to philosophy in general and to educational philosophy in particular is his conception of human nature. Marx criticizes traditional views that treat human essence as an abstract, fixed, and inherent property of isolated individuals. Instead, he argues that human essence is the ensemble of social relations. This marks a decisive shift from metaphysical to historical-social approaches to understanding human beings. From Marx's perspective, human beings do not exist as isolated entities but are always formed and developed within specific historical conditions. Human capacities, needs, values, and consciousness are inseparable from the social relations, especially relations of production, in which individuals participate. This insight has profound implications for education, demonstrating that education cannot be understood merely as a psychological or pedagogical process but must be analyzed as a fundamentally social process (Thi, 2023).

On this basis, Marx criticizes abstract and ahistorical conceptions of education. Educational models that aim to develop "human beings in general" without considering concrete socio-economic conditions easily lapse into formalism and idealism. According to Marx, education cannot be detached from its social context. Education in capitalist society cannot possess the same nature or goals as education in a society free from class oppression. Marx's conception of human nature also clarifies the dialectical relationship between individuals and society in education. While Marx does not deny the role of the individual, he argues that individual development is only possible through society. Education is therefore simultaneously a process of individual formation and socialization. Through education, society transmits knowledge, values, and forms of activity to new generations, thereby reproducing itself (Peters et al., 2022).

In class-based societies, Marx emphasizes the deeply unequal character of this process. Access to education, educational content, and educational goals are shaped by class interests. Education not only reflects social stratification but actively reinforces it by preparing individuals from different classes for different social positions. Yet Marx does not regard education as a purely passive instrument of society. Because human essence consists of social relations, transforming those relations opens the possibility of transforming human beings themselves (Hill, 2022). Education can thus become a crucial means of fostering critical consciousness and promoting social change. Its emancipatory significance can only be realized when education ceases to serve class domination and instead aims at comprehensive human development.

Another crucial aspect of Marx's thought is the unity of social existence and social consciousness. Marx argues that consciousness does not determine social existence; rather, social existence determines consciousness. This insight has important educational implications. Education cannot rely solely on changing consciousness in abstraction but must be connected to improving concrete living and working conditions. Detached from social reality, education loses both its effectiveness and its emancipatory meaning. From his conception of human nature, Marx advances the ideal of comprehensive human development. A fully developed human being is not one confined to a single skill or social function but one capable of developing intellectual, physical, and social capacities in a balanced manner. Education, in Marx's view, must facilitate such development rather than confining individuals to fixed social roles (Remmling and Marx, 2022). Thus, Marx's conception of human nature provides the theoretical foundation for his philosophy of education. It elucidates the historical-social character of education, criticizes abstract educational models, and opens a path toward an emancipatory approach oriented to comprehensive human development.

3.2. Labor as the foundation of Marx's philosophy of education

Within Karl Marx's philosophical system, labor occupies a central position not merely as an economic activity but as the fundamental process through which human beings form and develop their essence. Marx understands labor as the process by which humans act upon nature to satisfy their needs and, at the same time, as the process through which humans produce themselves. This conception is of decisive importance for his philosophy of education, as it provides the foundation for understanding education as intrinsically connected to labor and social production. According to Marx, through labor human beings not only produce material wealth but also develop their intellectual, physical, and social capacities (Bharas et al., 2023). Labor constitutes the primary mode through which human beings externalize and realize their essential powers. Consequently, an educational system detached from labor

cannot adequately contribute to the formation of fully developed human beings. Education that limits itself to the transmission of theoretical knowledge without connection to practical labor leads inevitably to one-sided human development.

At the same time, Marx emphasizes that labor under capitalism is alienated. Workers do not control the labor process or its products; instead, they are subordinated to the imperatives of capital accumulation. This alienation extends beyond production and profoundly affects education. In capitalist societies, education tends to function as a mechanism for producing labor power suited to market demands rather than as a means of promoting comprehensive human development. The capitalist division of labor generates narrow specialization, in which individuals perform limited and repetitive functions within the overall production process. Marx sharply criticizes this form of specialization because it impoverishes human life and restricts human potential. In education, this manifests as training individuals for fixed occupational roles, separating knowledge from lived social practice and reinforcing fragmented forms of human development (Øversveen, 2022).

In response, Marx advances the idea of combining education with productive labor. This does not imply transforming education into forced labor, but rather integrating practical activity into education so that individuals can understand the nature of production and develop their capacities in a comprehensive manner. The unity of intellectual education, physical education, and productive labor constitutes a core element of Marx's philosophy of education. This conception reflects Marx's vision of education oriented toward comprehensive human development (Giray, 2022). The Foundations of Marx's Theory Of Alienation: Marx's critique of his predecessors and alienated labour. *Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 24(4), 1656-1679.. In the society Marx envisages, individuals are not confined to a single occupational role throughout their lives but are capable of engaging in diverse forms of activity. Education, therefore, should not aim at producing narrowly specialized individuals but at forming human beings who are flexible, creative, and capable of self-determined activity.

Marx also stresses that the integration of education and labor can fully realize its emancipatory significance only under certain social conditions. In societies characterized by alienation, linking education to labor risks reproducing forms of oppressed labor. For this reason, Marx's philosophy of education is inseparable from his broader project of transforming social relations so that labor becomes a free and creative activity. In contemporary educational contexts, Marx's insights into the relationship between education and labor remain highly relevant. As education increasingly comes under pressure from labor markets and economic efficiency, Marx's philosophy reminds us that education should not

be reduced to vocational training alone. Instead, education should enable individuals to understand, master, and transform labor practices, thereby fostering the development of essential human capacities.

3.3. Education and social reproduction

A central concern of Marx's philosophy is the analysis of social reproduction. Marx argues that societies reproduce not only material wealth but also social relations, forms of consciousness, and types of human beings appropriate to prevailing modes of production. Within this process, education plays a particularly significant role, as it is one of the primary institutions through which knowledge, values, and norms are transmitted across generations. From Marx's perspective, education does not exist outside or above society but constitutes a component of the superstructure shaped by the economic base. The content, goals, and forms of education directly reflect the requirements of the mode of production and the interests of the dominant class. Consequently, in class-based societies education is never socially neutral but always bears a specific class character (Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1845/2023).

In capitalist society, education contributes to the reproduction of labor power in forms compatible with capitalist production. Through education, workers acquire the skills, knowledge, and disciplinary dispositions necessary for participation in production, while simultaneously internalizing values and assumptions that support existing social arrangements. In this sense, education functions as a crucial mechanism for maintaining the stability of capitalist society. Beyond reproducing labor power, education also reproduces social relations and class inequalities. Access to education, educational quality, and opportunities for social mobility are unevenly distributed among social groups. These disparities not only reflect existing economic inequalities but also reinforce and perpetuate them. Education thus becomes a mechanism that legitimizes social stratification by presenting historically contingent inequalities as outcomes of individual ability or merit.

Marx offers a sharp critique of the ideological function of education under capitalism. Through educational processes, the values and worldviews of the ruling class are disseminated as universal truths (Cole, 2022). This obscures the historical and contingent character of social relations and weakens individuals' capacity for critical reflection. Education thereby contributes not only to skill formation but also to the production of forms of consciousness that sustain the existing social order. Nevertheless, Marx does not reduce education to an instrument of domination. He emphasizes its dual character. Precisely because education is a space where knowledge and consciousness are formed, it also contains the potential for critique and social transformation. By providing scientific knowledge and fostering theoretical thinking, education can enhance critical awareness and enable individuals to recognize the historical and transformable nature of social relations.

In this sense, education can become a significant factor in the process of human emancipation when it is no longer subordinated to the interests of a particular class. Marx envisages that in a future society without class antagonisms, education will cease to function as a tool of domination and instead become a means for the free development of individual capacities. Education in such a society would be integrated with free and creative labor rather than alienated work. In contemporary conditions, Marx's analysis of education and social reproduction remains highly pertinent. As education becomes increasingly marketized and competitive, the risk that education will intensify social inequality grows. Marx's philosophy of education thus provides a critical theoretical framework for identifying and evaluating these tendencies (Sun, 2022).

3.4. The goal of comprehensive human development in Marx's philosophy of education

The goal of comprehensive human development occupies a central place in Marx's philosophy of education and represents the point at which his arguments concerning human nature, labor, and social reproduction converge. For Marx, education should not aim merely at producing individuals who fulfill specific social functions, but should strive to liberate and fully develop human capacities. The ideal of comprehensive human development is therefore not only an educational goal but also a broader social and humanistic objective (Zhang, 2023).. Marx strongly criticizes the one-sided development of human beings under capitalism. Rigid divisions of labor confine individuals to narrow and repetitive roles, suppressing other capacities and leading to alienation. Such development cannot be regarded as genuine human development but rather as a distorted form shaped by exploitative social relations. Education that directly serves this division of labor contributes to the reproduction of such distortions.

From Marx's perspective, a comprehensively developed human being is one who can cultivate intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and social capacities in a balanced manner. Individuals should not be bound for life to a single labor function but should be able to participate in diverse forms of activity. Education must therefore enable access to scientific knowledge, physical development, creative expression, and social engagement. This vision reflects the deep humanism of Marx's philosophy. Marx does not conceive education as a tool for maximizing labor efficiency or economic productivity but places human freedom and self-development at its core. Such development is significant not only for individuals but also for society as a whole, since sustainable social development depends on the comprehensive and free development of its members (Tontoh, 2022).

Marx also emphasizes that the goal of comprehensive human development cannot be realized under conditions of social oppression and alienation. Educational reforms alone are insufficient if social relations continue to constrain human development. Marx's philosophy of education is therefore

inseparable from his call for transforming social relations to create material and social conditions conducive to human flourishing. In the future society Marx envisages, labor ceases to be a coerced burden and becomes a free and creative activity (Satgar, 2022). Education in such a society does not merely prepare individuals for labor but enables them to master and use labor as a means of self-development. The integration of education and labor thus acquires an emancipatory rather than coercive meaning.

The goal of comprehensive human development also implies specific demands regarding educational content and methods. Education should not focus exclusively on specialized knowledge but should foster independent thinking, critical capacities, and social responsibility. Marx's philosophy of education therefore addresses not only what should be taught but also why education exists and what kind of human beings it seeks to cultivate. In contemporary educational contexts, where education is increasingly governed by performance indicators and labor market demands, Marx's ideal of comprehensive human development retains strong critical relevance. It challenges the reduction of education to human resource training and reaffirms education as a holistic process of human development (Mhlongo et al., 2023).

4. Conclusion

Although Karl Marx did not formulate a distinct educational theory, his philosophy contains foundational insights into education, human beings, labor, and society. By conceiving human nature as the ensemble of social relations, Marx situates education within a dialectical relationship with historical and social conditions, thereby criticizing abstract and instrumental models of education. Through his emphasis on labor, social reproduction, and the ideal of comprehensive human development, Marx's philosophy of education aims at liberating human beings from one-sided and alienated forms of development. In the contemporary context, where education is increasingly shaped by market forces and economic rationality, Marx's insights continue to offer valuable guidance for envisioning a more humane, equitable, and development-oriented educational system.

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