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OTRA ECONOMÍA AND ANTHROPOLOGY

What Can Anthropology Offer To Understanding Emancipatory Educational Practices?

Ana Inés Heras

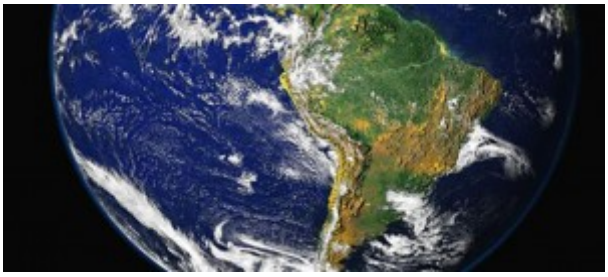
A View From South America

In my last column I described some characteristics associated to emancipatory education as a perspective.
I also stated that this is a long tradition in Latin America and has endured over time, even though the political scenario in many of our countries has made it difficult for the inheritance to pass along, due to the severe effects of military dictatorships during the 70´s and 80´s in our region that directly attacked it.

As way of providing context, there were important initiatives during the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX in Argentina and Uruguay, where social movements (eg, workers´ cooperatives or immigrant mutual aid associations) and political organizations and parties (eg, communists, socialists and anarchists) focused on promoting distinctive educational practices (see Imen, 2012).
Their aim was two-fold:

- To promote access to education (in this line they supported access to literacy as a human right).
- To understand education as part of a more comprehensive action upon society (they aimed at actively incorporating critical learning to foster meaningful change, oriented by justice).

This is a tradition that has lived through the XXI century in South America at specific types of schools, such as the Bachilleratos Populares, Schools run as Cooperatives of Workers, *Escuelas de gestión social*, and Locally Situated Educational Experiences run by Social Movements (see Sverdlick y Costas, 2008).



A composite image of the Western hemisphere of the Earth. Image courtesy NASA and wikicommons

There is also a body of anthropologically oriented research focused on these educational experiences. For example, Roberto de Elisalde has coordinated a three-book series on "Movimientos Sociales and Education" on experiences in Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay. The first book focuses on "Theory and history of Popular Education", the second on "Workers and Education: from union strategies to social movement action" and the third one analyzes "Social movements, popular education and self-managed, self-governed work-spaces" (compilations published in 2009, 2011 and 2013 respectively). From an inter-disciplinary perspective (i.e., education, social psychology, anthropology, sociology and political science), the authors have documented and analyzed the differences and commonalities of the educational devices created at these settings.

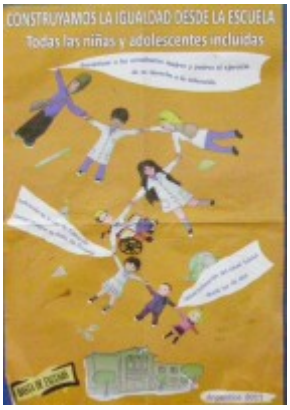
The work of Javier García is looking at Bachilleratos Populares in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He is contrasting his anthropological approach with research being conducted by other colleagues in similar school settings for he finds that building "autonomous collective thinking and practice" in the Bachilleratos is an every-day tension: students and teachers find themselves many times reproducing a logic that contradicts the Bachillerato´s orientation, and yet they try to interrogate their practice once and again. What is still at debate, García

points out, is whether what students and teachers call *autonomy* at the Bachilleratos is currently promoting a different type of *educated collective and individual subject* or not, and exactly how (which is also the center of anthropological research being conducted by Andrada in Brazil). García´s field-work (as it can be read from notes directly portrayed in his publications) and analysis also show some characteristics, indeed novel if these Bachilleratos were to be compared to other schools: that there are specific times and spaces where pedagogical practice is discussed (both by teachers and students together in assembly type configuration), and that there is a struggle to analyze how the state-bureaucratic logic may or may not be impacting their school work (same findings can be read in the work of Álvarez 2014, unpublished MA Thesis and in Bachillerato Arbolito´s members words).

Círculo de aprendizaje / Cultural Circle at Unión Solidaria de Trabajadores. Photo courtesy Ana Heras

In line with the idea that *emancipatory education* has a long tradition in South America we can also mention the work of some key educators (in Argentina, Uruguay, Colombia and Brazil for example) at public schools during the second half of the XX century. For example, in Uruguay, the work of Jesualdo Sosa at public rural schools was key in developing a pedagogy based on critically examining the world, researching it, and constructing evidence-based knowledge. He, as other of his colleagues in Argentina, such as Olga Cossettini and Luis Iglesias, also pursued educational methods based on critically examining the world, posing questions, supporting students to search

for evidence and contrasting it, and establishing ways in which all these learning processes could be shared with other students and teachers (a collective conception of learning). As other important teachers of his time, Jesualdo published his work (he wrote books and essays between 1927 and 1974) because he believed in making public his teaching methods, which in turn, were based on research on his own practice. All these educators can be said to have an anthropological angle on their work and analysis of what they did, for they sought to make the familiar strange, to interrogate common sense and everyday school practice, and to foster a way of understanding school work that was related to larger contextual cultural patterns.



Construyamos la igualdad. Poster at Escuela Isauro Arancibia. Photo courtesy Ana Heras

This tradition can still be recognized nowadays. Marta Marucco and a team of educators at the Cultural Center for Cooperation in Argentina are currently examining this line of work. Another key example is the work of Mariana Paula Dosso who has studied the work of a collective team of teachers, one principal, and several other education related professionals, to create a public school to attend the needs of children and youth who have been expelled from other school contexts. She analyzes this school over time, identifying the changes that took place over 15 years of practice (1998-2014).

Mural work portraying Isauro Arancibia (teacher assassinated by the dictatorship) Photo courtesy Ana Heras

Common to the other experiences we cited in this column, she finds that educators and students together discuss their school experience, find ways to solve a range of problems that this type of student population have to face (amongst the most crucial ones are not having a stable home, not being able to provide for their support and that of their families´, and not finding easy access to other vital needs such as health services), work to build multi-literacy with their students (numeracy, reading and writing, visual literacy, technology and digital literacy), and, mostly, to understand literacy in a Freirean sense: to understand the world/the word.

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