

CAN THE UNIVERSITY BE POPULAR? THE EXPERIENCE OF THE POPULAR UNIVERSITY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to understand how the relationship between popular education and the university, taking as a reference the extended case study of the Popular University of Social Movements (UPMS). Based on the epistemologies of the South, on the ecology of knowledge, a brief historical review of popular education and comments on elitism, colonialism and the growing commodification of conventional universities, as well as the plurality of popular experiences that have been developed in higher education to then present the UPMS demonstrating the divergences and convergences between it and other experiences. In the report of the co-author and UPMS participant, the importance of the ecology of knowledge, the decolonization of the university, as well as the collective and shared production of knowledge is latent. The work concludes by arguing that the UPMS experience can offer contributions to the challenge of thinking about a popular university, through the search for complementarity between the pedagogy of the oppressed and the pedagogy of articulation, reinventing Paulo Freire's proposal and updating it to face the challenges of the present.

Keywords: Popular education; Popular University; Coloniality; Democratization of education.

RESUMO

PODERÁ A UNIVERSIDADE SER POPULAR? A EXPERIÊNCIA DA UNIVERSIDADE POPULAR DOS MOVIMENTOS SOCIAIS

O presente artigo tem como objetivo compreender como se dão as relações entre a educação popular e a universidade, tendo como referência o estudo de caso alargado da Universidade Popular dos Movimentos Sociais (UPMS). Baseando-se

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nas epistemologias do Sul e na ecologia de saberes, é realizado um breve resgate histórico da educação popular, abordando o elitismo, colonialismo e a crescente mercantilização das universidades convencionais, bem como a pluralidade de experiências populares que têm sido desenvolvidas no ensino superior para, em seguida, apresentar a UPMS, demonstrando as divergências e convergências entre ela e as demais experiências. No relato da coautora e participante da UPMS, fica latente a importância da ecologia de saberes, da descolonização da universidade, assim como da produção coletiva e partilhada do conhecimento. O trabalho conclui defendendo que a experiência da UPMS pode oferecer contribuições para o desafio de se pensar uma universidade popular, por meio da busca de complementariedade entre a pedagogia do oprimido e a pedagogia da articulação, de modo a reinventar a proposta de Paulo Freire, atualizando-a diante dos desafios do presente.

Palavras-chave: Educação popular; Universidade popular; Colonialidad; Democratização da educação.

RESUMEN

¿PUEDE LA UNIVERSIDAD SER POPULAR? LA EXPERIENCIA DE LA UNIVERSIDAD POPULAR DE LOS MOVIMIENTOS SOCIALES

Este artículo tiene como objetivo comprender cómo se dan las relaciones entre educación popular y universidad, tomando como referencia el estudio de caso ampliado de la Universidad Popular de los Movimientos Sociales (UPMS). A partir de las epistemologías del Sur y de la ecología de saberes, se realiza una breve revisión histórica de la educación popular y se aborda el elitismo, el colonialismo y la creciente mercantilización de las universidades convencionales, así como la pluralidad de experiencias populares que han desarrollado en la educación superior para luego presentar la UPMS, demostrando las divergencias y convergencias entre esta y las otras experiencias. En el relato del coautor y participante de la UPMS está latente la importancia de la ecología del conocimiento, la descolonización de la universidad, así como la producción colectiva y compartida de conocimiento. El trabajo concluye argumentando que la experiencia de la UPMS puede ofrecer aportes al desafío de pensar una universidad popular, a través de la búsqueda de complementariedad entre la pedagogía de los oprimidos y la pedagogía de la articulación, reinventando la propuesta de Paulo Freire y actualizándola de cara a los desafíos del presente.

Palabras clave: Educación popular; Universidad Popular; Colonialidad; Democratización de la educación.

Introduction¹

The first area to be questioned in an emancipatory social transformation is the educational process, according to Theodor Adorno (1995).

Nevertheless, there is no simple or clear solution to the query raised in the work's title. Can higher education be decolonized, de-elitized, democratized, and decommodified? What potential links exist between the university and

¹ Text translated by Thaís Marçal da Silva - Universidade de Brasília

popular education? What circumstances allow the university to enjoy popularity? Are there any successful examples in this regard? What do they have to contribute to this challenge? These are the questions that lead us to write this article, which is the result of an extended case study of the Popular University of Social Movements (PUSM) and is based on the epistemologies of the South and the ecology of knowledges (Santos, 2007–2018).

The extended case study is a research methodology that was proposed by Michael Burawoy (1998) and uses quality and exemplarity—rather than quantity and uniformity—as criteria for generalization, assuming that a particular case may explain more general issues. We hope to investigate the PUSM's potential contributions to the ecology of knowledge practice and the promotion of a genuinely popular university—one that restores the “other possible worlds” to the horizon of possibilities—through this extended case study.

The PUSM's experimental, subversive, and inventive character, however, presents a methodological problem: it is hard to assess an experience that is more sophisticated than the techniques currently employed to analyze it. Because it takes into account various ways of knowing the world, any work based on the ecology of knowledges and the epistemologies of the South would need to be plural and flexible from a methodological standpoint. However, this is precisely what the scientific community frequently rejects. Therefore, there is a certain incompatibility between the logic and values of knowledge production within the traditional university and the methodological plurality rooted in the ecology of knowledges. This creates a situation that is paradoxical in that the research techniques used are more conservative than the experience that is being studied.

Written by numerous hands and drawing from a variety of languages and knowledge forms, this work should be a collaborative effort under the ideal conditions for knowledge

production evoked by the epistemologies of the South. Recognizing the institutional limitations on knowledge production and the democratization and collectivization of the research process, we decided to take a position at the edge, following the rules but making an effort to break them whenever we could. We believe that subversion is more successful when the norms are profaned than when they are rejected outright.

In order to establish a critical, ethical, and political commitment to the experience under analysis, we decided to employ a militant research² approach in addition to using research instruments like participant observation, document analysis, and literature reviews. It is militant because it aims to be objective without objectifying the reality it studies, but it is also research because it maintains rigor, rationality, and scientific objectivity. Additionally, it was carried out with an emphasis on progressive social transformation goals and actions that go beyond the scholarly goals usually assumed in traditional research.

There are six sections to the discussion. In order to place popular education in the current context, the first section gives a brief historical overview of popular education in the 20th century. It then goes on to describe the different popular education strands that currently make up what is known as an ecology of educational practices. In the second section, the conservative, colonial, patriarchal, and elitist nature of conventional universities is critically addressed, along with the current trend toward their increasing commodification. The second section critically examines the conservative, colonial, patriarchal, and elitist characteristics

2 According to Fals Borba (2009, p. 243), militant research was defined as “the attitude of the intellectual who, upon becoming aware of their connection to society and the world of their time, renounces the position of a mere spectator and places their thought or art at the service of a cause.” To put it another way, the researcher in this kind of research is also an activist who, by fusing research with political action, applies objectivity and scientific rigor to generate knowledge that can actually support the social struggles of the oppressed and contribute to social transformation.

of traditional universities as well as the current trend toward their growing commercialization.

In order to comprehend the connections between popular education and the university, the third section examines the variety of experiences that are considered popular in higher education. These experiences are categorized into four groups: progressive public universities, counter-hegemonic outreach initiatives and programs, popular universities of the North, and popular universities of the South.

PUSM is portrayed as one of the popular university experiences from the South in sections four and five. These sections discuss the PUSM's relationships with other popular universities and with conventional universities, respectively, while emphasizing its distinctive features in contrast.

Finally, a personal story by the co-author as a participant in one of the workshops is presented in the sixth and final section to add substance to the discussions surrounding the PUSM and other potential ways of conceptualizing the university. The significance of the ecology of knowledge, the decolonization of the university, and the shared and collective creation of knowledge are all emphasized in this account.

1. Popular education in the 20th century

"To the miserable people of the world and those who find themselves among them, and, in doing so, suffer with them, but, above all, fight with them." Paulo Freire (2011 [1968], p. 5) begins his well-known book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which is considered to be one of the founding texts of popular education, with these words.

According to Souza (2007, p. 66), the dominant viewpoint up until the 1950s was to popularize education, viewing it "as the extension of the schooling system of the urban middle sectors to the children of the so-called popular sectors." Stated differently, popularizing

education simply meant giving those who are excluded from all educational processes and marginalized by the school system more access to formal education.

Popular education remained focused on the goal of universalizing access to education despite the fight for public education, subsequent attempts to end illiteracy, and the experiences of popular universities that offered workers class-based education in the early decades of the 20th century. As stated by Brandão (2006, p 17), it was still regarded as a "professionally mediated modality of extending school services to different categories of subjects within the popular sectors of society."

A break with prevailing educational practices was only brought about by the emergence of popular culture movements, popular culture centers, and grassroots education movements throughout Latin America after World War II, following the effects of Salvador Allende's victory in Chile and the Cuban Revolution with its successful attempts to eradicate illiteracy.

Fals Borda's (1970 and 1972) "participatory action research" proposals, which challenged conventional forms of research, emphasized the need to link the scientific interests of universities with the social interests of the communities being studied, enabling the transformation of scientific knowledge into social change for the marginalized; Liberation Theology,³ which, by proposing a "preferential option for the poor," inspired the formation of thousands of grassroots ecclesial communities; and other major social innovations made possible by this context of significant social upheavals in Latin America

3 The preferential treatment of the poor is an epistemological decision in which "the poor constitute the locus from which the concepts of God, Christ, grace, history, the mission of the churches, the meaning of economics, politics, and the future of societies and humanity are reflected upon" (IDEM: 151). Boff (2004a: 150) claims that Liberation Theology is the result of "ethical indignation in the face of poverty and the collective misery of the masses". It is no accident that Freire, who has strong ties to the progressive wing of the Catholic Church, calls his teachings liberating and his pedagogy the "pedagogy of the oppressed," highlighting the direction of an education that prioritizes the underprivileged.

during the 1950s and 1960s. The 1970s saw the development of Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed," which served as a vehicle for mobilizing communities, villages, slums, and urban peripheries; and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which fundamentally altered the idea of popular education by giving it a dialogical, critical, and liberating quality.

Paulo Freire, who began his work with a novel approach to adult literacy through cultural circles in the interior of northeastern Brazil,⁴ rose to prominence as a prominent educational thinker by putting forth his pedagogy as a fresh approach to conceptualizing and building educational relationships. His "pedagogy of the oppressed" transformed education from a purely knowledge-transmission endeavor to a political act of knowledge decolonization and social change.

As a set of "political-pedagogical processes that seek to overcome relationships of domination, oppression, discrimination, exploitation, inequity, and exclusion" (Jara, 2010, p. 4), popular education is then defined as a critical, dedicated, participatory education that aims to "build equitable and just relationships, respectful of diversity and the equality of rights among people" (Ibid.).

Therefore, the core feature of popular education is the integration of politics and education through the mobilization and awareness-raising of the oppressed, connecting knowledge acquisition to social change initiatives. According to Carrillo (2009) and Gadotti (2012), Latin America's most significant theoretical contribution to modern pedagogical thought is popular education. A true ecology of educational practices—diverse and multifaceted counter-hegemonic teaching-learning experiences—has gradually emerged from this widely held belief in education. At least five separate

branches of popular education currently make up these, and they are as follows:

- a. A branch of education that focuses on universalizing education and making it more accessible to the working class is known as popular education, or the democratization of education.
- b. Popular education as political training and awareness-raising: this field entails intellectuals approaching the oppressed with humility, not only teaching them but also learning from them. This is how popular education is currently understood conventionally, and this is how Paulo Freire mainly developed it through cultural circles. Generally speaking, its main goals are basic education, raising working-class people's political consciousness, and educating children and adults.
- c. Popular education as an investigative technique: Orlando Fals Borda (1972), Michel Thiollent (1985), Carlos Rodrigues Brandão (1983), and numerous other progressive intellectuals developed this subfield of popular education. With participatory action research as its main instrument, it seeks to naturally connect scholarly research with the desires of the oppressed for social change.
- d. Popular education as public policy: State-developed initiatives, such as national councils, national conferences, and participatory budgets, seek to integrate popular education as an institutionalized public policy and as a methodology for social participation programs and dialogue between the State and society.
- e. Popular education as higher education: a subfield that aims to create popular higher education experiences by bridging the gap between popular education and universities. Rather than focusing on the connection between popular education and universities.

⁴ In order to quickly teach literacy to adults from popular classes, Freire first came up with the idea of culture circles. Instead of using a traditional classroom, these groups meet in a circle and, with the help of an educator, discuss subjects that are relevant to the students' everyday lives while learning to read and write.

Paulo Freire and the popular education movement as a whole paid far more attention to literacy processes and basic education. Because of this, the field has only recently become more receptive to innovative and daring experiments in popular higher education, which we will subsequently refer to as “popular universities of the South.”

The conservative, colonial, patriarchal, and elitist characteristics of traditional universities will be discussed first in order to analyze them. This will be followed by a brief historical overview of popular universities prior to the rise of the popular universities of the South. We will conclude by summarizing the Popular University of Social Movements and drawing comparisons with other experiences.

2. Elitismo universitário, colonialismo e mercantilização do ensino superior

Since its inception, modern science has been deeply colonial, and its associations with capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism have paved the way for the development of a global cognitive empire,⁵ which the university best exemplifies. The modern university was created with the intention of producing national elites from the very beginning. The creation of “predominantly white, segregated, and racist institutions, dedicated exclusively to reproducing the modern Eurocentric knowledge model” (Carvalho; Florez, 2014, p. 41) is a common trend in the Global South, where universities from the North have been replicated. As a re-

sult, building relationships with the popular segments of society has been uncommon.

Over the centuries, the university’s historical elitism—which is concealed behind the rhetoric of excellence, neutrality, and meritocracy—has manifested itself in discrimination against students and faculty on the basis of gender, race, and class as well as in the way the institution operates and the subjects, research, and curricula it offers. This has resulted in significant epistemic exclusion. Therefore, even though the university is used to portraying itself as the leader, the institution has an indisputable colonial past that continues to be reproduced in the present in sometimes unexpected ways. One important aspect of higher education in Latin America was “to consolidate academic institutions that function as replicas of the universities created in 19th-century Europe” (Carvalho; Flórez, 2014, p. 131). Carvalho (2011) highlights that the height of colonialism coincided with the peak of university expansion and the consolidation of disciplines in the field of social sciences.

As we shall see, the university’s colonial nature has encountered opposition. Nonetheless, it has been linked to a strong market orientation in recent decades due to the commercialization of public universities as well as the pressure from the growth of private research and higher education institutions. The university has undergone an unprecedented commercialization since international organizations viewed higher education as a new frontier for the growth of capitalism. It now resembles a service-providing business that is subject to the efficiency and profitability standards of capitalism, rather than a public institution tasked with producing knowledge for society. Santos (2018) describes this as the rise of “university capitalism,” contending that the university has become a higher education market in recent decades in addition to creating professionals, knowledge, and services for the market.

Can the university be popular in this situation? There is currently no entirely satisfacto-

5 Santos (2018) details the establishment of a “cognitive empire” of contemporary science that haughtily asserted its exclusive right to legitimate knowledge, defining it in accordance with its own standards and rejecting the rationality of any knowledge that did not fit the limited definition of what it deemed to be scientific knowledge. A monoculture of knowledge and epistemic totalitarianism that leads to severe cognitive injustices are the results of this “cognitive empire” in education. The denial of contemporaneity and the incalculable gap between scientific knowledge and other types of knowledge production are the foundations of these injustices.

ry answer to this urgent question of our day. The concept of a popular university seems contradictory in such a setting, where higher education is increasingly market-oriented, elitist, and colonial. However, the popular experiences of higher education arise from the realization that the university is not accessible to the oppressed.

3. The plurality of popular experiences in higher education

These days, there are many different university experiences that consider themselves “popular,” developed by a multitude of actors with a range of goals and ideologies. This makes us wonder about the various interpretations of the term “popular university”: is a university popular because it is founded on the idea that everyone has the right to free, public, universal higher education, as opposed to the elitism and exclusions that characterize traditional universities? Is it well-liked because it allows popular classes to enroll in traditional universities? Is it well-liked because it helps the underprivileged access scientific knowledge? Does its popularity stem from the fact that it educates people in order to technically prepare human resources for the workforce? Does its popularity stem from the fact that it seeks to create knowledge with the people and engages with their knowledge? Or is it well-liked because it was created and implemented by the people, groups, organizations, or movements to protect, create, and share their own knowledge? Because it spreads hegemonic knowledge to popular classes, because it aims to include everyone in higher education, because it is associated with emancipatory conceptions of struggle and social transformation, or because it is conceived and executed by the oppressed, is it popular?

It is challenging to develop classification criteria for popular initiatives in higher education due to their vast number, diversity, and fluidity.

Nonetheless, in order to make this work easier to understand, we divide the common higher education experiences into the following four groups:⁶

- a. Progressive public universities;
- b. Counter-hegemonic extension programs and projects;
- c. Popular universities of the North;
- d. Popular universities of the South.

3.1. Progressive public universities

The goal of progressive public universities, which are state-run and institutionalized non-traditional university experiences, is to challenge the traditional idea of the university and give it a popular character by holding that democratization of knowledge leads to democratization of society. In addition to having a strong social commitment to the underprivileged, these universities are “polyphonic universities” (Santos, 2018), meaning they embrace this commitment in a pluralistic manner and create opportunities for discussion with other types of knowledge through projects, ideas, and creative experiments.

An enormous student uprising broke out at Argentina’s National University of Córdoba at the start of the 20th century. The students called for a new higher education project in Latin America and criticized the university’s colonial past in an epic and combative manner. Known as the “Córdoba model”⁷ for higher education, the “University Reform” promoted by the Córdoba student movement, which dared to suggest a democratic, dedicated university involved with social justice, had an impact

⁶ By doing this, we hope to gain a better understanding of the context in which the relationship between popular education and the university develops, rather than conducting a comprehensive investigation of these experiences. See Benzaquen (2012) for additional classification models of common experiences in higher education.

⁷ André Rubião (2013) uses the term “Córdoba model” in his book “History of the University: Genealogy for a Participatory Model” to compare it to the traditional university models, which include the multiversity model (North American university), the Napoleonic model (French university), the Humboldtian model (German university), and the Newmanian model (English university).

throughout Latin America and influenced numerous initiatives for progressive public universities. Defending university autonomy, the democratic election of university authorities, free chairs, free education, student social assistance, democratization of access to higher education, university extension, and the strengthening of the university's commitment and social responsibility (Rubião, 2013; Tunnermann, 1998; Sader, Gentili, Aboites, 2008), the university reform of the Córdoba movement was not everything it hoped to be, nor did it allow the university to proceed in the same way, bringing into the social struggles' imagination the possibility of a progressive public university.⁸

In the 1960s, Anísio Teixeira and Darcy Ribeiro founded the National University of Brasília (UnB) in Brazil with the goal of implementing the idea for a new university, the "necessary university" (Ribeiro, 1969), that could integrate the university reform's tenets of democracy, inclusion, and social commitment. Although the Military Dictatorship prematurely dismantled the new university project's boldness, innovation, and emancipatory spirit in 1964, the ideas of Anísio Teixeira and Darcy Ribeiro, along with the fight for a progressive public university, were revived in the "New University" proposed by Naomar de Almeida-Filho (2007). The Federal University of Southern Bahia (UFSB), established in 2013, was the site of its most consistent implementation.

The Federal University of Southern Frontier (UFFS), which has been using the slogan "quality education for all" since 2009, and which bills itself as "a public, popular, and quality higher education institution" (UFFS,

2018), the University of Latin American Integration (UNILA), which emphasizes academic exchange, solidarity cooperation, and regional integration among Latin American nations, and the University of International Integration of Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (UNILAB), which is founded on promoting affirmative action against ethnic-racial discrimination and integrating with Portuguese-speaking nations in Africa, are some of the other universities that have recently been established in Brazil in addition to UFSB. Redenção, a small town in the interior of Northeastern Brazil, is also home to UNILAB. It was chosen for its symbolic significance as the nation's first city to abolish slavery.

Due to its practice of solidarity and international cooperation, the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM) in Cuba has been a global reference since 1998. It offers humanistic medical training to children of workers, peasants, Indigenous people, Afro-descendants, and members of social movements from all over Latin America and the Caribbean (Abba; Corsetti, 2016).

Three public Indigenous universities were established in Bolivia under Evo Morales' administration with the goal of decolonizing higher education and using a community-based approach: the UNIBOL Guaraní and Lowland Peoples "Apiaguaiki Tüpa," the UNIBOL Aymara "Tupak Katari," and the UNIBOL Quechua "Casimiro Huanca." Numerous public universities in Mexico, like the Autonomous University of the State of Morelos (UAEM) and the Autonomous Indigenous University of Mexico (UAIM), aim to provide intercultural education or popular education.

A relatively recent and expanding trend of progressive public universities with a popular and polyphonic orientation is exemplified by these few examples. Furthermore, many Latin American countries have implemented significant inclusion and democratization policies in higher education in recent decades, in contrast to the elitism and commodification of universities. One example of this is Brazil's affirmative

8 In support of his claim that "the student movement that began with the struggle of the students of Córdoba for the reform of the University marks the birth of a new Latin American generation," José Mariátegui (2007 [1928]: 100) demonstrates how the idealized university reform of the Córdoba movement influenced the demands of students from Cuba in 1923, the platform of struggle of students from Colombia in 1924, the proposals of students from Mexico and Chile in 1921, and the students from Peru in 1919 and 1926.

action and quota policies for Black, Indigenous, and public-school students. Understanding “to what extent a public university, bureaucratically organized, focused on scientific knowledge, and oriented toward granting diplomas, can actually be considered popular” is the primary concern with progressive public universities, according to Santos (2018).

3.2. Counter-hegemonic extension programs and projects

Counter-hegemonic extension programs and projects aim to create a popular, solidarity-based, and socially committed extension—not with the market, but with the excluded populations—in contrast to neoliberal extension programs and projects, which establish dialogue and cooperation with the market, reducing extension to a means of generating income for the university.

With fewer structures and resources, but with greater autonomy and potential for subversion than progressive public universities, there are many extension programs and projects that, even existing within traditional and sometimes extremely conservative universities, manage to create counter-hegemonic spaces for dialogue, interaction, learning, and commitment between intellectuals, students, organizations, movements, and local communities. Examples include: the Pedagogy of the Land and Indigenous Teaching degree programs, conceived and carried out in partnership between universities and social movements; the “Law Found in the Street,” which starts from the subversive idea that law must be sought in the street, in public spaces, in the claims of marginalized populations, in social movements fighting for dignity and justice, and not just in institutions and the State as provided by positivist law; the Poles of Citizenship program, which, along with peripheral communities, seeks to guide the law in the service of social transformation; the “Meeting of Knowledge” project, which promotes dialogue between academic knowledge and traditional knowledge

through the recognition of popular masters as teachers in universities (with all the complexity, difficulties, problems, and resistance that such boldness entails).⁹

The Observatory of the National Policy of Integral Health for Populations of the Countryside, Forest, and Waters (OBTEIA), which promotes research engaged with social demands developed in co-authorship between academic intellectuals and activists from social movements; and the South-South Network, an intercultural and counter-hegemonic program of reflection, training, and action integrating the peoples and knowledge of the South, are still in their early stages. This is just to illustrate the diversity of proposals and programs being developed in this field, alongside many projects of solidarity economy, popular legal assistance, popular education, and participatory action-research, carried out by extension groups from universities across Latin America.

3.3. Popular universities of the North

The Popular Universities of the North are examples of popular universities that arose, especially in Europe, with the shared objective of educating the working classes about modern science and academic knowledge.

In Central Europe, especially in France, England, Germany, Belgium, and Italy, a number of popular universities were founded at the close of the 19th and the start of the 20th centuries. In order to spread technical knowledge to the populace, anarchist, communist, and workers’ parties founded these universities (Gurgel, 1986). Anarchist Italian and Greek laborers without access to higher education established the Popular University of Alexandria in Egypt in 1901, nearly concurrently with the founding of the first popular university in Paris in 1899 (Gorman, 2005). The concept gained traction in Europe, where more than 200 well-known

9 “An expansion of the universe of knowledge, so that we move from a monoepistemic university to a multi-epistemic university” is necessary, according to José Jorge Carvalho, the idealizer of the “Meeting of Knowledge” project (Carvalho, 2010, p. 241).

universities were established in the early 20th century. These were frequently union centers or community gathering places where progressive thinkers devoted their time to educating workers about general topics.

Despite the staggering social problems amplified by the advance of capitalist industrialization at the beginning of the 20th century, there was a strong epistemological trust in Western modernity, reason, and scientific knowledge as the sole and exclusive source of truth and freedom. In this way, many of the initiatives for popular universities in Europe were driven by the aspiration to educate disadvantaged populations, bringing Marxist culture and scientific knowledge to the working classes, who were completely excluded from formal education.¹⁰

Many of the popular universities created throughout the 20th century still exist today, and there are even networks of popular universities in Europe, such as the Association of Popular Universities of France (AUPF), which brings together more than 80 French popular universities.¹¹ Furthermore, we can say that the popular universities of the North influenced many initiatives in both Europe and Latin America. This is not a territorial metaphor, but rather an epistemological one. Examples include the Gonzáles Prada Popular University, which was proposed by Mariátegui in 1922, the numerous trade union schools that are dispersed throughout the continent, and the educational experiences of marxist party cadres.

10 To learn more about the beginnings and development of popular universities, see Agustín Osorio (2006), Júlia Benzaquen (2012), and Roberto Mauro Gurgel (1986). Please refer to Lucien Mercier (1986) and Leopoldo Marini Palacios (2002 [1908]) for a study of popular universities in Europe in the early 1920s. See Jean Claude Richez (2018) for a contemporary and comparative analysis of well-known universities in Sweden, France, Germany, and Italy. Lastly, José Romão and Adriana Loss (2013) provide an analysis of well-known Brazilian universities.

11 I appreciate you providing the link. I can't, however, directly access external websites. To learn more about the Association of Popular Universities of France (AUPF), go to the website at the given URL: <http://www.universites-populairesdefrance.fr/>.

3.4. Popular universities of the South

The popular universities of the North and the South have very different experiences, practices, and goals. While the popular universities in the North are concerned with adult education, professional training, and the dissemination of knowledge, culture, and science created in conventional universities (SOUZA, 2005: 255), the popular universities in the South are heavily influenced by popular education, interculturality, and the real struggles of marginalized populations. These popular universities were created in response to the need of collectives, communities, and movements to affirm themselves and produce their own knowledge and ways of knowing that were routinely discredited and ignored by conventional universities. The initiatives we classify as popular universities of the South are generally recent, having been conceived and developed in the last few decades by social movements themselves to autonomously and interculturally produce and transmit their own knowledge, values, worldviews, and teachings, with their own methods, pedagogies, and objectives. These institutions have been designated as “universities of social movements” by Benzaquen (2012), “intercultural higher education institutions” by Daniel Mato (2009), and “second-generation popular universities” by Santos (2018).

The popular universities in the South, which claim to be universities, perform tasks that institutionalized universities are unable, unwilling, or incapable of performing. Instead of trying to spread the knowledge produced by the university to the general public, they are spaces that help dismantle the idea that academic knowledge is universal, challenge the monocultural logic of scientific knowledge production, confront it with alternative ways of knowing, and use it in a counter-hegemonic manner. This is in contrast to the popular universities of the North.

The experiences of well-known southern universities that are being established in different Global South nations are diverse. The Land-

less Workers' Movement (MST) constructed the National School Florestan Fernandes (ENFF) in Brazil to train its militants politically, and it has since grown significantly in significance. Additionally, it brings in activists from social movements in Brazil as well as other nations (Fernandes, 2007; Benzaquen, 2012). Popular University of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (UPMPM) has achieved success in Argentina. In order to collectively produce knowledge involved in social transformation, the mothers of young people killed during the Argentine military dictatorship idealized and implemented this university of struggle and resistance. In Ecuador, a fundamental reference of resistance is the Intercultural University of Nationalities and Indigenous Peoples "Amawtay Wasi," created by Andean indigenous movements. In Colombia, there are several initiatives such as the University of the Peoples and the Peasant University of Civil Resistance, built by movements fighting for peace and justice in conflict and guerrilla areas; and the Autonomous Indigenous Intercultural University (UAIIN), created by the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC), in the pursuit of building an educational system of its own, compatible with the needs and worldviews of local communities and capable of combining the wisdom of indigenous peoples with the knowledge of other cultures.¹² In Mexico, the Zapatista movement has been leading the University of the Land (UNITIERRA), which was founded in 1999 based on the recognition by the indigenous peoples of Chiapas that the school has been the main instrument of the State in destroying

their communities. Therefore, the creation of an alternative educational system was deemed necessary, one that is deeply rooted in the knowledge of local communities and in the social and political transformation processes of the region (Unitierra, 2018; Benzaquen, 2012). In Algeria, the Popular University of Tifariti has the bold singularity of being located in the refugee camps on the border with Western Sahara and having as its mission the production of knowledge for the liberation and self-determination of the Sahrawi people. In India, since 1972, there has been the University of Barefoot, which, inspired by the principles of Mahatma Gandhi, offers professional courses built alongside the local communities of Rajasthan; and the Tibetan University in Exile, created by the Tibetan monks exiled in northern India (Carvalho; Flórez, 2014).¹³

The denial of the exclusive legitimacy of scientific knowledge; the criticism of the traditional, Western, modern, colonial, patriarchal, and commercial university; the dedication to creating counter-hegemonic educational models; the promotion, valorization, and collective production of popular knowledge; and an openness to communication, acknowledgment, and interculturality are all shared by these experiences and initiatives, despite their vast diversity. The Popular University of Social Movements (PUSM), with its unique characteristics that we will look at below, is one of the many unconventional experiences of popular universities from the South.

4. The conventional university and the PUSM

With the intention of encouraging the sharing of knowledge to broaden, express, and fortify social struggles, the PUSM was established in January 2003 during the third World Social

12 "When we speak of our own education, it is not as some believe, that it is just about staying within the community, focusing only on internal management, or that the training process is the exclusive property of each community, without allowing for socialization, exchange, and enrichment with other cultures," is a noteworthy way that the indigenous peoples of Colombia define what they refer to as their own educational system. According to the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca apud Tattay (2013), p. 91, "We view our own education as the capacity and right to direct, organize, and construct educational processes and proposals with a critical and proactive stance toward the education that we wish to transform."

13 See the works organized by Mato (2009); Loeza et al. (2015) for a more thorough summary and in-depth research on the variety of popular and intercultural higher education experiences in Latin America.

Forum (WSF) after it was recognized that social movements, non-governmental organizations, and academia lacked reciprocal knowledge. Given that almost nothing about PUSM is similar to traditional education, it makes sense that it creates strangeness.

We are discussing an educational experience that does not have any instructors or students, no physical headquarters or assets under its name, no syllabus or curricula, no classes, subjects, or training courses, and participation in its activities is contingent on social activism rather than academic achievement. PUSM has demonstrated itself to be a pedagogical, epistemological, and political experience of reciprocal learning, collective production of counter-hegemonic knowledge, and the articulation of the diversity of knowledge and practices that rise in favor of dignity and against oppression and injustice. It operates in the form of two- to three-day thematic workshops that include in-person meetings with intensive work periods, discussion, study, collective work, leisure, and socialization.

Given that it operates outside of the traditional university's framework and offers an alternative approach to knowledge management, it is odd that PUSM calls itself a "university," given that nothing about it is similar to the hierarchical, institutional, and bureaucratic structure of universities. By appropriating the name, a political controversy is sparked regarding its meaning, objectives, and social interaction style. In order to give the term "university" a popular and counter-hegemonic character, PUSM subverts it. It transmits and produces knowledge, but not in the ways that science suggests. This makes it a university. It gives legitimacy to other ways of producing knowledge. The assertion that the knowledge generated by social struggles is equivalent to that produced by traditional universities is made possible by the claim to university status.

The counter-hegemonic university project of PUSM is founded on the idea that the university and the knowledge and curricula it

produces need to be decolonized, de-patriarchalized, de-commodified, and democratized. This is based on the epistemologies of the South (Merladet, Reis, Sussekind, 2020). Decolonizing entails fighting against institutional racism, racial discrimination, and the coloniality of university-produced knowledge in all of its manifestations. In addition to "teaching, research, and extension," the university must learn from the world's diversity, starting with learning "with" the Other rather than "about" it. In this way, PUSM has partnered with well-known extension programs and projects to host workshops where extension happens in reverse, where excluded social groups share their historically delegitimized knowledge with the university instead of the university sharing its knowledge with those who do not know anything.

De-patriarchalizing entails fighting against the gender inequality and machismo that still exist in higher education, which views as unacceptable any sexual discrimination and any information that implies or leads to the subordination of women. In particular, PUSM workshops, which are consistently made up of an equal or higher proportion of women than men, have been primarily promoted by feminist movements. The many feminist movements have the chance to converse with one another and with a wide range of other social struggles through PUSM's activities. These discussions are enriched by feminist inquiries as well as inquiries about alternative solutions and forms of resistance.

De-mercantilizing entails opposing the direction that capital seeks to force on the university, which goes against both the university's commercialization and privatization policies as well as its focus on producing specialized labor, knowledge, and techniques for the market. In this sense, the UPMS never engages in commercially viable activities or services, and even the organizations that provide funding to PUSM have no special influence over the selection of workshop participants, subjects, approaches,

or results. Its entire operation occurs both outside and in opposition to the capitalist market. Additionally, PUSM never hosts events in which admission is paid for. On the contrary, it is a requirement of their methodology that all attendees of their workshops receive lodging, meals, and transportation for the duration of the activities.

Last but not least, democratizing entails not just making scientific knowledge more widely accessible by increasing university enrollment but, more importantly, broadening the body of knowledge and methods of knowledge production and dissemination. This will challenge the cognitive empire of science with the world's epistemological diversity, which it has historically delegitimized. PUSM proposes that learning be reciprocal and that knowledge be collectively built by many voices and many hands, based on the potentially infinite diversity of knowledge and ways of producing knowledge (living, pulsating, deep knowledge that the university systematically ignores). Much of what academic and scientific knowledge has taught us as distinct and universal truths must be difficult to unlearn in order to accomplish this. The idea of knowledge dissemination, which is so important to higher education institutions, is replaced in PUSM by the concepts of intercultural translation and ecology of knowledge. This is in contrast to the conventional university, which derives its strength from the exclusive knowledge it produces.

5. PUSM and Popular Universities

Right in the first pages of its Methodological Guidelines Document, PUSM clearly distinguishes itself from popular universities:

The PUSM is not a training school for cadres or leaders of organizations and social movements. Although PUSM is clearly oriented toward the action of social transformation, its goal is not to provide the types of skills and instruction typi-

cally offered by the already known experiences of popular universities (PUSM, 2012a, p. 3).

There are many well-known higher education programs around the world, especially in the Global South, as we have seen in the preceding pages. Each has its own dynamics, history, audience, goals, viewpoints, and approaches. Nonetheless, nearly all of them concentrate on particular topics (e.g., Indigenous knowledge, trade unionism, regional integration, fighting racial discrimination, the fight for land, education for peace, anarchism, or Marxism). However, there are not enough inter-thematic projects that can bridge the knowledge gaps from the various communities, peoples, organizations, and movements working to change society.

PUSM's uniqueness resides in its capacity to horizontally and non-directively address a number of themes pertinent to diverse struggles. Even if the knowledge is emancipatory, intercultural, engaged, socially committed, and/or locally produced, PUSM does not aim to impart a particular body of knowledge to participating movements, in contrast to the majority of well-known universities. Rather, it aims to promote an ecology of knowledge among the various methods of knowledge production found in its workshops through intercultural translation.

Hence, its Charter of Principles states that:

Its specific vocation is inter-thematic and intercultural: inter-thematic because it aims to promote encounters and dialogue between movements/organizations with different agendas and struggles to facilitate alliances and articulations among actors (for example, between feminist, workers', Indigenous, quilombola, Afro-American, religious, student, ecological, rural, urban movements, and others); intercultural because it seeks to create mutual understanding between cultures and narratives, between principles and mobilizing and guiding concepts for the social transformation of different struggles (PUSM, 2012b, p. 21).

Furthermore, because it aims to create a trans-scalar and multi-territorialized approach, PUSM has a more global vocation than

other well-known universities due to the fact that it does not have a physical headquarters in a particular region. This makes it possible for it to conduct and express activities and actions on a local, national, regional, and international level across a variety of territories. Therefore, the multi-territorialized, trans-scalar, intercultural, and inter-thematic nature of the Popular University of Social Movements distinguishes it from other popular university experiences. In its global activities, it brings together the greatest variety of struggles, organizations, communities, and movements. By being so strongly opposed to all types of monocultures, it aims to promote conversations and mutual learning between the scientific knowledge that supports social struggles and the popular knowledge that emerged from those struggles, rather than teaching participants in its activities specific, predetermined content.

PUSM, however, aims to enhance and fortify current initiatives put forth by various movements and organizations rather than to replace or compete with well-known universities. It takes on the responsibility of making them visible and encouraging understanding and communication between various common experiences in higher education. The First Social Forum on Popular Education, which was planned and conducted by PUSM in cooperation with other organizations in January 2016, is a prime illustration of this. This gathering brought together popular universities, counter-hegemonic extension programs, progressive public universities, and popular education experiences.

6. The PUSM experience report

Attending a PUSM workshop causes us to reconsider our personal experiences and fosters an openness to interacting with different types of information. By acknowledging the other, their worldviews, and their epistemologies, it humanizes us and inspires us to “be more” through inclusive, humanizing, and rebellious

political discourses and practices. This article, which was co-authored with one of PUSM participants, honors the ecology of knowledge, the decolonization of the university, and the proposal for collective and shared knowledge production. Her description of the encounter is as follows:

I participated in the workshop “Defend and Decolonize the University: From Resistance to the Ecology of Knowledge,” organized by PUSM at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), during the 39th meeting of the National Association for Postgraduate Education and Research (ANPEd), held from October 20 to 22, 2019. I represented GT 18 of ANPEd (Education of Young and Adult People) and participated as a teacher, researcher, and activist in the field of popular education for young people, adults, and the elderly in rural and peripheral areas.

Collective and solidarity work, the meeting of people, ideas, knowledge, actions, dreams, memories, identities, resistances, insurgencies, utopias, and workable innovations are the sources of the shared writing here. We acknowledge that we are social, political, and historical beings with the capacity to practice UBUNTU (I am because we are) and learn collectively.

My participation in the workshop was a turning point in my formative, academic, professional, and especially human journey. Sharing knowledge, actions, and words over 30 hours of collective work resonated deeply in my life. The experience of being in community not only with my peers from academia, but also with people from diverse struggles, holders of multiple knowledges, and singular formative paths forged in the resistance for the survival of their ways of life, was extraordinary and educational. We truly materialized collectively the ecology of knowledge and consolidated the importance of the articulation between the university and the popular social movements that engage with life and the radical transformation of humanity, with the horizon of utopia and “hope.”

Like Paulo Freire, we believe in the importance of each person as a radical agent of change. Our meeting was unique because in it we celebrated our (inter)connections and bonded as “relatives,” that is, we cried and laughed with each other; we shared dreams, desires, fears, projects, and above all, we were willing to care for each other. In a scenario of (un)certainly and (in)security, it is necessary to articulate and consolidate bonds of protection and affection. From this perspective, it was essential for us to understand our dilemmas and possibilities, what united us, what distanced us, what strengthens us, what limits us, and what we can do together.

The groups of activists and leaders of popular social movements, as well as representatives of the ANPED GTs, were able to reflect on the political and educational scenario in a humane and fraternal dialogue during the workshop. This was based on the non-hierarchization of the various knowledge present, the systematization of experiences, and strategies for organizing organized collectives in defense and strengthening democracy, freedom, and education as a field of human and solidarity formation, as well as the fight for the guarantee of rights that make us equal in our differences.

The organization and planning of articulations, shared actions, and group activities outside of the workshop were aided by the reflections on the articulation between what is unique and what is multiple, between what is global and what is local. These reflections were always conducted from the perspective of the ecology of knowledges and with regard to the various forms of knowledge, practices, speech, and lively voices that denounce and announce. For instance, the workshop’s outcomes led to the university organizing extension courses (short courses and improvement courses) from a popular education perspective, based on Freirean assumptions and principles, and particularly on what we were able to develop as a group through the reciprocal learning that was offered during the workshop days.

Groups were tasked with presenting ideas and advancements during the discussions that addressed the workshop’s proposal, “Defend and decolonize the university: from resistance to the ecology of knowledges.” PUSM announces the decolonization of minds and dominant knowledges through a different conception of education, whose premises are of a critical, dialogical, intercultural, and decolonial pedagogy. It is inspired by Freire, popular education, and the epistemologies of the South. A democratic, critical, and dialogical education that makes it possible to overcome colonialist educational practices that impose an oppressive, dehumanizing, and accommodating order on people while preventing the development of genuine, insubmissive, transgressive beauty and thought.

Understanding popular thought as valid knowledge that is neither subalternized nor subalternizing was a key topic covered in the workshop. As an ongoing learning process that is connected to the practice of freedom, justice, and well-being, education is essential and helps people become more humanized so they can deal with the unfair, unequal, and perverse reality they live in. As a result, it is not just any kind of education; rather, it is an education dedicated to the participants’ freedom, aspirations, knowledge, hardships, and struggles.

One of the challenges of Brazilian education, in a capitalist context characterized by exclusion, injustice, and inequality—which puts the majority of the population in situations of unemployment, exploitation, and misery—is comprehending the profile of the popular educator in a society that is constantly changing and experiencing numerous setbacks, as we discussed during the workshop’s experiences and activities. Keep in mind that in 2019, we were under a proto-fascist government that flirted with military dictatorships, and that social movements were becoming increasingly criminalized.

Understanding worldviews that have their roots in the histories of marginalized and/or

suppressed cultures, which are full of hardships, resistances, hard work, aspirations, utopias, and beauty, bolstered our own existence and made us think about the need to deepen and broaden discussions about the conflicts and contradictions that arise between popular education and the university, particularly in university extension, with the various knowledges generated in popular social movements.

In the various contexts created collectively, between conflicts and processes of articulation and mutual knowledge, it was vital and humanizing to learn about and comprehend these additional possibilities of revealing and unveiling the here and now. The search for a becoming, a more shared being among all, was aided by the realization that we were (in)finished beings during the days we spent together, desiring dreams and viable novelties. Education is a historical, political, and ideological process that is infused with the culture of a place and time as well as with common aspirations for freedom. In this manner, the beauty that each individual brought to the workshop and beyond was shared.

Conclusion

Is a university able to have popularity? Is it possible for academics and activists to share knowledge at a university? Can a university use scientific knowledge as one of many knowledges that share the variety of worldviews, rather than as the only knowledge? Can a university seek to express knowledge for progressive social change and social emancipation? Can a university's ultimate objective be to produce and disseminate transformative strategies and actions that effectively combat the injustices of our day, in addition to producing and disseminating knowledge? Is it possible for a university to have a different possible world as its utopia and be counter-hegemonic?

This article examines the connections among PUSM, popular education, traditional universities, and popular higher education

experiences. We observed that there are many well-liked initiatives in higher education, even in spite of the elitism, colonialism, and growing commercialization of traditional universities. This plurality includes PUSM, which sets itself apart from other popular higher education experiences through its multiterritorialized action, trans-scalar, intercultural, and intertematic nature, and its goal of promoting horizontal dialogues and reciprocal learning between popular and scientific knowledge rather than imparting a particular knowledge to its participants.

With this work, we aim to demonstrate that the experience of PUSM can offer contributions to the challenge of thinking about a popular university, through the search for complementarity between Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed and what we have been calling the pedagogy of articulation.¹⁴

The pedagogy of the oppressed, as we have seen in the preceding pages, "makes oppression and its causes the object of reflection for the oppressed, resulting in their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation" (Freire, 2011, p. 43). Freire suggests this pedagogy as a means of fostering critical consciousness and political formation for the popular classes through the dialogue suggested by popular education, in conjunction with literacy. In order to enable more robust articulations and more daring and successful collective actions between them, PUSM goes one step further by developing in its workshops an articulation pedagogy that seeks to foster the ecology of knowledges, interknowledge, and mutual intelligibility among diverse social struggles.

It is important to keep in mind that, in Freire's time, socialism was a clearly defined revolutionary project that, in order to be

¹⁴ We refer to the particular shape that educational practices take when their goal is to build bridges of communication, mutual learning, and solidarity among the forms of resistance to the oppression, injustice, and suffering brought about by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy as "pedagogy of articulation" (Merladet, 2020).

genuine, had to “inaugurate the courageous dialogue with the masses” (Freire, 2011, p. 172). However, in the context of PUSM, there are a number of emancipatory projects that must be articulated in the fight for a different possible world through dialogue and conflict (that is, by arduously negotiating their divergences and convergences) rather than a clear revolutionary project that must be advanced through dialogue. Additionally, PUSM’s area of practice is the relationship between struggles and the various knowledges that make them up, whereas the primary focus of popular education practices is grassroots work. In this sense, the main purpose of PUSM workshops is to facilitate the articulation and intelligibility of movements rather than to establish their foundation.

For instance, Freire (1979) highlights the significance of awareness in the educational process to make students the agents of their own destinies in *Education and Change*. It is clear that activists in the movements have a critical consciousness of themselves as subjects of social transformation, so referring to awareness in PUSM is redundant and out of date in contrast to Freire’s context. The awareness suggested by Freire is a given fact in the workshops conducted by PUSM, rather than something that is aimed to be created in the movements. As the experience report shows, PUSM prioritizes a pedagogy of articulation based on the relationship between diverse knowledges rather than the awareness of the oppressed because of the lack of awareness regarding the legitimacy and significance of struggles beyond their own.

As a result, a fishing community can effectively educate and politically train its leaders and members to defend their struggles through the pedagogy of the oppressed, as well as effectively incite the necessary outrage and rebellion in them to fight those who perpetrate injustices within their community. Conversely, PUSM’s pedagogy of articulation is a useful tool for the articulation and development of

cooperative actions between their activists and those of other communities and other social struggles, rather than for the fishermen’s political and educational development or for inspiring them to fight against the injustices they experience (though this also occurs in their workshops).

By focusing on the ecology of knowledge, intercultural translation, reciprocal learning, and horizontal articulation among individuals who already possess a critical awareness of the world, we can conceptualize PUSM as a type of higher education in popular education. This allows for the discussion of complex issues, strategies of struggle and resistance, tangible forms of action, and opportunities for alliances. PUSM is their university, where activists from movements with a long history of political formation and struggle experience find the chance to develop new knowledge and practices in articulation with activists from other movements and critical intellectuals dedicated to social struggles. If popular education is the school of social movements, that is, the space where movements build the educational and political formation of their activists, then PUSM is their university. In this sense, discussion, education, and expression all work in concert to strengthen oppositions and alternatives to the various types of oppression and dominance brought about by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy.

This complementarity between PUSM and popular education leads us to the conclusion that, in the new 21st-century contexts, PUSM updates Freire’s proposal to reflect contemporary challenges. As a result, it stays true to Freire in a broader sense by imagining what he would think today while accounting for the shifting political and social structures of our era. “I have no doubt that sooner than many think, men and women of the world will reinvent new ways of fighting that we cannot even imagine now,” Freire (2003) writes prophetically on the back cover of his book *El Grito Manso*. This prophecy is what PUSM aims to achieve.

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