Postcolonial Directions in Education
Volume 10 Issue 2, 2021 | 305-326

LEARNING THROUGH COLLECTIVE ACTION AND SOCIAL MOBILIZATIONS IN PORTUGAL: DIALOGUES WITH PAULO FREIRE'S PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT In this article, we analyse social mobilizations in Portugal as privileged spaces for collective learning. What is learned and how is it learned in the context of struggle? What makes each and everyone involved in a protest? What dilemmas and contradictions mark these processes? To what extent are these experiences related to Freire's pedagogy? In this sense, we established four learning categories: operational, strategic, convivial and political-ideological. The analysis of the dynamics experienced in these contexts derives from five core concepts in Paulo Freire: dialogue, conscientization, conflict, indignation and hope. Finally, we offer some clues about the relationship between dispositions, contexts and capitals.

RESUMO Neste artigo analisamos as mobilizações sociais em Portugal enquanto espaços privilegiados de aprendizagem coletiva. O que se aprende e como se aprende nos contextos de luta? O que faz cada um e cada uma envolver-se num protesto? Que dilemas e contradições marcam estes processos? Em que medida essas experiências se relacionam com a pedagogia freiriana? Nesse sentido, estabelecemos quatro categorias de aprendizagem: operacionais, estratégicas, conviviais e político-ideológicas. A análise das dinâmicas vividas nesses contextos é feita, também, a partir de cinco conceitos nucleares em Paulo

[1] The publication was supported by FCT – Foundation for Science and Technology, within the scope of UIDB/00727/2020.

Freire: o diálogo, a conscientização, o conflito, a indignação e a esperança. Por fim, deixamos algumas pistas sobre a relação entre disposições, contextos e capitais.

KEYWORDS Collective learning; social mobilizations; critical education; militant dispositions; Freire's pedagogy

"We lived in the streets, nobody was home at night", "there was this sense of 'urgency', we thought that "we could change the world", not least because "everything had yet to be done" (Gomes et al, 2005: 75)

This is the testimonial of a participant in the literacy campaigns during the PREC –Revolutionary Process in Progress, which followed the 25 April 1974 revolution in Portugal and lasted about one and a half years. During what was dubbed the "golden age" of adult education and training, educational, social and cultural experiences that challenged employer, state and military powers sprang up throughout the country, bringing about "new types of social relations and new forms of social organisation and exercise of power", becoming an "immense and dynamic collective learning process", through participation in "debates and decision-making, in struggles, in the autonomous management of villages, factories or companies" (Canário, 2006: 211-213). This powerful popular movement represented an "explosion of autonomy", the background of which was "arduously and persistently structured and preserved by the autonomous activity of the labour movement from the 19th century to 1974." The "political work of the resistance was strongly cultural" during the Fascist period and was carried out through a dense network of recreational and cultural associations, the construction of various forms of mutualism, the creation of the trade union movement, but

also through more informal approaches, such as the collective reading of newspapers or study circles, even in adverse contexts such as political prisons (Canário, 2007: 19-21).

With the newly found freedom and restoration of democracy in April 1974, the educational project continued working towards the construction of a socialist society. The motto of the literacy campaigns – "conscientise, organise, mobilise" (Melo and Benavente, 1978: 37) – truly represents the driving force of those processes. Learning took place through political participation in different venues and forms – associations, cooperatives, public libraries, theatre companies, occupied factories – blurring the boundaries between what was and what was not educational, between physical and intellectual work, between formal and informal education, between educator and learner, at a time when "Paulo Freire's ideas were a norm and not an alternative." (Stoer and Dale, 1999: 68). To cite but one example, the assessment of adult literacy, laid down in Implementing Order (*Portaria*) 419 of 13 July 1976, referred to the ability to "read and understand newspaper articles, newsletters and notices", "completing applications" or "writing neighbourhood committees' announcements" (Melo and Benavente, 1978:117-118). When reflecting on this period, Pintassilgo highlights that it was "quite a laboratory of pedagogical experiments", regretting that the "simple recalling" of some of those experiments is enough to "sense the great divide that separates us from those times of intense social mobilisation and strong belief in the power of education" (2015: 15-18).

In fact, almost fifty years later, there is not much left other than nostalgic memories of those times of defiance and collective subversion. Protests and social movements in Portugal – whether spontaneous or organised – have since then been discreet, if not barely existing, with very few exceptions, such as that of the student struggle in the

mid-1980s or, more recently, during the economic crisis and Troika intervention between 2011 and 2013. Along the same lines, the field of popular adult education has also been affected by the technocratic drift. While, traditionally, adult education has always "favoured associative, community and local dynamics, as well as devices for critical mobilisation and political and citizenship education" (Lima, 2006: 15), today it has called forth a "logic of certification production", a "subordination of the concept of education to the concepts of training" and of an individualist and competitive "lifelong learning" (ibidem: 17-18).

In the year marking the centenary of the birth of Paulo Freire, one needs to take a fresh look at his legacy, in the context of contemporary movements and collective actions, based on the experience of a militant research carried out in Portugal during the period of austerity (Barbosa, 2016), but also based on the participation of both authors in political parties, unions or movements. What is learned and how is it learned in the contexts of struggles? Why do people take to the streets to protest? What dilemmas and contradictions mark these processes? To what extent are these experiments and learning related to Freire's pedagogy?

1. Education and learning in collective action

The dimensions of associations, activist groups or social movements are plural, as are their forms of organisation, the objectives that drive them, and the degree and type of impact they can have in the context where they operate. Therefore, to refer to learning in associations or social movements tends to be misleading, in that we would always be referring to distinct and often divergent realities. Paulo Freire, in a rare essay where he clearly discusses the relation between education and social movements, calls all collectives where "knowledge and the

transformation of better living go hand in hand" the Popular Movement: "workers in the factory committee", "slum dwellers in the residents' association" or "neighbourhood women in the struggle for day-care" (Freire and Nogueira, 1989: 67). Gadotti also refers to the need to expand the concept of "social movement", as a large part of the population is "organised informally" into clubs or associations (Gadotti, 2008).

When we speak of "education in the collective action" our intention is to highlight the type of learning experienced by adults, as a result of their participation in collective organisations and of an ongoing political action towards social transformation. Some of the important assumptions include: a broad concept of education, setting out the different processes and spaces where it takes place; a focus on the participation, experience and collective dimension of learning; and a perspective of critical and emancipatory education, resulting from the firm belief in its transforming role.

Although this is still an underexplored field - in general, social movement scholars rarely address the educational dimension and, on the other hand, adult education scholars scarcely focus on social movements - there is some work to be noted, showing signs of growing interest. Griff Foley (1999; 2004), for instance, studies the learning that occurs during the struggle against oppression in social and collective actions, for almost two decades. Gohn, in turn, refers to the processes of self-learning and learning resulting from the experience in social and collective processes, setting them within the field of non-formal education and, more specifically, in social movements, with particular emphasis on the "pedagogical process of participation" (Gohn, 2006:37). For Canário, acknowledging non-formal educational processes – which is still "undervalued and little known or recognised" – is associated with the "primary assumption of adult education" that "people learn with and through

experience", and that this experiential heritage is the "most important resource for the realisation of new learning" (Canário, 2006: 195-198).

This presupposes breaking away from the technicalities and supposed neutrality of the educational task. For Mayo, the term "participation" (as with many others) was appropriated by capitalism and turned into a cliché in adult education. More than preaching it indefinitely, it is necessary to "recognise the political nature of all educational interventions" (Mayo, 1999: 24). Foley even considers that education and learning in social movements cannot be disconnected from "political economy, micro-politics, ideologies and discourses" (Foley, 1999: 6) and that "at the heart of an emancipatory adult theory" should be a "critique of capitalism" (ibidem: 138).

Holst also defends that it is necessary to "rejuvenate the Marxist theory on adult education", arguing that while Paulo Freire's idea that "education is politics" was widely assimilated and taken into the social movements in the 1970s, today this is very much a discussion topic because the practice of social movements is taken as being political rather than educational, due to the fact that the tendency is to downplay informal education and that the increasing professionalisation of this field has discarded its historical roots from within the social movements (Holst, 2002: 77-81).

From a Marxist perspective, emancipation has always been tied with struggles and social movements, with a "historical, economic and political process" around a political project of radical social transformation (Afonso, 2001). Thus, "education cannot in itself be considered as emancipatory without reference to a broader project" (ibidem: 229). According to the author, the "relation of education with emancipation has been thought out and re-updated" in the "action and reflection of social movements", in the "experiences that carry within them new emancipatory possibilities" (ibidem: 238). Gohn adds

that the nature of this learning and participation, whether "emancipatory or integrating", will "depend on the quality of relations and interactions that have been developed" and "on the political project of the groups in action" (2006: 44).

But what are these experiences and how can they be emancipatory? What actual relation could there be between education and participation in mobilisations or social movements? These are the considerations that will be addressed hereafter, in a discussion around the tension between "integration and emancipation".[2]

According to Foley, much of the discussion about what is learned in social actions or movements is "abstract and exhortatory" (1999: 138). The author stresses the importance of recognising the "complex, ambiguous and contradictory nature" of these movements and struggles and, as such, of the learning taking place within them, which is shaped by intrapersonal, interpersonal and social factors. O' Sullivan (1999), for example, identifies three fundamental educational moments: one relating to *critique* (of systems, realities, politics, etc); another of *resistance* (in the form of opposition or reorganisation); and a third one of *creation* (of new strategies, interactions, etc). Gohn, in turn, describes multiple types of more or less evident learning that unfolds at various levels: practical, theoretical, instrumental technical, political, cultural, linguistic, economic, symbolic, social, cognitive, reflective and ethical. Learning ranges from the ability to speak in public, to financial management, knowledge about rights

[2] This idea is somewhat similar to Boaventura Sousa-Santos's proposition, for whom the project of modernity was defined, in its essence, by a balance between regulation and emancipation, which was never achieved, with the scales tipping in favour of excess regulation. In this time of transition in which we live, the possibility of there being a change in paradigm opens up with the "principle of community" and "aesthetic-expressive rationality". The desired solution today is not, therefore, a new balance between regulation and emancipation, but rather a dynamic imbalance that swings towards emancipation.

and the laws that govern them, or the construction of a common language and grammar (2011: 352-353).

The greatest difficulty – especially for the activists involved – is to recognise it as such. The task of critical education is, therefore, to create spaces for consciousness-raising processes regarding this informal learning, to reflect thereon and develop action strategies accordingly (Steinklammer, 2012: 33). Choudry and Kapoor (2013) highlight the "many powerful critiques and understandings of dominant ideologies and power structures, visions of social change and the politics of domination and resistance" which emerge as "knowledge-production dimensions of movement activism", even if they are often invisible or ignored (2013: 1-2). Laurence Cox is adamant: social movements produce significant forms of knowledge and are sources of epistemological innovation. The question is to understand how sociology can dialogue with and be inspired by them, not least in view of the promotion of a public sociology (Cox, 2014).

The Popular University of Social Movements (UPMS) seems to be an example of an initiative that shares these concerns, bringing together knowledge and practices of diverse origins. The UPMS emerged from the World Social Forum and aims to promote the "self-education" of activists who, through "reflective understanding of its practice", can "increase their efficacy and awareness". As for committed researchers, they see the "distance between the analytical and theoretical frameworks" and the reality they want to understand and transform reduced (Santos, 2006: 156-157). The idea behind this is to carry out a "dialogical and political" work whose core concept is the "ecology of knowledge": "contextualised, situated and useful knowledge at the service of change-inducing practices", which can only "flourish in environments as close as possible to such practices and in such a way that the protagonists of social action are recognised as

protagonists of the creation of knowledge." (Santos, 2004: 86; Santos, 2006: 155)

We have established four categories of learning from the analysis of the dynamics and interactions in an activist context (Barbosa, 2016), but also from previous and subsequent experiences of participation in informal collectives, movements or political parties:

Operational: the learning is directly related to the implementation of practices and to their more operational aspects. This includes writing a press release or minutes, using social networks and other forms of communication and dissemination, filling in forms, designing projects, managing accounts and funding.

Strategic: the learning is related to the decisions on how to do it, choosing which methodologies to use, target-groups, spaces, partnerships, and organisational methods. Strategies are not usually learned *a priori*, but rather based on the results obtained and, as such, on the continuous reflection of the group, i.e., on its work and rework.

Convivial[3]: the learning that results from intra and interpersonal experiences that take place in a collective. Some are more visible, like leading a meeting, managing leaderships, moderating a debate, speaking in public, dealing with conflicts; other are more difficult to perceive, such as the construction of group identity, the awareness of the collective or the capacity to access other realities.

Political-ideological: the learning that takes place at the level of the collective's macro decisions. How do we understand the world? What systems are we fighting against? What are our priorities? Who are our allies? Some of the examples of this type of learning include knowledge of the laws and regulations, claims of rights, construction

[3] The term "convivial" used herein is inspired by the work of Ivan Illich in the field of education, in particular "Deschooling Society" and "Conviviality".

of common values, and analysis and deconstruction of dominant discourses.

Learning may be individual (filling in a form) or collective (devising strategies), may take place at macro (taking a political position) or micro levels (making an announcement), and usually occurs in a transverse, interpenetrating manner. Some examples observed in the context under analysis: the fact that they consider themselves as a feminist collective led their supporters to obtain information about the legal framework or statistics concerning gender violence; led to the development of an inclusive language not only in their interactions, but also in the outside communication; resulted in attention being paid to the participation of women in the debates they organised or even in the inclusion of a babysitting service in their initiatives, so that no woman was left out.

2. Collective action and Paulo Freire's pedagogy

Let us look at a popular assembly filled with people discussing the right to housing, at an informal collective that organises a protest against sexual harassment, and at an association preparing for yet another anti-racism campaign. What do all these spaces have in common? What binds these activists together? Why do they join these causes for which there is not always an outward return? Which elements feed the disposition for militancy and the vibrancy of the moment? Based on Paulo Freire's pedagogy, we will analyse the essence of the collective action contexts and list some of their fundamental concepts: *dialogue*, *conscientisation*, *conflict*, *indignation* and *hope*. Within these concepts, many other words are part of Freire's vocabulary (boldness, love, praxis, emancipation, autonomy, liberty) and intersect and complement each other, forming a dense and complex body.

Dialogue: communication and interaction with the other is an unequivocal condition of collective action: sharing experiences with comrades, listening attentively to the speech of a leader, dealing with potential allies, and opposing ideas of antagonist groups, take centre stage within these spaces. For Augusto Boal, playwright and the driving force behind the Theatre of the Oppressed, dialogue is the antithesis of oppression. When "only one of the interlocutors has the right to speak: one sex, one class, one race, one country", "the others are reduced to silence, to obedience. (…). And this is the Paulo-Freirian concept of oppression: the dialogue turns into a monologue." (Boal, 2009:19). More than being an exchange of words between individuals or social groups, dialogue appears as a way of breaking the "culture of silence" and also as a source of critical learning. "No man (sic) fights against forces they do not understand, whose importance they cannot measure, whose forms and shapes they do not understand" (Freire, 1979: 22). Reality is analysed and problematised in the dialogical process and this is also where the oppressed become aware of their oppression, freeing themselves from alienation. However, this awareness is not yet conscientization, as the latter is the "critical development of awareness" (ibidem: 15).

Conscientization: in political participation, having refined knowledge of the oppressive systems or of the various forms of inequality or injustice is not enough; it presupposes a will to transform them. Conscientization implies a political commitment, a "critical insertion in history. It implies that men (*sic*) take the role of creators of the world; recreators of the world". (Freire, 1979: 15). Often, the activist impulse stems from a diffuse desire to be part of a certain cause, but this desire to be a part of the collective quickly provides a setting for the development of critical and collective positions among peers and in the face of challenges being posed. It is not

uncommon for that experience to generate multi-involvement dynamics (Sawicki and Siméant, 2011). The district nuclei of the protest movement under the slogan "Que se lixe a Troika" (To hell with the Troika) (2011-2013) or the recent social mobilisations against gentrification in Porto are a clear example of this, in that it brought together feminists, anti-racists and ecologists under common and intersectional claims. The "pedagogy of questioning" (Freire, 2002) is the starting point for deconstructing myths, ideologies or dominant discourses, for reformulating ideas and appropriating concepts. As in our research (Barbosa, 2016), Themelis (2017) highlights the educational potential of participating in social mobilisations against austerity in Greece to decode the meaning of "crisis", "debt" or "outside" and to generate critical interpretations about them. "To read the world" (Freire, 2001) is, thus, to "write" or "rewrite" the world, i.e., to transform. Conscientization is not the "starting point of", but a "product of": "I do not become aware in order to fight. By fighting, I become aware". The deepening of this awareness is "generated in praxis", in the action and reflection on the practice of struggle, in a "dynamic cycle" (Gadotti, Freire and Guimarães, 1989: 87).

Conflict: the processes of dialogue and conscientization within social mobilisations imply moments of horizontality and consensus, but especially relations of force and contradictions. Dilemmas about what constitutes paid or voluntary tasks, about the difficult balance between informality and institutionalisation, about identity and diversity, or about autonomy and heteronomy are a source of permanent tension, but also of discovery (Barbosa, 2016). For many authors, conflict is one of the most important aspects of collective learning (Gadotti and Freire, 1995; English and Mayo, 2012: 21; Kilgore, 1999: 199) "Educating presupposes a transformation, and there is no kind of

peaceful transformation" (Gadotti, 1995:29). "Pedagogy of conflict" does not seek to hide the conflict, but rather to face it, to uncover and use it as a source of learning, because it is through conflict that the dialectic aspects of reality, the contradictions and the spaces of resistance become evident. This restless practice is at the same time "militant and loving", founded on Marx's dialectics and is essentially "critical and revolutionary" (idem, 2003: 58-59). This perspective calls for pedagogy of provocation and an "epistemology of controversy" that does not obscure, but rather considers objection and conflict as essential elementos of analysis (Correia, 1998). In fact, it is by disagreeing that one can indeed speak of democracy (Ranciére, 1996).

Indignation: this is another driver of collective action that maintains the cohesion of a group in the face of a certain cause. Daniel Bensaid, one of the protagonists of May '68, wrote: "Indignation is a beginning. A way to stand up and start moving. First comes indignation, then rebellion, then we shall see. You feel passionately indignant even before you understand the reasons for this passion. Principles must be established before interests and opportunities are calculated" (Bensaid, 2008:97). This leads to omissions in the analysis of social movements. The sense of injustice, the notion of inequalities and the will to change the order of things do not only occur on a rational level; it implies and articulates body and emotion dialectically. Collective action involves moments of tension and anxiety, expectation and joy. *Pedagogy of Indignation* (2000) – the last book by Freire, whose title was chosen posthumously by his long-standing partner, Nita – describes precisely the transformative potential that occurs from the combination of anger and affection. In this sense, what goes on behind the scenes of a collective is just as important, if not more, than what transpires to the

media: moments of conviviality, camaraderie, rituals and parties.

Hope: as opposed to resignation and fatalism, hope appears as a beacon for any social and political mobilisation. It would be unthinkable for a collective to meet through the night, sacrificing their free time to define strategies of struggle, take risks in clashes with the police or the State if they did not think it was worth it. Along with this belief in the power of their action is the boldness which Paulo Freire also referred to, which is contrary to fear, is subversive, relies on the liberty to imagine other possibilities, and is focused not only on resisting, but also on creating alternatives (Themelis, 2017). This hope does not mean only a subjective feeling that animates a collective. Objectively, it is necessary to reach objectives, small achievements, otherwise the movement loses morale. During the period of crisis and austerity (2011-2014), thousands of people took to the streets in Portugal saying a clear "no" to the measures imposed by the government and the Troika. However, the intransigence on the part of the latter and the subsequent feeling of failure caused the movements to disintegrate. Many other collectives have lost strength because they felt they were coming up against stumbling blocks. How many supporters have not become discouraged and given up because they felt there was nothing left to do? It is, therefore, a "untested feasibility" (Freire, 1992, 2007)[4] that brings together the "warm stream" and the "cold stream" (Bloch, 2005) and transforms utopian thought into concrete, continued and achievable actions, situated

[4] Paulo Freire addresses the utopian concept as a "untested feasibility" (inédito viável) in his books *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of Hope*, published 24 years apart in their English versions though the first one was completed in Portuguese 1968, while he was in exile in Chile, and the second one, also in Portuguese in Brazil, in the 1980s.

between denunciation and announcement (Freire, 2000: 37).

3. Final notes on the relation between dispositions, contexts and capital

Through this text, and based on the Portuguese reality, we have sought to analyse the conditions that enable critical learning in collectives aspiring to be social movements. One message strikes us as particularly important: departing from Pierre Bourdieu's proposal (1997), expanded by Bernard Lahire (1998), such learning results from the (mis)matches and contradictions between dispositions (to learn, to fight, etc.), contexts (plural) and capital. As structured and systematic forms of action, dispositions refer to socialisation processes. These are far from being limited to the family and origin, but rather expand along a path of ongoing acquisition, in which new and old learning intersect, dialogue, negotiate and modify each other, giving rise to new ways of interpreting the world, its relations and conflicts. We cannot, therefore, hold up the socialization thread in a moment and space, even though we admit the existence of contexts that also provide opportunities for new practices to emerge. A disposition (coherent, durable and systematic way of thinking, acting and feeling) [*has*] as a certain origin and trajectory, along which it gains or loses strength, depending on whether or not it is activated and mobilised. We can learn to struggle, but also to unlearn and give up …We cannot simply presuppose that a certain disposition is an omnipresent and all-encompassing entity that automatically adapts individuals to situations (or the present to the past).

The key question is, however, how to keep (critical, reflective, fighting) dispositions alive in "weak" or "intermittent" contexts, such as those that result from hastiness (doing more and more things at the same time

and in different social roles and spheres of life), precariousness and uncertainty. In short, the challenge is to understand the conditions under which one can accumulate "militant capital", as a wealth of political competences (knowledge and know-how) outside the traditional institutionalised politics, while still establishing dialogues and connections with it. The analysis of the communication between repertoires (the collective, work, leisure, emotional life) is also worthy of note, as these bridges, translations and adaptations can either strengthen or weaken the activist dispositions.

Similarly, it is also important to question the effects of the new cultures of work (or of non-work …) and their huge impact on the precariousness of the self (in cognitive, relational and emotional learning environments) or on hegemonic governmentality (the "sweet" internalisation of discipline and self-control – Foucault, 1987). Such processes and contexts produce new forms of subjectivation in line with the logics and perpetuation of the system ("the individual is fully responsible for himself", "absolute master of his own course, successes and failures", etc.), in a difficult conciliation between the "impulse to resist" and the "fantasy of autonomy" (Lloyd, 2011). How many times have we incorporated, without realising it, the values of flexible accumulation in the name of a libertarian and anti-bureaucratic tendency (the pressure of the "society of individuals")?

Lastly, we draw the lines of what these dispositions may be, in the tense articulation between knowledge that is practice, and practice that is knowledge: openness to otherness and to dialogical learning (against sectarian tribalism); the awareness of the constraints and possibilities that shape us (and the art of transforming the awareness of coercion into the possibility of liberty); the politicisation through exercising conflict as an opening to a world of controversies, disputes and contradictions; indignation against conformist reasoning and anticipatory

obedience and, finally, hope, that overturns fatalistic logic and opens up the imagination to what is possible.

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