

Wilhelm Liebknecht, “Knowledge is Power – Power is Knowledge” (February 5, 1872)

Abstract

Long involved in labor organization and workers' education, Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826–1900) was one of the founders of the Social Democratic Party and the editor of the socialist journal *Vorwärts*. Here, he argues for linking knowledge and power, asserting that the people must control education.

Source

Knowledge is power! Education sets you free! This saying, which was emphasized earlier in the prologue (to the Dresden Festival), and which we hear so often in the mouths of our opponents, will be the focus of my lecture today. Yes, in the mouth of our opponents, and used against us, and in refutation of the statement propounded by us, the Social Democrats: that the chief activity of the worker should be directed toward changing our political and social conditions, and that the exclusive pursuit of educational goals is nothing but a time-consuming dalliance for the worker and benefits neither the individual nor the whole.

Knowledge is power! This is indeed a true saying. Knowledge is power, knowledge gives power, and because it gives power, the knowing and the powerful have always sought to preserve knowledge as the monopoly of their caste, station, and class, and to keep it from the unknowing, the powerless – who from time immemorial have constituted the great masses of the people. This is how it has always been; this is how it remains today. If we skim through the history of mankind from the hoariest times of antiquity right up to the present: it is everywhere the same spectacle. One caste, one estate, one class appropriates knowledge for itself and uses it as an instrument of power to oppress and exploit the other castes, estates, or classes. The priests of Egypt and India: what was their thousand-year rule based on? They were in sole possession of knowledge – of what was known at the time of natural forces, the course of the stars, the nature of man; and this knowledge was for them the magic wand, the scepter before which the amazed, admiring masses reverently bowed; it was the chain with which the priests, supported by the warrior caste – for warrior and priest have always walked hand-in-hand, brotherly, in the subjugation of the world – took hold of the state and society and made them subservient. We see the priests of Greece, Rome, the Christian Middle Ages, of modern and most recent times filled by the same desire: to retain knowledge for themselves as the primary wellspring of power and domination, and to shut it off from the mass of the people. Knowledge is for the rulers, ignorance for the ruled. In the slave states of North America there was a law that threatened death to anyone who taught a Black person to read and write. The slave owners knew very well that if the slaves became conscious of their slavery, if their eyes were opened, it would spell an end to the “eternal” and “sacred” institution of slavery. Here among us, in “educated” Europe, in the so-called cultural states in general, the dissemination of knowledge among the people is not punished with death, but it is no less effectively ensured that knowledge does not reach the people. Knowledge is under the lock and key of the rulers, inaccessible to the ruled, except in the sort of prepared and falsified form that suits the rulers. And once a ruled class, like the French bourgeoisie in the last century, succeeded in capturing knowledge, and with the help of knowledge political power, it regularly used its power merely to consolidate itself in power, to promote its own material interests, and to cast the “lower classes” into bondage and spiritual darkness. I am not exaggerating, I speak only of an incontrovertible truth, confirmed by history on every page, when I say:

There has never been a ruling caste, a ruling estate, a ruling class that has used its knowledge and its power to enlighten, educate, and nurture the ruled, and which has not, on the contrary, systematically cut them off from true education, the education that sets you free.

That is part of the very essence of domination. He who rules wants to make himself strong and the subjugated weak. And whoever wants universal education must therefore fight against all domination.

We Germans don't just call ourselves "the nation of thinkers," we also consider ourselves the most educated people in the world. Now, in his immortal work on civilization, Buckle says of the Germans: "there is no nation in Europe in which we find so wide an interval between the highest minds and the lowest minds. The German philosophers possess a learning, and a reach of thought, which places them at the head of the civilized world. The German people are more superstitious, more prejudiced, and, notwithstanding the care which the government takes of their education, more really ignorant, and more unfit to guide themselves, than are the inhabitants either of France or of England. Their great authors address themselves, not to their country, but to each other. Their language is utterly incomprehensible to the lower classes."^[1] In short, Buckle maintains that literature in Germany is entirely disconnected from the people; the gulf between those who know and those who know not is nowhere as vast as in Germany. In contrast to Germany, that brilliant English historian writes about the American Republic that "in no other [country] are there so few men of great learning, and so few men of great ignorance."

I do not wish to go into Buckle's verdict in detail here. It was not rendered carelessly – such a conscientious scholar would not be capable of doing so. There is no doubt that Germany has far more people, both in absolute and relative terms, who can read and write than England and France; but reading and writing in and of themselves are not education, they are mere tools for acquiring education. And based on my personal observations, I would not hesitate for a moment to say that the workers of England and France are on average far superior to German workers in their knowledge of their rights and obligations in the state and society, even though very few of them, but nearly all German workers, have learned to read and write in school. For them, the more developed political and economic life partly makes up for what was lacking in their youthful education; and life is the best school, which cannot be replaced by any theoretical instruction, no matter how excellent.

It likewise seems indisputable that the educational divide between the higher and lower classes of the population is wider in Germany than in England and France; and it is generally admitted that the language of our so-called national literature – not to mention the language of our scholars, which is notorious for its incomprehensibility – is not understandable to the masses of the nation. However, the same is more or less true of all cultural nations. A Frenchman said of the Russians: "*Grattez le Russe, et le Tartare apparait!*" – scratch a Russian and the Tartar appears. You can say much the same about our modern culture: If you scratch the culture of today, barbarism appears. Our culture – and the culture of a nation represents the sum of the education present within it – is only skin deep; a thin veneer, a shining varnish on the outside and underneath it crudeness, superstition, the war of all against all, the war of destruction, the strong devouring the weak, perhaps not literally, but no less genuinely.

[...]

The number of those who can passably read is indisputably far greater, and I admit that reading is a far more important educational tool than writing. He who can read and is inclined to educate himself will, if he has time and access to reading materials, gradually fill the gaps in his upbringing and acquire a genuine education. But are such reading materials available to our people? That question must be answered in the negative. Any

bookseller can tell you that our classical literature, as Buckle has reproached us, does not exist for the people. Only in recent times, when very cheap editions have started being issued, have some of the works by of great authors begun to penetrate into the middle strata of the population. The books of our scholars are sealed with seven seals for the masses; the intellectual nourishment of the people is the daily press: newspapers and cheap entertainment weeklies. Unfortunately, this intellectual nourishment is the same as the bodily nourishment on which the people depend; like the latter, it is adulterated and unhealthful, and it is as harmful to the spirit as the latter is to the body. We do not have a single entertainment weekly that seeks to ennoble the mind of the reader.^[2] Pure monetary speculations, they pursue merely the goal of making money. And most money can be made if they swim with the current, flatter the fashionable prejudices, and appeal to the weaknesses, the base passions, and the coarser instincts. And so they have the clientele of the great multitudes, of the “educated” and uneducated rabble and – the protection of the grandees who have an interest in the great multitudes, the people, not attaining the education that “sets you free,” not attaining the knowledge that “is power.” The cheapest entertainment weeklies, which chiefly circulate among the people – I include here the so-called colportage or delivery novels – are almost entirely, I think one can say: without exception, in form they are miserable rubbish and in content they are opium for the mind and poison for morality. The best thing about this literature, because it appears more infrequently and is not so widely distributed, is that it is relatively harmless compared to the daily political press, which extends its influence everywhere, also into circles that are impenetrable to every other kind of reading. Everyone who can read, reads a newspaper – either at home, at the neighbor’s, or in the tavern. Alongside the school and the barracks, the press is our third great educational institution. And it is worthy of its colleagues. Of one heart and mind with them, it complements their work. What is learned in the barracks and the school, it carries forth into the land, into every house, every cabin – except that it does not always speak in the tone of the schoolmaster and corporal, but often puts on a free-thinking mantle, and likes to speak of the people’s welfare, enlightenment, democratic achievements, and other fashionable articles, because that “draws,” and the unappetizing wares sell more easily under such pretty labels.

[...]

Recently, an “Association for the Freedom of the School” was set up in Berlin, which has tasked itself with directing all efforts to improve the education of the people and with removing the education of the people from the deleterious influences of the state and the church. Nothing could be more laudable. But, unfortunately, the gentlemen leading it are putting the cart before the horse. That is already apparent in the first paragraph of the statutes, which reads: “In cultured states, normal social conditions can only emerge out of a normal school system.” A wondrous confusion of cause and effect! “Normal social conditions” require a “normal school system,” but they do not emerge from it, because a normal school system is possible only under normal social conditions, and because the abnormal social conditions which now prevail do not allow a normal school system to arise. Normal social conditions do not emerge from a normal school system, rather, a normal school system can only emerge out of normal social conditions. No doubt, if the entire people today were educated, we would also quickly arrive at sensible social and political conditions, which means presupposing something that is impossible.

All we ask of the men who are placing the primary emphasis on the education of the people is practical and logical consistency. We, too, consider the education of the people the highest good. But we love it not only platonically. It must become reality. Education of the people – that is primary schools in which all children are equally given the best possible instruction; education of the people, that is education free of charge; education of the people, that is educational institutions that continue the work of the primary school and prepare the young man and the young woman for a life’s vocation; education of the people, that is state and societal institutions that promote genuine

humanity – in a word: education of the people, if that phrase is not to be a hollow one, a lie, means and demands the fundamental transformation of today's political and social conditions; and anyone who is serious about the education of the people has a moral obligation to work with us toward that transformation.

Social Democracy is the party of education in the most eminent sense of the word.

Today's state and today's society, which we are fighting against, are the enemies of education; as long as they exist, they will prevent knowledge from becoming a common good. Anyone who wants knowledge to be bestowed on all must therefore work toward the transformation of the state and society. You, gentlemen, the members of the Association for Workers' Education, understand this. You understand that the temple of science is closed to the people, that the doors of education are blocked by a Great Wall of China. The key to the temple must be seized, the wall must be torn down. The instrument is political and social agitation. To be sure, the enemies who stand in our way are powerful. But they themselves are unwittingly providing us with the weapons of victory. The conditions are becoming ever more unnatural, are clashing ever more glaringly with the interests of the general community, the people, humanity. How innumerable are not those whose eyes were opened by the horror of the last war! The more the state develops into a class state, the greater the pressure it must exert on the dominated, exploited classes, the deeper and more universal the dissatisfaction it must produce. And likewise with modern society: the more that capitalism, large-scale production is taken to extremes, the greater the gulf between the poor and the rich, the more imperative it becomes for the masses to confront the necessity to shake off the yoke of wage slavery.

No doubt, efforts are made to cut the people off from the possibility of education. But necessity is the best teacher. Every new machine preaches the gospel of social emancipation; every new factory is a greenhouse of Social Democracy; every ruined artisan and small master swells the ranks of the proletarian army. And so, with light hearts and confident courage, let's get to work! "The future belongs to us!" The enemies cannot take a step without strengthening our army with deserters from their ranks.

We are not struggling for domination, not for privileges. We want to abolish domination as such. Where there is domination there is servitude, and where there is servitude, there is exploitation. We fight against domination in all forms, political and social domination. We seek the free state under popular rule, which, built on the ruins of the current class rule, elevates the harmony of interests into the truth – a free society in a free state, the state that grants everyone equally the means for the harmonious development of his abilities, and which, in fulfillment of the Aristotelian ideal, "strives for the highest good": the true cultural state. And we seek a free society, which replaces the immoral, soul- and body-crushing wage labor with brotherly, cooperative work, and which plugs up the source of all evils of state and the society: the exploitation of man by man.

It is only in a free state and a free society that today's disharmony will dissolve into harmony. Only in a free state with a free society can we attain the universal harmony that is the highest goal of culture: the harmony of interests, the harmony of man with man, the harmony of man with himself – harmony externally: harmony of nations, harmony within the state and society; harmony internally: harmony within the individual by developing all capabilities and by eliminating the contradiction between ideal and reality, between theory and practice, between morality and action.

This goal can be achieved only through the path of political agitation. The Leipzig (Dresden) Association of Workers' Education has realized this, thereby demonstrating that it is conscious of the task of an educational association. Do not let anything divert you from your path. Draw fresh strength from every obstacle. The path

leads to victory. . . There is education, knowledge for all. The state and society stand between us and the goal. We must go beyond the state and society. If we forego the battle, the political battle, we forego education, knowledge. "Through education to freedom," that is the wrong slogan, the slogan of the false friends. We respond: Through freedom to education! The people can achieve education only in a free state under popular rule. Only if the people gain political education will the gates of knowledge open up for it. Without power for the people no knowledge! Knowledge is power! – Power is knowledge!

NOTES

[1] This passage has not been translated from Liebknecht's German, but rather taken directly from Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, volume 1. London, 1857, pp. 218-19.

[2] * The lecture about this topic was delivered at the beginning of 1872.

Source: Wilhelm Liebknecht, "Knowledge is Power, Power is Knowledge" ["Wissen ist Macht, Macht ist Wissen"]. Speech delivered at the founding of the Dresden Association for Workers' Education, February 5, 1872. New edition. Berlin: Expedition der Buchhandlung Vorwärts (Th. Glocke in Berlin), 1904, pp. 11–13, 27–28, 49–52. Available online at: <http://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb11128194-8>

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: Wilhelm Liebknecht, "Knowledge is Power – Power is Knowledge" (February 5, 1872), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-21>> [April 17, 2024].