

REBUILDING THE LEFT

Marta Harnecker. Zed Books, London, 2007, 168 pages.

When most North American adult educators think of adult or popular education in Latin America, they generally think of Paulo Freire and his text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. If, however, we want to think of one text that has had the most singular impact on popular educators in progressive and revolutionary social movements in the region, it would be Marta Harnecker's *The Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism*, which in its original Spanish version is in its third edition and 63rd printing, selling over a million copies—about twice that of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This probably comes as a great surprise to most readers, since Harnecker is not generally well-known outside Latin America. Nevertheless, her *Basic Concepts* text is the most common entry into Marxist theory for the region's radicals and revolutionaries.

Harnecker was born in Chile. She completed university studies in France under Louis Althusser, then returned to Chile in time to work as a journalist during the presidency of Salvador Allende and the Popular Unity government. From the 1973 coup in Chile until recently, she lived and worked in Cuba, where she directed the Latin American Popular Memory (MEPLA) research centre. She currently resides in Venezuela. During her years at the head of MEPLA, Harnecker involved herself in dozens of popular education and community development projects in Cuba and research projects documenting all major radical and revolutionary movements throughout Latin America. Harnecker has published over 60 texts. Only a very few of these texts have been published in English translation. Her lack of translation may have to do, in part, with the fact that her texts on radical movements, theory, and practice are designed for the educational work of these very same movements. In other words, among other things, Harnecker produces texts about and for popular and revolutionary education.

The pedagogical nature of Harnecker's writing can be seen in her heavy use of subheadings, paragraph numbering, and detailed tables of contents in her texts. She has, at times, had to insist with publishers that all paragraphs in her texts be numbered; this technique is designed to facilitate the reading of and referencing to her texts in study circles. The frequent subheadings help focus the reader on the main points of the text. The reader will find these techniques in *Rebuilding the Left*. In fact, for a summary of the main ideas, one merely need read the detailed table of contents.

The publication of an English translation of *Rebuilding the Left* provides English-language readers with a rare opportunity to engage one of the most important writers and popular educators of the Latin American Left. Popular educators and educators with a specific interest in social change in Latin America will find this text of particular interest. Any student of left politics will also find this text an engaging exposition of a call for the Left to reassess its past in order to be more effective in the present and future. While there are particularities to the text due to its focus on Latin America—and the translation is reflective of this with a few oddly translated Latin American terms and concepts—there is plenty in this text for a general appreciation by any educator interested in the nature of social change.

In *Rebuilding the Left*, Harnecker marshalls her 40 years of political practice and social movement research to provide us with an assessment of the Left in Latin America since the triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1959, which opened a new stage in the history of social change in the region. Harnecker’s basic thesis is that, today, the Latin American Left is facing qualitatively new conditions than those of the 1960s, and must, therefore, reassess organizational forms and practices that for the most part do not correspond to the new conditions and that were not always successful in the past. The text focuses on what she sees as the mistakes of the past, outdated practices, and her ideas on what is needed today for building a political and social force capable of confronting and defeating the neo-liberal order so devastating to people and the planet.

More specifically, Harnecker argues that the Latin American Left has tended to mechanically apply European-developed working-class-oriented party structures to a region that has a very different historical development than Europe and that does not have, in many areas, a working-class majority. Along with a mechanical replication of the Bolshevik party, the Latin American Left has been plagued by tendencies toward authoritarian, vertical, bureaucratic, dogmatic, state-centric, and vanguardist organizational structures and practices. Harnecker believes that a major source of these problems is the underdevelopment of an authentically Latin American Left theory based on an independent assessment of the region’s own historical, socio-political economic development.

Before, however, the reader thinks that Harnecker is presenting a civil societarian, new social movement-based alternative as has been common in the North American Left, it needs to be stated that she argues forcefully for the need for a creative and uniquely Latin American development and application of socialist theory, as well as for the necessity of a political instrument capable of uniting the increasingly diverse social forces negatively impacted by neo-liberal capitalism. The old party-based Left is not up to today’s tasks, but the spontaneous rebelliousness of new social movements on their own is also not sufficient. Educators will find of great interest that, throughout her analysis, Harnecker emphasizes the central role of consciousness and human transformation in social change. She paraphrases Canadian Michael Lebowitz on the idea that, in the end, socialism is merely a path to the ultimate aim of full human development.

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