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Luis Emilio Recabarren: Educator of the Chilean Working Class

María Alicia Vetter

Key words: working-class education, Chile, history of adult education, social movement learning

Abstract: This paper is based on a philosophical and historical inquiry into the educational vision of Luis Emilio Recabarren, a working-class leader and organizer of the early 20th century in Chile.

Luis Emilio Recabarren (1876-1924) lived in Chile during a historical period that was marked by political and social activism, of which he was a well-known participant. His active political life began shortly after the death of President Balmaceda (1891) and the start of the “Nitrate Era” (1880-1930), and ended in 1924, when the exploitation of nitrates in Chile was coming to an end. Although not an educator in a formal sense of the word, his image as the educator of the working class he came from and helped organize has remained in time (Alegría, 1968; Furci, 1984; Lafertte, 1971; Loyola Tapia, 2000; Massardo, 2008).

The “Nitrate Era” (Artaza Barrios, 2006; Monteón, 1982; Pinto Vallejos, 1998) created an industrial proletariat in the north of the country that would often confront the Chilean state and the foreign companies involved in the exploitation of nitrates. Similar struggles went on in other parts of the country and in the urban areas, where a new working class¹ was filling the cities in search of the new manufacturing jobs (Ortiz Letelier, 2005). Recabarren became a leader who systematically gave direction to the organizing of these workers in parties, federations, and cooperatives (Ramírez Necochea, 2007a, 2007b). As a typographer, Recabarren came in contact with newspaper activity from a very early age (Alegría, 1968). This trade would turn out to be fundamental for his political education, as well as for his vocation as educator of the working class. Recabarren (1965/1921) thought that the working class should be educated to fulfill its role in society and conceived of the press as an educational tool. He also envisioned the organizations he founded and led as schools for the working class.

For this purpose, Recabarren founded, and helped found a great number of working-class newspapers and he organized and led a number of political parties and workers’ federations. The workers themselves would know him as *El Maestro*, The Teacher.² Massardo (2008) pointed out that Recabarren, like Gramsci according to Roland, became “the teacher of the proletarian revolution”³ (p. 20). Furthermore, Massardo (2008) argued, basing this idea on Salvador Ocampo’s *Recabarren, el Maestro*: “[I]t is this nickname [*el Maestro*], the one with which the workers’ tradition has identified Recabarren and, eventually, the image with which this workers’ tradition recognizes itself in relation to him” (p. 20). Recabarren played the role of a

¹ According to Ortiz Letelier (2005), the industrial working-class sector in Chile grew from 150,000 in 1890, to 250,000 in 1900. By 1920, the numbers surpassed the 350,000 people. Although modernization created unprecedented industrial work in the cities (the urban population had doubled between 1875 and 1920), the largest sector of workers remained in the mining of saltpeter, copper, and coal.

² All translations in this paper are mine.

³ “Il se fait le maître enseignant de la révolution, prolétarien.” (p. 20)

“foundational myth”⁴ Massardo (2008) says, quoting Loyola Tapia (2000), and insisted that it is the “pedagogical dimension of his cultural work where one needs to submerge oneself to find the genesis of the myth” (p. 20). It is, therefore, Recabarren as an educator of the proletariat in Chile that is at the center of my research.

Methodology

The original questions my research attempted to answer had to do with the reputation Luis Emilio Recabarren had in the history of Chile as the educator of the working class, the educator of the proletarian revolution, the father of the workers’ movement. For this purpose, I conducted a historical and philosophical inquiry to determine the nature of Recabarren’s educational vision. Accomplishing this required answering two primary questions related to Recabarren’s philosophical and pedagogical outlook. First, what was the nature of his educational outlook? In other words, what was it that he meant by education and what were the philosophical underpinnings of his understandings of education? Second, what practical expressions did his philosophical and educational outlook take and how were those expressions informed?

I identified and acquired all the materials Recabarren authored, which are available today in compilations (the originals are archived in the National Library of Chile). I read all of the journal articles (630 articles), originally published in a great number of newspapers, and that were compiled by Devés and Cruzat in four volumes. I identified every quote that related to education and, or, was of a philosophical nature. I translated every quote that I identified and I looked for the main themes and subthemes that connected them. I also read all of Recabarren’s essays that were published in other compilations, which allowed for a more in-depth thematic analysis of Recabarren’s major ideas. I summarized them in English and I identified and translated the quotes that were relevant in those texts. I organized the data chronologically because it allows the reader to follow more closely the progression in Recabarren’s ideas; it also provides a step-by-step historical overview of the working-class movement.

This research discovered a civilizing aspect in Recabarren’s educational vision and identified the working-class organization and the working-class press as the major areas that Recabarren entrusted with the civilizing and educational role.

The Civilizing Aspect in Recabarren’s Educational and Political Vision

Recabarren (1885/1904), by his own admission, was a *revolutionary* and it was the idea of revolution that motivated and dominated his writings. The main objective of his revolutionary activities and, among them, the work of agitation and propaganda that he conducted through his writings, was the *civilizing* of society. In this context he saw education as the vehicle to civilize the working class, who, in turn, would play a civilizing role in the society at large.

For Recabarren, a *civilized society* would be one in which complete equality reigned, allowing for humankind to fulfill its role as species without fetters. Recabarren considered *that*

⁴ Founding myth, or foundational story: Loyola Tapia claimed that Recabarren has become a mythical figure in the history of the CPCh and in the working class’ lore. Massardo used the expression in the sense of a foundational story. In other words, the working class in Chile has traditionally identified the figure of Recabarren both as a “father” of their struggles (founding myth) and as the leader that taught them how to struggle (foundational story).

last class of society,⁵ the working class, to be the one called on to play the civilizing role. Therefore, he emphasized its education for that role as fundamental.

The civilizing aspect appeared in Recabarren's works, first as an inheritance from the Enlightenment with its emphasis on reason and manifested in the republican ideals of the bourgeois revolutions. The civilizing aspect was made evident in Recabarren's emphasis on habits and morals, as well as on cultivation and culture. The *regeneration* and the *emancipation* of the working class were at that point the main objectives of the education of workers. Although Recabarren was a socialist, his militancy in the Democratic Party with its republican ideology, limited what he considered achievable in revolutionary terms. With his break from that party and the founding of a Socialist Party in 1912, he was freed to pose socialism as the civilizing alternative to the failed bourgeois civilization. With a socialist theory to ground his writings and a socialist agenda and party program, he proposed new educational alternatives for the socialist cadre, for the working class, and for the society at large.

In 1917, with the triumph of the Russian Revolution, the certainty of revolutionary success, as well as a new world view, influenced his positions and writings. The direct contact with the Bolshevik Revolution in 1922 allowed him to reinforce his positive opinions of it and consider a revolution of similar characteristics feasible for Chile. Recabarren (1987/1923) believed the Russian Revolution had achieved the first steps towards a new civilization and was itself a civilizing force, thus ushering in a new age for humanity.

The civilizing nature of education was combined in Recabarren's writings with an initial advocating for schooling to complete the main republican objectives, and with new forms of self-education by the workers through their own press, their own schools and organizations, and their own experiences as workers. At the same time, the "civilized" nature of bourgeois society was made suspect as Recabarren perceived that bourgeois society had failed to deliver on its promises. Part of the self-education of workers, in Recabarren's views, should be directed to *redeem* and *regenerate* the society that had failed them.

Keeping some of the legacy of the Enlightenment, Recabarren's theory of socialism then moved away from education for citizenship under republican constitutions to propose a system change led by socialism as a civilizing force. In this context, socialist education and the influence of socialists on the political arena, as well as socialist organizations and their educational activities, were proposed as civilizing both for those involved in them (workers) and for the society at large.

The Educational Role of the Working-Class Organization

I examined: Recabarren's educational project in the Mancomunal Combination of Tocopilla of 1903-1905; Recabarren's views on the labor unions of Argentina in 1906; the founding of the Socialist Democratic Party by Recabarren; the Socialist Workers Party (POS) founded by Recabarren in 1912, its educational activities and leadership; the cooperatives and the role Recabarren believed they played; the unions and union action; the Federation of Chilean Workers (FOCH); and the Communist Party of Chile (CPCh) in 1922.

⁵ Recabarren used this expression in two ways: as the class at the bottom of society, an oppressed class; and as the one remaining class that would eliminate all classes and make a classless society possible.

Initially, Recabarren saw great potential in the mancomunales combined with the municipalities. After travelling to Argentina and Europe, the combination of unions and cooperatives seemed to Recabarren to be more appropriate for their then present struggle and for training for the future society. As the Federation of Chilean Workers (FOCh) gained numbers and gathered strength, Recabarren saw the advantage of such an entity organizing all of the workers in the country, regardless of their party and political affiliations. From his militancy in the Democratic Party to his founding of the POS and then the CPCh, Recabarren always considered the political party to be essential. He understood that not all workers would join the party, but considered it a necessity that the party would provide leadership to the organized workers. It is in this context that one must understand why Recabarren considered the working-class press to be essential to the organization of the working class.

The Educational Role of the Working-Class Press

Initially, Recabarren thought of the press as a way to civilize the workers. The working-class press could offer culture and cultivation as support for the educational efforts of the state. Recabarren soon thought of the press as a means to organize the workers and as a way to propagate the ideas of the working class; in other words, as a means to establish the hegemony of the working class. It was in the building of proletarian hegemony that the revolutionary role of the working-class press finally expressed itself.

Recabarren believed that it was only by establishing their own body of thought through the press that the workers could start organizing and that the working-class organizations could take shape. In a retrospective account of the role of the press in the awakening of the working class, Recabarren (1965/1921) declared:

While the press was not in our hands, we were invisible, we lived in darkness, ignored; we could not develop our thinking. But the creation of the press reveals a genius in the thought of the workers. When they have said: "Let us have a press, then we will be able to perfect our intelligences," then and only then have things started to change. (p. 52)

Like other intellectuals of the working class of the same period,⁶ Recabarren (1965/1921) believed in a counter hegemonic role of the press: to oppose the hegemony of the bourgeoisie through its media, the working class would build its own proletarian hegemony through its press. For this purpose, it was necessary to have a press that would first help educate workers and develop their thinking and, once the workers had begun organizing, they could direct their own processes from the press. Part of the effort to give body to a new (social, political) consciousness was to develop a proletarian culture and proletarian ethics. To the dominant culture of the bourgeoisie, with its history, its values, its institutions, its religion, the working class would counter with its own history, ethics, organizations, and beliefs. Through the press, Recabarren launched an educational drive towards a working-class culture that would ideally be internationalist and antimilitaristic, anticlerical, and, above all, egalitarian. The emphasis was on education itself as a means to accomplish organization and solidarity among all workers.

⁶ The concept of working-class "hegemony" is associated to Antonio Gramsci.

Recabarren viewed the role of the working-class press consecutively as civilizer, social emancipator, defender, guide, educator, tribune, and organizer of the working class. These categories roughly corresponded to the roles that Recabarren assigned to the organizations. Both the roles assigned to the organizations and to the working-class press reflected Recabarren's different stages in his educational and philosophical outlook.

Implications for Adult Education

This research places Recabarren within the field of adult education and it contributes new perspectives to the field. The study of Recabarren's works brings to light the emphasis that the socialist organizers of the first decades of the 20th century placed on the education of adult workers. As the elites started offering formal adult education programs to counteract the socialist organizing of workers, the working-class organizations countered with their own independent efforts to educate their members towards their own goals. Recabarren's views and efforts were not different from other such efforts in Europe and in the U.S. in the same period.

In the broadest terms, this research falls within and contributes to the tradition of Radical Adult Education (Foley, 1999; Lovett, 1988), most particularly in the area of Independent Working Class Education (Altenbaugh, 1990; Schied, 1993; Sharp, Hartwig, & O'Leary, 1989; Simon, 1965). It is also a contribution to historical (see for example, Boughton, 2013; Gettleman, 1993; Hammond, 1998) and contemporary (see for example, Ruiz 2006) case study and philosophical (Allman, 1999) approaches to revolutionary adult education. Recabarren can be considered one of the forerunners of workers' education as (radical) adult education in Latin America. He changed the prevailing discourse on the education of workers and created the conditions (parties, federations, cooperatives, newspapers, night schools, and a body of thought) for the workers to take control of their own education as a class.

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