


Current challenges for Popular Education in Latin America

Desafíos para la Educación Popular en América Latina hoy (resumen: p. 10)

Desafios para a Educação Popular na América Latina hoje (resumo: p. 10)

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The processes of Popular Education in all fields are continuously challenged by the scenarios and situations in which they occur. These processes are only significant when perceived in terms of their practical and theoretical response to such challenges. This work is a critical-reflective essay, through which we address five interconnected aspects that determine the current context in our region in Latin America and the Caribbean: 1) the eroded liberal democracy; 2) the market fundamentalism; 3) the offensive for conservative restoration; 4) higher inequality, exclusion and social and political polarization; 5) reinforcement of the dominant logic and values. Subsequently, we outline deadlocks, possibilities and horizons of popular education in the face of such problems. We also point out the current perspectives for the actions of the protagonists of those experiences guided by Popular Education.

Keywords: Popular education. Social practices. Paulo Freire. Conjuncture. Challenges.



Introduction

This work is a critical-reflective essay aimed at sharing reflections on the main current challenges in the field of popular education in Latin America. In this context, some factors are taken into account, such as the exigent demands brought about by the strong presence of the neoliberal perspective in the public agenda of the countries in the region, as well as the social and political forces that promote an offensive for conservative restoration in the face change efforts in recent years.

The processes of popular education in all fields (health, organization, participation, defense of human rights, school and university institutions, agroecological training, etc.) are continuously challenged by the scenarios and situations in which they occur. These processes are only significant when perceived in terms of their practical and theoretical response to such challenges.

Therefore, by referring to such challenges to popular education in Latin America today, we must refer to the current Latin-American and Caribbean context, which, from local, regional and national spaces, defies us to propose actions and reflections based on the will of the popular majorities of our countries.

For this purpose, we address five interconnected aspects that determine the current context in our region, Latin America and the Caribbean, which, albeit present different nuances and particularities in each country, and even within them, can be considered as a general trend.

Liberal democracy eroded

The first idea is that liberal democracy is entirely eroded in Latin America. The word “eroded” reflects the idea that everything the liberal democracy constituted has no longer the same influence or utility. It represents a dissolution of all those factors which gave meaning to the constitution of liberal democracy, but no longer represents it: it is now reduced to an electoral moment completely penetrated by mercantilization and by the media manipulation; the real basis of representativeness has been eroded, and the construction of effective participation in permanent democratic processes is not even considered at this moment.

Many political parties are unaware of everyday life and specific problems of people. The political space has been occupied by political-economic actors unconcerned to the dynamics of social movements, without dialogue, without consistent and stable links with the people with whom they must dialogue. Vertical and unilateral power is exercised from the spaces of government (executive or legislative). It is a very common confusion to reduce public policies to what the government does. However, public policies must be thought beyond the governmental sphere: in order to “public”, it must be thought of as a policy that is appropriated by the citizens, who analyze, discuss and play a crucial role in its formulation and execution and in the monitoring of its conformity and evaluation. “Public” is not just governmental. It is the responsibility of governments to dialogue and establish policies based on the needs and proposals of citizens. By doing so, sectors and social movements have the possibility (and



responsibility) to contribute to build the logic and the directions of these policies. Such central dimensions of the democratic exercise of power are becoming increasingly absent in our region.

The market fundamentalism

For some decades, our region has been dominated by neoliberal policies that aim to enable the economy to be ruled exclusively by market rules, and also reduce the role of the State by deregulating the use and supervision of natural resources and privatizing services such as energy and water supply, health and education.

However, it is not just the neoliberal policies that are becoming prevalent in the economic management of our region. It is also an individualistic and consumerist way of thinking in which everything becomes merchandise and a space for competition. Thus, such hegemonic logic is imposed on all economic, social, political and cultural relations. Knowledge is sold through multiples forms of privatization and control. The market, the competence and the profit are the prevalent value, and, therefore, the “ethics” that rules the pockets, the minds and the hearts.

This market fundamentalism is deeply dehumanizing for it directly annuls the values of solidarity, common good, mutual support, respect and care for nature, equity and justice, which have characterized the customs of our native peoples and the aspirations of the popular majorities in our region.

The offensive for conservative restoration

After the progressive reform processes that took place in the last 20 years – which did not represent a radical change in the model of capitalist society, but sought to reduce social gaps in several Latin American countries, such as Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Uruguay, Bolivia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and also important mobilizations in other countries –, we currently face an intensive offensive for conservative restoration which, through electoral processes, seeks to re-establish past times for the benefits of traditional dominant sector and transnational powers.

This offensive signifies an important loss of conquered rights, increased inequality and social exclusion, criminalization of protests, greater depredation of nature and increased repression. On the other hand, it is also generating new forms of resistance, organization and mobilization, expressed in new forms of cultural, artistic and ecological action, solidarity-based economy, community health and gender identity, which are accompanied by processes of critical and transforming popular education.



Increased inequality, exclusion and social and political polarization

An expression of what was previously stated is that we currently live in Latin America with an increasing inequality in terms of economic, social, political and cultural conditions, which reflects a clear setback in terms of democratic quality. When it comes to democracy, we must think about economic democracy, social democracy and cultural democracy. Such levels of inequality and exclusion that we experience continuously express anti-democratic, authoritarian, discriminatory and exclusive relations.

Furthermore, all of this is creating a greater polarization between the people and the political forces, which can be expressed by the increasing aggressiveness: debates are not generated with real arguments, but rather with total and disqualifying exclusion of reason and contrary arguments as a starting point.

There are basically two conflicting models that belong to two paradigms in total confrontation: on one hand, a paradigm of profit, market, individualism, values that are at center of politics and society; on the other hand, there is a proposal to build a paradigm of life and solidarity, a paradigm of an idea of democracy, where all people can fit and all rights are respected. This polarization expresses an antagonism of such models. We live in a time when we are unable to be neutral, but we are rather in dispute over which of these models will guide us in our societies.

In despite of having resorted to mechanisms of formal democracy, this offensive, which intends to go back in history, is profoundly anti-democratic because it is fraught with aggressiveness, violence, disrespect and denial of citizenship rights for all people.

Reinforcement of the dominant logic and values

For this reason, the dominant social, political and ideological forces of companies, parties and the media are currently reinforcing the “hegemonic logic”, which is capitalist, patriarchal, extractive, racist and colonial. This logic unites all these elements in an ideological amalgamation, under a single form of domination, which seeks to impose itself under a falsely democratic discourse and disguise.

The conservative offensive highlights and imposes an individualistic, consumerist, conformist, passive and intolerant subjectivity. Everyone must seek to save themselves and diminish other if necessary, also promoting resignation in the face of this reality that is presented as the only possibly one, and trying to change it is nonsense. It is also a fundamentalist and messianic subjectivity, in which religious arguments are used to justify neoliberal policies in economic, social, political, environmental and cultural terms.

All of this generates demobilization and intolerance, two aspects that destroy democratic relations, because, due to such conditions, it is more difficult to generate processes of an effective democratic debate. It is a more violent scenario, verbally and physically speaking; a context of violence against women and against everything that dares to think about another possible world other than the existing one. The criminalization of protests means violence against those who oppose it and believe that this model can be changed. All of this causes demobilization and resignation



processes that internalize and generalize that “it is not possible to change”. Thus, initiatives that seek to promote protagonism and political influence of popular sectors and movements are weakened.

These processes have actors that are present in the poorest and most vulnerable communities, carrying out assistance actions that manage to alleviate many of the daily problems that public policies abandon: it is the other extreme of neoliberal politics, because, while the State ignores such sectors of society, these groups work with people in their communities and build relationships of trust, identity and security.

What about the Popular Education?

Based on these five characteristics of the current context, we would like to deepen some ideas on education and on the importance of creating identity and spaces of common and solidary construction in order to think and build an equitable and just society.

By “Popular Education” we refer to something that must always be comprehended according to the spaces and historical contexts where it takes place. This is the reason why one may not refer to “the” popular education as a single, homogenous or uniform process. Thus, it is more appropriate to refer to it as “popular education processes”: processes that correspond to particular moments and contexts. We must understand what it means to promote popular education processes at each historical moment. The history of Latin America can teach us a lot, not in order to repeat it, but to inspire us for the future and to face the current challenges¹.

All popular education processes in Latin America have always been linked to a process of organization, participation and aspiration of spaces for the construction of democracy. For instance, in the 19th century, popular education was considered as “public education”, and arose the notion that education should not be just a privilege as it was for the nobles of the colony, but that it should be a right for the entire population². Since then, we find a democratic aspiration in the term “popular education”³.

When the Cuban Revolution carried out the National Literacy Campaign – which was a debt for the majority of the people; or when the Allende government in Chile proposed the “National Unified School” in the 1970’s as part of the Popular Unity government program, and community and factory committees conceived the “Popular Unity Committees” as a space for organization and political training; or when the Nicaraguan Revolution resulted in the idea that all education in the country – formal, non-formal, informal, from preschool to adult – should be popular education: in all of these cases, Popular Education Processes were stated to be linked to democratic aspirations that strengthen the power, the capacities and the participation of the people. Such democratic aspiration that has always accompanied popular education processes is present when the Zapatista movement in the 1990’s rose up and created processes of valorization of identity from indigenous. It built a new democratic political culture where the Boards of Good Government as self-government was governed by the principle of “Order by Obeying”, and spoke of a popular education to build a world “where all worlds fit”^{1,4}.

In this perspective, as stated by Mota Neto and Streck⁵, the

educação popular da segunda metade do século XX possui antecedentes e fontes de inspiração que fazem parte da história de resistência e da inventividade pedagógica na América Latina. Isso nos permite caracterizar, historicamente, a educação popular como uma das tradições pedagógicas mais originais nascidas na América Latina. Não se trata apenas de um pensamento educacional, mas também de um movimento de educadores, profundamente conectados com a história do continente, com realidade própria das classes populares latino-americanas, suas experiências reais, seus saberes ancestrais, suas necessidades e seus projetos de vida. (p. 212)

However, it is important to understand that popular education processes are not just a method. They do not correspond only to a methodology or to the use of some techniques. They are rather based on a philosophy, on an emancipatory ethical, political and pedagogical paradigm⁶. This paradigm of solidarity, of people as creative subjects of societies, is a paradigm that expresses itself from the ethical sense of life in the political construction of other power relations. It underlies and guides a pedagogy that – as a dialogical, critical, horizontal and transforming process – enables the construction of spaces and subjects that produce a democratic society and democratic relations in all fields and levels of social life as pre-figurative spaces in which we can show that it is possible to live in a different way than the one imposed by the system. It is also a way to unlearn the authoritarian, vertical and patriarchal power relations in which were formed, by exploring other forms of collective, synergistic and constructive power exercise.

Popular education processes should also be a space for creating affection, mutual care, building trust and complicity, and for valuing the characteristics of each person in their particularity. Spaces where not only the mind, ideas or arguments are present, but where our whole body travels with our emotions, sensitivities, sensualities, efforts and frustrations. Spaces where hope and shared dreams manifest themselves vividly. Spaces for creating and exercising creativity, where all languages and forms of expression have space to unfold freely.

Therefore, the Freirian inspiration of a liberating education² – that builds the capacities of people as subjects committed to a social transformation of history – implies an integral formation in which pedagogical processes can develop all our capacities. It would be a contradiction to carry out authoritarian, vertical or doctrinal educational processes, in order to implement processes of truly human coexistence and democratic participation. Hence the criticism of “banking” education, for it is vertical and authoritarian. Hence the proposal for a problematizing, dialogical and horizontal education, which articulates practice with theory and develops critical thinking, the ecology of knowledges and the vocation of humanization; and, therefore, develops transformative human capacities so to become subjects of history.



The contributions of Freire reinforce that the proposals to be a subject for social transformation and subject for creative educational processes are closely related. If we are educated as critical and creative people, it will be expressed in critical and creative forms of social participation.

A key idea by Freire⁷ in his book “Pedagogy of Autonomy” is: “teaching is not transferring knowledge, but creating the conditions for its production or construction”. This idea is not appropriated accordingly. Educating is not transferring content; it is rather implementing conditions to produce, create and build transformative knowledge. So, the most important question is: how do we implement the right conditions for a learning process and a critical reflection, for creating the capacity for analysis, communication and awareness of problems, in order to work and understand what happens around us? In short, in order to develop our leadership skills and build popular leadership in social, political and cultural life. Thus, when we refer to popular education processes, we talk about processes that take place at all levels and spaces. They create capacities that represent essential contributions to the spaces of democratization, in order to implement spaces for effective participation. Consequently, they demand institutional spaces and modify the authoritarian and exclusive rules of the exercise of an eroded formal democracy.

If we have a paradigm for transforming the society into a just, equitable and democratic place, it does not represent a distant utopia. It is rather a paradigm that should guide our daily actions in the search for reducing the inequalities and eliminating injustices. Utopias must be manifested in daily life and in people’s actions; it is the way people build it from now on. It is not something waiting for us along the way or at end of our path. Such utopia must be built daily by the social actors, considering their conditions, and analyzing and transforming this reality together.

A democratic society is not possible if we do not implement spaces for democratization in the family, at home, at work, at school, in our communities, unions, parties and organizations... In all dimensions where there are power relations, we must think: are these power relations authoritarian or democratic? Do they build capacities for transformation or do they build resignation and passivity? What do we do of our work every day: do we favor these conditions for the protagonism of people and for their conformity?

As Mota Neto and Streck⁵ state, it is always necessary to remember that:

o continente latino-americano é um território marcado por profunda exploração e desigualdade. Porém, por sua própria condição de periferia do sistema-mundo, irrompeu ao longo da história, como contrapartida à dominação, um manancial de lutas e resistências, de que são protagonistas os coletivos populares que procuraram reescrever a história com seus próprios valores, cosmovisões e ideais. (p. 219)

Thus, we return to the importance of that firm recommendation by Paulo Freire, which is always to make a critical reflection on our own practice; make a self-critical analysis and learn from them, considering that we, the educators, have in practice the main source of our permanent education. The popular educators are in the process of education all the time. We never finish our education. And what can precisely help us, in a permanently innovative and creative practice, is the critical reflection on our practice. On this aspect, the Brazilian educator Amieiro Júlio Ferreira Calado⁸, one of the pioneers of popular education actions in that country, reinforces that the process of popular formation:

que interessa aos membros das forças sociais imbuídas da tarefa de construção de uma sociabilidade alternativa à ordem vigente, há de comportar uma diversidade de situações e dimensões que abarcam todo o existir. Trata-se de trabalhar, de modo concatenado e ininterrupto, as mais diferentes facetas da existência - econômica, política, cultural-, de maneira a interligar os mais distintos aspectos da vida humana e do planeta: relações com o Cosmos; relações de espacialidade; relações ecológicas; relações de gênero; relações de orientação sexual; relações étnicas; relações geracionais; relações de caráter místico⁸. (p. 53-4)

Thus, the “systematization of experiences”, according to Jara⁹, is being continuously assumed as a fundamental factor in popular education processes, which prevents us from being passive, conformist or repetitive, and gives us the ability to enrich the educational theory and the new practices due to the learning we obtain.

Final considerations

The challenge that we have at this historic moment in Latin America – in all possible spaces – is to build and strengthen democratizing capacities, and enable the utopia of equity, justice, respect for diversity and care for life, from the concrete and everyday spaces in which we live. For this reason, it is of utmost importance to commit ourselves to transforming the conditions that generate this hegemonic cultural matrix marked by individualism, mercantilization of life, colonized mentality, consumerism, violence and patriarchal domination, which are expressed in the current dominant capitalist system that oppresses most of the world.

In the face of the offensive for conservative restoration, which already shows its limits and weaknesses; in the face of the media manipulation; in the face of the hate and intolerance speech, popular education processes are challenged to implement spaces of solidary, autonomous and critical relationships, capable of formulating arguments and mobilizing convictions that represent these new imaginary, with which we can generate transformative actions by rescuing our identities. The popular processes are also called upon to strengthen the capacity for analysis, mobilization and proposition that will influence the definition, execution and evaluation of public policies – health, education, housing, pensions, care for the environment and life, management of budgets and financial resources, among other). The interesting thing is that we are already undertaking these challenges in our practices. We must continue building contacts, networks, contacts, spaces for meeting and inter-learning, so as not to hinder our progress.

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Los procesos de Educación Popular en todos los campos siempre se ven desafiados por las situaciones y condiciones del contexto en el que se desarrollan. No tienen sentido en sí mismos, aislados, sino solo en términos de la respuesta práctica y teórica a estos desafíos. Este artículo es un ensayo crítico y reflexivo, a través del cual desarrollamos cinco aspectos interrelacionados que marcan el contexto de nuestra región en América Latina y el Caribe hoy: 1) democracia liberal desgastada; 2) fundamentalismo del mercado; 3) ofensiva de restauración conservadora; 4) mayor desigualdad, exclusión y polarización social y política; 5) refuerzo de la lógica y los valores dominantes. Luego, delineamos callejones sin salida, posibilidades y horizontes de la educación popular frente a estos problemas e indicamos las perspectivas actuales para la actividad de los protagonistas de las experiencias orientadas por la Educación Popular.

Palabras clave: Educación popular. Prácticas sociales. Paulo Freire. Coyuntura. Desafíos.

Os processos de Educação Popular em todos os campos são sempre desafiados pelas situações e condições do contexto em que são realizados. Eles não fazem sentido em si mesmos, isolados, mas apenas em termos de resposta prática e teórica a esses desafios. O presente artigo constitui um ensaio crítico e reflexivo, por meio do qual desenvolvemos cinco aspectos inter-relacionados que marcam o contexto de nossa região da América Latina e do Caribe hoje: 1) democracia liberal desgastada; 2) fundamentalismo do mercado; 3) ofensiva de restauração conservadora; 4) aumento da desigualdade, exclusão e polarização social e política; 5) reforço da lógica e dos valores dominantes. Em seguida, delineamos impasses, possibilidades e horizontes da educação popular diante desses problemas e indicamos as perspectivas atuais para a atividade dos protagonistas das experiências orientadas pela Educação Popular.

Palavras-chave: Educação popular. Práticas sociais. Paulo Freire. Conjuntura. Desafios.

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