

Silvia Negruțiu

The Pedagogical System created by Anton Semyonovich Makarenko - a “profitable” Loan for “Re-education”

Abstract

Stressing the importance of the *teaching method* within the educational process and in defining a teacher's status, the author describes the pedagogical system created by Anton Semyonovich Makarenko, his perspective on pedagogical theory and practice, on education through and for the group, and on the significance of a detailed knowledge of the individuals in the group. Makarenko considered all these elements essential in the process of shaping the communist citizen. The author highlights the similarities between the educational ends pursued in the “Gorky Colony”, established and led by A. S. Makarenko, and those of the communist prisons in Romania, particularly in



Silvia Negruțiu is Phd Associate Professor at the University of Arts, Department of Teacher Training, Tîrgu-Mureș, Romania

the *Pitești Phenomenon*, as well as the multiple parallels between Makarenko's and the "re-education" strategies applied to political detainees; the conclusion of these comparisons is that the *Makarenko strategy* was well known and used in order to "re-educate".

The conclusions are structured around the idea that the pedagogical system created by A. S. Makarenko was instrumental in "creating the new man", unfortunately still present among us, despite the fact that communism has left the European political scene.

Keywords

Teaching method, teaching strategy, re-education, creating the new man, communist prisons

1 On the teaching method and its functions

This teacher "has a good method"! These words are often heard and one understands that the person referred to is a teacher whose didactic reputation is based on their remarkable professional achievements. One also understands that for many of us the teacher's personality is defined by their method of teaching, learning, and evaluating.

The "method", as a pedagogic concept, derives from the Greek word "methodos" composed in its turn of the noun "odos" (meaning way) and the preposition "metha" (translated by to/towards). Thus we may deduce that the method is actually a path leading to the achievement of a purpose in a given domain, in our case the education. The method is helpful in reaching an aim by defining the very action of "doing something"; it is something that leads to achieving the educational ends set beforehand.

The practical side of the method emerges from both teaching, and learning and evaluating; the aim pursued by the use of methods is the acquisition of knowledge, abilities, values, attitudes, as well as training and self-training strategies. It should be mentioned that the method becomes operational through the instruments it employs, called procedures and techniques that render the process efficient only in as much as the educator selects and applies them responsibly.

The method is often part of the effort to achieve certain objectives set for the process of training and educating. Choosing the method is therefore paramount, considering the multifarious aspects it relates to: the educational ends being pursued, the characteristics of the group of people being educated, the psycho-individual specificity of each one of them, the adjustment of educational means.

According to pedagogue Ioan Cerghit¹, the teaching methods have the following particular functions:

1. *a cognitive function* (knowledge);
2. *a formative-educative function* (forming attitudes and behaviours);
3. *an instrumental function* (operationalizing, performing);
4. *a normative function* (optimizing action – showing how to teach efficiently).

All the pedagogical methods employed in education form an open and flexible methodological system in which the methods can be structured and re-structured by the teacher in order to lend a higher degree of efficiency to the teaching process; this benefits both parties engaged in education and education itself because it consolidates the teacher's relationship and correlation with those being educated.

In its turn, the methodological system is a pivotal component of the teaching strategy alongside several others: the way the

¹ Ioan Cerghit, *Metode de învățământ*, (București: Edit. Didactică și Pedagogică, 1980), pp. 12-17.

activities of those being educated are organised (frontally, group-activities, individually, independently etc.), the system of the used teaching means (teaching materials), the type of learning experience (cooperative, active, interactive, creative, centred on discovery etc.).

What could we answer when asked the following – obviously rhetorical, perhaps non-pedagogically formulated, yet still useful – question: *which is the most important component of the teaching strategy?* What is the most important thing to know: *what is the optimal method to accomplish (...), how to organize the educational activity in order to accomplish (...), what means are helpful in accomplishing (...), or what types of learning I suggest in order to accomplish (...)?* Naturally, the expected answers depend on the aim the educator sets out to achieve.

In our present study the aim we will be considering is “the creation of the new man” the communist society of the 20th century was striving for; this society promoted a pedagogical system capable to “imagine and create a new man”, as well as the figure of the pedagogue who designed it, Anton Semyonovich Makarenko.

2 Makarenko and the method of “creating the new man”

Anton Semyonovich Makarenko was born into a worker’s family in Bilopillya, Ukraine, in March 1888 and died aged 51 in Moscow, in April 1939. As to his education we will note that he graduated the courses for primary school teachers in 1905 and the Poltava Pedagogical Institute in 1917, both forms of education having shaped his pedagogical views from early on. He supplemented his general knowledge and his notions of psycho-pedagogy through self-education: he was interested in general biology (he studied the works of biologists Timiryazev and Mechnikov, and read those of Darwin several times), chemistry (he was well acquainted with the works of Mendeleev), and astronomy (a field in which he was quite

proficient). Nevertheless, his views on education as well as his credo were forged in the turmoil of the 1905 Russian revolution. He later confessed that "our understanding for history was awakened by Bolshevik propaganda and the revolutionary events themselves."²

The objective of his scientific endeavours was implementing education in institutionalised environments (colonies for young offenders) with the purpose of "creating the new man", the communist. He began his work in the recently established soviet school. His preoccupation was to identify strategies that would lead easily and surely to achieving the set aim. That is why his first concern was to find the suitable form of organizing the activities of those being educated (the second component mentioned in the previous sub-section of this study, when listing the functions of a didactic strategy), choosing the frontal forms (he sought to create a strong and united group of pupils) and those based on groups (pupil detachments); he considered the most appropriate teaching experiences (the last component mentioned in the previous sub-section) for the form in which the educational activity was organized: active, through cooperation, experiential (organizing the pupils' work on the school's grounds). The following stage was to find out *how, by using which method* he could reach the purpose he intended for his education (the method being the first of the components of the teaching strategy listed above). The central methods he used were based on practical, real action (practical exercise, practical works), on methods of oral communication (explaining, informing), on methods of order-execution (physical exercises, paramilitary training, military games, parading with flags) that lent a military character to the pupils' activities. He also understood the importance of the teaching means (the third component of the teaching strategy in our

² Anton Semyonovich Makarenko, *Opere pedagogice alese*, (vol. II, 2nd ed., București: Edit. Didactică și Pedagogică, 1963), p. 3.

random list), making use of objects strongly suggestive of his vision such as the flag, the uniform, the bugle etc.

A simple look at Makarenko's model provides us with an answer to the question of this study, *which of the components of the teaching strategy is more important?* These elements can be separated only in theory, whereas in practice they are effective solely as a whole. In education a whole strategy is employed and each of its components has a precise and clear role, each of them being responsible for a certain aspect in the joint action they have to perform.

Makarenko had a particular propensity for certain topics relating to the education through and for the group: "building the group and the personality", "the collective's cell", "parallel action", "pedagogical technique"; he elaborated on them in public conferences, his contemporaries admiring him as a very talented speaker. These topics generated numerous writings published in the pedagogical review of his time, "Utchitelskaya gazeta" (The Teachers' Newspaper), as well as artistic creations: *The Pedagogical Poem* (1933-1935), *The Book for Parents* (1937), *Flags on Towers* (1938) that were later turned into films.

Even as early as the civil war – that had started in 1918 – Makarenko was interested in the rehabilitation and education of abandoned children and young offenders, beginning his professional trajectory in 1920 when he established the work colony mentioned earlier, a first in its time, called "the Gorky Colony" and led it. Appointing him at the helm of the colony the head of public education had told him this: "We need our own man! You must create him!"³ This appointment could only have been made based on the certainty that Makarenko would succeed; he possessed the "method", the guarantee of success and results were soon visible: through the pedagogical system he created, he was able to transform the former vagrant and

³ Idem, *Opere pedagogice alese*, (vol. I, 3rd ed. , București: Edit. de Stat Didactică și Pedagogică, 1960), p. 8.

criminal children into almost 3000 "new people", that is soviet citizens, faithful to their socialist duties. His method consisted of enforcing a military discipline and acclaiming the opinion of the collective; both aspects were devised to crush the personality of those being "educated". This in its turn became a political mission that Makarenko carried out by means of an education based on constraint, severe discipline, and oppressive surveillance.

Anton Semyonovich Makarenko promoted an education within and through the collective, being convinced that:

- the individual cannot be understood apart from the society or the group;
- one must create the collective and set its interests above all else;
- *people must not be educated in view of personal, but common happiness*, and for the common struggle;
- the strongest influence over an isolated individual can be exerted by acting in relation to the collective that individual is a member of, according to the principle of the "parallel action".

As to knowing the individuals forming the group, Anton Semyonovich Makarenko stressed the following ideas:

- a detailed knowledge of the individual is useful in order to render the educational activity more efficient;
- there is no set of standard methods: the secret is that the teacher should know the human being well enough to be able to give an accurate general view of it;
- it is useful to approach the individual with an optimistic mindset, even at the risk of being mistaken;
- it is useful to see in every pupil (who is actually a delinquent) a person with great creative abilities.

To conclude this section of the study, here is a synthetic overview of Anton Semyonovich Makarenko's perspective on pedagogical theory and practice:

- for him a requisite of the pedagogical theory was to perform a profound analysis of the practice and to grasp the phenomena at hand;

- he strove to achieve in his field of pedagogy the same scientific precision found in natural sciences;
- the detachments, the symbols, the reports, the militarization etc. were seen as successful methods only when preceded by the creation of a united, strong, and authoritative collective that the teacher had to know how to lead;
- he stated that the pedagogy of bourgeois society was one of the least studied fields of knowledge;
- he deeply disliked the chaos that plagued the organization of the pedagogical technique. He knew from experience that “it is impossible to get through to even one single hooligan: there is neither a method, instruments, nor logic”⁴;
- he dedicated his entire life to elaborating a philosophy of pedagogy, a solid methodology, and to the creation of the technique of communist education;
- he structured an original teaching system as a result of his extensive pedagogical practice;
- the basis of his system is the doctrine of Marx, Engels, and Lenin.

3 A “profitable” loan for the communist prisons: Makarenko’s “re-education” strategy

Shortly after the Russians had occupied Romania, reading Anton Semyonovich Makarenko’s works became compulsory in our country for certain categories of people: party activists, pupils, students, and even political prisoners. The indoctrination was cemented by way of regulations; those who rebelled against the regime’s “education” were destined to fall prey to the “re-education” carried out within the communist prisons which soon became too small for the vast numbers of intellectuals (literati, priests etc.) and simple faithful who would not accept losing their freedom and being manipulated.

⁴ Idem, *Opere pedagogice alese*, vol. II, p. 4.

The cause of detention was made up, the most common of accusations being that they had conspired against the social order and had neglected to denounce other people and certain actions.

From 1945 to 1989 the Romanian Communist Party implemented the inhuman system of organizing prisons inspired by Soviet Russia. The prison governors devised physical and psychological tortures, with the help of political officers who carried out party directives to the letter. The coordinators of this system referred to the life in communist prisons as an "experiment" because the prisoners (the young and old intellectuals) were indeed subjected to an experiment of "re-education" through torture. As potential threats to the system they were the object of a de-humanizing exercise meant to empty their minds and to fill that void with communist dogma. In order to diversify and amplify terror, the political detainees were often transferred from one prison to another. The result of this transformative action should have been "the new man" educated in the spirit of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine.

In 1949 the communist officials decided to implement Makarenko's "pedagogical" methods with the help of the secret police, the *Securitate*, such "practices" having been successfully employed in communist China. Thus the Romanian communist regime started its frightful experiments on people, the most notorious of which was the *Pitești Experiment*. Its subjects were over 1000 students aged 18 to 25, arrested throughout the country. Why students? Because they possessed the capacity to challenge the system. Why challenge it? Because the communists planned to destroy the Romanian intellectual tradition.

The general target of this *experiment* was to annihilate the country's intellectual potential that might pose a threat to the communist regime, because the latter did not need elites but rather people obeying the system, easily manipulated, people it could form and re-form as it pleased. Communist sadism knew

no boundaries: for the *Pitești Experiment* some of the former political prisoners were appointed as “re-educators” after having been tortured and promised to be set free and later employed in the *Securitate* as ranking officers, in exchange for extracting information from their prison mates.

Almost nothing of this was known during the communist era. People lived in a controlled haze, deprived of the right to speak, to react, and even worse, to know. Today we get to find out in the media and in the materials published after 1989 about the people who died in the communist prisons with their dignity intact, unbroken, about the people who “adapted” to the regime and became its henchmen, and also about those who survived the abject regime and who sometimes grace our television screens, recounting heart-wrenching episodes of their imprisonment. We also learn of pedagogues who have delivered their “educational” strategies into the hands of torturers. And then we see former torturers, learn their names and see they do not even blush remembering the terrible scenes they had once initiated and organized.

Nowadays we discover that there was a prolonged martyrdom in the forced labour camps and in the communist prisons designed to “re-educate” and exterminate, all of them filled with both criminals and numerous intellectuals who opposed the regime. Here are some of them: the re-education prisons in Suceava, Pitești, Gherla, Tîrgu-Ocna, Târgșor, Brașov, Ocele Mari, and Peninsula, and the ones in Sighet, Râmnicu Sărat, Galați, Aiud, Craiova, Brașov, Oradea, and Pitești meant to exterminate the political and intellectual elite.

The re-education was planned to take place in two stages: the unmasking and the re-education itself. The one who decided what the stages would be was called “chief-interrogator” and was directly subordinated to the *Securitate*. The unmasking also had two stages: the external unmasking aimed not only at the inmate but also at those close to him, and targeted against the thing dearest to his heart – faith, family, friends, and colleagues (either from outside or inside the prison). At this stage, the

physical violence was extreme. The prisoner was continuously tortured, day and night, until he was "brainwashed" (torturers' slang for the internal unmasking). "Brainwashing" was a long-lasting phenomenon: from 1949 to 1952.

In the following section we will refer to some of the tortures used on the prisoners and listed in the writings of those who delved in the distressing reality of the communist prisons.

The detainee was incessantly tortured, twenty four hours a day, with the most barbaric punishments, inhuman living conditions, starvation, physical and psychological abuse, an almost complete lack of medical treatment, inquiries, overpopulated cells etc.

In the "Encyclopaedia of Romania" (an online non-profit project set up by volunteers) the article presenting *Pitești phenomenon* cites Banu Rădulescu, a former political prisoner, stating that "nothing of that which could constitute a man's intimacy was forgotten; all that had once been education had to be demolished, the terrain of one's spirituality had to be left completely sterile, so that on that barren field a new man would arise, the result of re-education"⁵.

There was no way out of the devilish game for those forced into it: the re-educated person became a torturer himself, as a proof to him and to his group that the process was irreversible.

We will now attempt to list the elements forming the torture strategy suffered by the prisoners during their forced transformation into "new men", a procedure that began when they entered the prison and ended with successful indoctrination:

- the onset of the torture (beginning with the prison schedule);
- the order to adopt the unmasking position. "The student was made to sit on the bed or the bunk, his hands over his knees, head high, always facing forward, not being allowed to move at

⁵ http://enciclopediaromaniei.ro/wiki/Fenomenul_Pitești (accessed March 29, 2014).

all. Each student was guarded by an orderly, recruited from among those who had already gone through unmasking, naturally. The slightest breach of this discipline was severely punished on the spot by the orderly himself; he then reported it to his superior, who ordered additional punishment”⁶.

- being beaten for days on end;

- “extenuation caused by lack of sleep; verbal abuse; being burnt with cigarette butts; having water or acid poured down continuously on the prisoners’ bodies; being coerced to acknowledge false accusations; suffering humiliations, intimidation, lies, threats; losing one’s mind; being deafened or blinded by light; being forced to kneel or stand upright; being deprived of water, sleep, heat; being locked in a stall filled with bedbugs; tortured with a machine designed to rip out fingernails; fracturing one’s spinal cord; being forced to wear a straitjacket”⁷.

- forced physical exercises;

- the procedure called “watching the spectacle”. “The physical tortures are combined with the psychological; one’s torture is combined with the spectacle of someone else’s. In this way the attack on one’s innermost self is complete and relentless. The state of partial paralysis the self enters as a result of torture – and as a last resort in search for protection – is dissolved when one has to watch the other’s suffering. This procedure gives the person the feeling that his self can no longer live on its own and that any resistance is futile. In fact, this is the truth. Submission is only a question of time”⁸.

⁶ Mircea Stănescu, *Reeducare totală. Eseu asupra Fenomenului Pitești (1949-1952)*, p. 3, at <http://mircea-stanescu.blogspot.ro/2007/12/reeducarea-total-eseu-asupra.html> (accessed March 29, 2014).

⁷ Irina-Maria Manea in *Pitești, amintiri din mlaștina disperării*, p. 1, at http://www.historia.ro/exclusiv_web/general/articol/pitesti-amintiri-mlastina-disperării (accessed March 29, 2014).

⁸ Mircea Stănescu, quoted essay, p. 4, at <http://mircea-stanescu.blogspot.ro/2007/12/reeducarea-total-eseu-asupra.html>.

- "external unmasking": "the prisoner is forced to denounce all those who had helped him in any way, outside or inside the prison; statistics mention around 3000 arrests made solely on the grounds provided by this procedure";
- "internal unmasking" (banishing all form of belief and attachment to loved ones from one's heart);
- "the autobiography": the last stage of re-education (the shadow of a new personality, adapted to the ideology of the regime rose from the ruins of one's self).
- the anguish, the despair, and the fear: "excruciating fear, deceit, and suffering, as states of one's soul, that for an undetermined period of time will unite against the man, turning him into his own enemy, paralysing every reaction that might save him"⁹.
- the madness: "being unable to hold on to anything and anyone; that absolute isolation of the inner person becomes unbearable and the Self is driven on the brink of madness"¹⁰. "In order to avoid madness, the only alternative is to accept reality. But the actual reality no longer exists. The tangible universe of the prison has been emptied. It is temporarily filled with terror so as to make room for the ideological reality"¹¹;
- adapting to the communist system;
- the double personality (not adapting): "a person forced to hide, to whom only the closest friends and family can get, and another conformist one out into the open. This double personality actually hides a *double way of thinking*"¹².
- the annihilation of one's thoughts;
- *complete ideological conformity (the purpose and the result of re-education)*.

⁹ Dumitru, Bacu, *Pitești. Centru de reeducare studențească*, (București: Edit. Atlantida, 1991), p. 113.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 87.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Virgil Ierunca, *Fenomenul Pitești*, (București: 1991, Edit. Humanitas), p. 86.

4 Conclusions

The end result is the first element we consider when planning an educational activity, the point of reference we relate to when implementing a project and estimating its success. We are therefore going to formulate the conclusions on the “re-education” phenomenon, beginning with the similarities between the educational ends we analysed in this study. In the “Gorky Colony” the educational purpose was a political mission: *We need our own man! You must create him!* – “our own man” meaning the soviet citizen devoted to socialist duties. In the *Pitești experiment* (and generally the communist prisons) the educational end was also a political mission: creating “the new man” by means of real and unconditional ideological adherence. Therefore it comes as no surprise that the *Makarenko educational strategy* applied in the “Gorky Colony” and the “re-education” strategy to which the political prisoners were submitted share striking similarities: the former consisted of braking the person in, conditioning, and brain-washing, while the latter was centred on demolishing the person, forced isolation, being evacuated from one’s own personality, and simulating a new personality.

So far, our conclusions allow us to believe that the torturers knew Makarenko’s “re-education” strategy in detail, a fact emphasised in the memoirs published by those who were able to survive the most horrible experiment of their time, the *Pitești experiment*: Eugen Țurcanu the torturer-in-chief and the “re-education committee” read Makareko’s works together, in order to extract their “method” and “general orientation”.

What is the algorithm indicating the “didactical” level of the “re-educator” in the attempt to “create the new man”? For Makarenko the algorithm ranks the following components: having a high standard pedagogical theory and practice, educating through and for the group, and possessing a refined psycho-pedagogical knowledge of the individuals so as to

"form" them as you please. These three components are linked by unconditional subordination.

A synthesis of the "re-education" process of the detainees contained the following elements: firstly, braking them in – that annihilated their ability to think, their judgement, their faith, conscience, feelings, will, reducing the man to a mere stimulus-reaction mechanism, just like a trained animal. Their behaviour became completely conditioned, responding to external stimuli by a certain observable behaviour (the one the educator intended) on the grounds that for a stimulus X they had once displayed reaction Y ("this has happened before"). The thought processes, the feelings, and so on were no longer activated. As this training got more and more entrenched, the process of destroying the person gained ever greater momentum. Personal obliteration engendered an isolation that came to dominate the ruins left behind by this destruction. The human being thus became both subject and witness to its own demolition. This was the most favourable time to begin building a new being, "the new man", inhabited by the "builder's" ideology.

The *Pitești experiment* is the perfect example that re-education is operable. Virgil Ierunca described the punitive mechanism, one of the means of carrying re-education into effect: "turning the prisoners into the torturers of their fellow inmates, not allowing the cell to be a space of solidarity, inner rest, and moral recovery. Destroying the prisoner's physical strength, forcing him not only to invent crimes, endlessly repeat things he does not believe in, but also to become the others' torturer"¹³.

In a letter addressed to Makarenko in 1933, A. M. Gorky wrote: "In my opinion, your greatly important and surprisingly successful pedagogical experiences are of global significance"¹⁴.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p.84.

¹⁴ Anton Semyonovich Makarenko, *Opere pedagogice alese*, vol. I, p. 6.

In response to Gorky's lines, we would have to say that Makareko's system would have a worldwide significance if we could imagine the unimaginable, the terrible idea that the world is a sum of individuals without souls and incapable of free thought. As to the satisfaction of "success", it would only be reserved to the henchmen. For the rest of the people with a normal, constructive thinking, Makarenko's "pedagogical" experiences were a long-term human disaster, because even now, at the beginning of the third millennium, people "indoctrinated" by the dehumanising communist education are still among us, albeit communism has long since left the stage of European politics.

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