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The educational philosophy of Luis Emilio Recabarren and its influence on the Chilean Working Class and its class struggle strategies

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Keywords: Workers' education, Luis Emilio Recabarren, class struggle

Abstract: This paper documents the major class struggles of the Chilean working class during the "Nitrate Era". It highlights the leadership of Luis Emilio Recabarren, who understood working-class education as a strategy for power.

Introduction

Luis Emilio Recabarren (1876 -1924) is recognized as the most notable leader of the Chilean working class in the very beginnings of its struggles as a class conscious of itself. He is also respected as the educator, whose educational philosophy and pedagogy inspired a century of working class struggle. Furthermore, he is acknowledged as one of the forerunners of Marxism in Latin America, alongside José Carlos Mariátegui and Julio Antonio Mella (Vitale, 1987).

In this paper, I intend to analyze Recabarren's influence on the Chilean working class' ideological make-up and struggle strategies. Luis Emilio Recabarren, according to some authors, sought to foster an enlightened working class, one that would, through education and political struggle be able to take over its own destiny and that of the nation. It is the nature of such enlightenment, and the how and what for of the political struggle held by Recabarren, the ones that I will analyze and put in the historical context in which the Chilean working class waged its battles. Recabarren was a great advocate of civic education as a must in the consciousness raising of the working class. He also believed that in the process of educating itself, the working class should create its own enlightened culture, one that would span schooling, theater, and art. A typographer himself, Recabarren believed in the power of the written word. He founded, and helped found a great number of working class newspapers as tools for the education of the working class.

The overall importance of this paper resides in deciphering the historical significance of these early influences of the Chilean working class. It is my belief that the clues to understand the struggles of the Chilean working class in the 20th Century lay in its very beginnings. I believe that it is in its early education that we can identify some of the reasons for its triumphs, and where we can find, perhaps, the clues for its defeat in 1973. Both are of major importance for our understanding of the role of adult education in the battle to transform the world.

There is an abundant literature on the history of the Chilean working class. In it, the role of Recabarren is predominantly pointed to as fundamental in the formation of working class parties (Angell, 1972; Witker Velásquez, 1977). There is also an effort on the part of new social and historical analysts to point to the early experiences of the Chilean working class as more authentic examples of working-class organization than the ensuing ones of the parties (Salazar, 1987). Educators, particularly popular and adult educators (Núñez, 1982) claim that truly liberatory education took place in these early efforts, to be lost forever when the parties took over the education of workers.

Though there is no need to rescue Recabarren's stature as a revolutionary and as a Latin American patriot, I believe that not enough attention has been paid in the literature to his

educational vision. I believe that it is from this vision that one can begin to reconstruct the theoretical body that helped him inspire his contemporaries, as well as all subsequent generations of revolutionaries.

Historical background

The early organizations of the Chilean working class placed a remarkable emphasis on the education of the workers. This education was pursued through formal, non-formal, and informal venues. This paper highlights a concept of adult education understood as the political self-education of workers through their militancy in workers' organizations. How a class moves from defensive organizations (such as mutual aid societies and resistance societies) to parties that articulate a hegemonic role for the working class, as well as how these qualitative jumps take place in the context of a change from freely competitive capitalism to classical imperialism are questions at the core of this analysis. The role of Luis Emilio Recabarren (1876-1924) as working class leader and organic intellectual (Gramsci, 1971) must be understood as fundamental in that stage of the history of the Chilean working class.

The Chilean working class waged battles all through the second part of the 19th century. What made it an industrial working class was the stage set up by the jump from freely competitive capitalism to classical imperialism that took place thanks to British imperialism. It is no surprise, then, that some of the first forms of classical worker organizations, as well as the qualitative jump to parties of the working class, take place in the mining North in what has been called the "nitrate era". Though there are authors that emphasize the spontaneous character of workers' response to capital (Angell, 1974), and others that deny the existence of an organic intellectual leadership (Monteón, 1982), the evidence points to quite the contrary. The Chilean North filled with foreign as well as homegrown anarchists, who were not only quite educated themselves, but who fostered and promoted the education of workers; and the figure of Luis Emilio Recabarren, foremost an educator of the working class, was crucial in advancing workers' consciousness and the creation of parties. The working class not only organized but also created the conditions for their own education as a class. The hundreds of working-class newspapers that made their appearance attest to the usage of this medium to foster consciousness and to rally workers. Workers were initially suspicious of the formal education forced upon them as a means for domestication, but they would eventually demand it as they understood the need for elementary education in the process to change the conditions under which they labored.

The nitrate era (1880-1930) cemented the economic dependency of Chile and set the conditions for the era of classical imperialism that would characterize it during the entire twentieth century.

Workers' struggles between 1907 and 1925

In 1907, one year after Luis Emilio Recabarren is elected to Parliament as deputy, and consequently excluded from the Chamber of Deputies, 10,000 nitrate miners demonstrate for higher salaries, safety standards at work, and an end to the company stores in the northern city of Iquique. The Chilean military is called in to defend the interests of the nitrate tycoons and the foreign interests of England, and 2,000 men, women and children die under machine gun fire in a school yard called Santa María. Considered one of the worst massacres in labor history, Angell (1974) refers to it as an example of how the workers at that stage of the game believed in the strength of their numbers to combat capitalism.

In 1909, the Chilean Workers' Federation (FOCH), a mutual aid society is founded and though its initial purpose is to curtail unrest, the workers, thus organized, strike 293 times between 1911 and 1920. By 1912, Recabarren has founded the first working-class political party, the Socialist Workers' Party, which in 1922 will become the Communist Party of Chile, while in 1921, the Chilean Workers' Federation (FOCH), also led by Recabarren, joins the Communist International Trade Union Movement.

In 1914, anarchists form the Liga de Arrendatarios [Renters League] in Valparaíso to address the worsening housing problem. In 1915, the Federación de Profesores de Instrucción Primaria [Federation of Primary School Teachers] is formed. This is followed by the first teachers strike in 1918. The year 1918 is also witness to the formation of the Asamblea Obrera de Alimentación Nacional [National Workers' Food Assembly]. The Assembly becomes known for its Mítines de Hambre [Hunger demonstrations] which attract large crowds culminating in a demonstration of nearly 100,000 in Santiago. In addition, the Assembly's National Congress in 1919 takes up, among other issues, such as the 8-hour day, the detrimental impact that the latifundios have on food production and the living conditions of the peasants. The Congress recognizes the need to organize the peasants and calls for the end of the latifundios through land distribution to the peasantry. In the year 1920, there are several mass strike actions in the mining areas of the north and the south, and anarchists establish a chapter of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Students also begin to form their first organizations in this year with the first Chilean Student Convention. All of this agitation and revolutionary upheaval is met with consistent repression exemplified in its most dramatic form by the massacre of at least 500 in the Nitrate mining town of San Gregorio in 1921 and followed later by the killing of several hundreds in the mining towns of La Coruña, Pontevedra and Barreñechea in 1925.

Parallel to the workers rising level of consciousness, capital is incessantly changing hands and foreign capitalists are replacing each other in the Chilean scene. In 1911, Chuquicamata is bought by Guggenheim from Albert C. Burrage, to be later sold to the Anaconda Copper Company in 1923. In 1913, Bethlehem Steel Corporation is granted a 30 year concession to exploit Chile's iron ore deposits, consequently keeping a monopoly over iron ore in Chile till the 1950s. The Andes Copper Mining Company purchases *La Africana* from a Chilean capitalist in 1914. In 1904, the Braden Copper Company buys *El Teniente* from Chilean capitalists, to sell it then in 1908 to Guggenheim, who then is responsible for organizing the Kennecott Copper Corporation (with financing from Morgan). These companies would control Chile's most important resources until the government of Eduardo Frei Montalva (1964-1970) would unwittingly open up the road to the full-scale nationalizations of the Unidad Popular (1970-1973). Thus, as the resources would be for the first time in Chile's history in the hands of Chileans, the workers would achieve an electoral victory that Recabarren had started setting the stage for in 1907.

Luis Emilio Recabarren

"Recabarren, Mariátegui y Mella", Alejandro Witker Velásquez (1977) states, "represent a qualitative jump in the birth and development of the Latin American workers' movement. They overcome the reformist tendencies... and they decidedly close ranks with the revolutionary current of the international workers' movement" (p. 18, my translation). "Recabarren", he adds, "represents the most authentic workers' root, the most colossal work of organizing, education and propaganda, as well as the creation of a true school for the masses" (pp. 16-17, my translation)

Recabarren's life parallels the ascendancy and demise of British capitalism in Chile, and, therefore, the workers' struggles he, himself, would lead. And although he had been preceded by

several socialist organizers, and socialist organizations in other parts of the country, his leadership is the one recognized as the most enlightened and the one to successfully move the class forward. The importance of the press in the education of workers is present from his very beginnings in the Partido Democrático de Chile [Democratic Party of Chile], which he joined in 1894. In 1900, Recabarren takes the leadership of the party's newspaper in which he calls for "a proclamation of communism." In 1903, he directs the weekly *El Trabajo* for the Mancomunal [mutual aid society] of Tocopilla. He is jailed as a result of the ideological struggles he wages through the paper. In 1906 he is candidate for Congress for Antofagasta and although he is elected, he is denied his seat as a strategy to impede workers' participation in government. Nevertheless, Angell (1974) and others have identified this initial attempt of Recabarren's to enter bourgeois electoral politics as the one that would give the particular approach of the Chilean working class to the strategizing of the taking of power its particular imprint. Recabarren would soon form a new party, Partido Demócrata Doctrinario [Doctrinarian Democratic Party], in his attempt to form a workers party. He founds another newspaper, *La Reforma*, to which he would give an internationalist approach by reporting on the revolutionary events of 1905. Persecuted again, he exiles himself to Argentina where he joins the Partido Socialista [Socialist Party]. In 1908 he travels to Europe where he establishes relationships with European revolutionaries, among others with Pablo Iglesias, in Spain, and Jean Jaurès, in France.

In 1911, after spending time in jail one more time (where he writes some of his most important writings), he sets residence in Iquique. He founds *El Grito* [The Cry] and then *El Despertar de los Trabajadores* [The Worker's Awakening] (1912-1927), considered the most advanced workers' newspaper up to that time.

Recabarren (1910/1976) would always consider education as fundamental for working class consciousness and this class's final victory. Nevertheless, he questioned the value of literacy alone for what he called "that last class of society":

They will say that the number of illiterates is, proportionally speaking, much smaller than before, but with this statement nothing is proven that would evidence progress. For this *last class of society* [my emphasis] to know how to read and write is nothing but a means of communication that has not provided it any social welfare. The slim exercise that these sectors of the people get to make of these forms of knowledge, places them in such a condition that it is almost as if they have not learned anything. In the cities and in the fields, to know how to write, or sign one's name, has been for the people a new means of corruption, because the class in government has degraded them civically by teaching them to sell their conscience, their will, their sovereignty.

The people in their naïve ignorance greatly appreciate to learn how to read and write to sell their conscience. Is this progress? To have barely learned how to read and write, as it happens to most of the people who live in the opposite extreme of wealth, it does not mean, truly, the slightest atom of progress. (p.63, my translation)

In opposition to this pseudo formal education, Recabarren proposed and carried out in the midst of political education, what he considered to be a necessary moral education for the real progress of the country and its citizens:

The Socialist Party offers evening conferences every Saturday at its headquarters. Through these, it accomplishes the gradual but certain education of those sentiments that today fill the people. This educational work that raises the intellectual level of the popular masses constitutes the facts with which we prove our love for our country. This educational work is only carried out by the Socialist Party. When with such persistence the Socialist Party

combats the alcoholism that is the wound that poisons the people, it is doing patriotic work; it proves that it loves its country because it wants to keep its people and its race healthy. When the Socialist Party fights against bars and gambling is because it wants to do away with the vices that take away the daily bread from the tables of the poor, which destroy so many workers, who, were they to be redeemed, would be useful to their country. When socialism combats prostitution, the most infamous of the social ills of our present society, it is doing patriotic work of the highest kind, because it seeks to free our country and the families that are its base, from the degradation in which our women, mothers of humanity, are made to fall. That we call patriotic work, and in working to make those vices disappear, we give the best proof of our true patriotic love, which might be quiet and unassuming but is much more real and effective than the one of those who scream a lot about patriotism. (as cited in Witker p.74, my translation)

With the founding of the Partido Obrero Socialista [Socialist Workers Party] (POS) in 1912, Recabarren and a few others identify the need for an autonomous historical project for the working class. The party sets up study groups where workers read international socialist papers and study the ideological bases of socialism. Recabarren leads and also writes pamphlets that are used by the militants to study. Elías Lafferte (as cited in Witker, 1977) claims that Recabarren was in the beginnings of the POS, the only intellectual in their midst with a solid Marxist education. But in time, he says, the militants would become familiarized with the tenets of Marxism through study groups, with books that came from Europe, through international relations and traveling and, eventually, with the solidarity of the Communist International. The party extends through the whole country, and new and better press appears.

In 1920, Recabarren is proposed as a presidential candidate to counteract the populist appeals of Alessandri. The working-class press clarifies that the working class does not believe that bourgeois politics is their field of struggle, but rather that Recabarren's candidacy is their way of manifesting their opposition to the oligarchy (Witker, 1977). This showed a high level of consciousness as a class, one that would get distorted with time as the parties and organizations of the working class entered the electoral arena and validated it this way as a legitimate arena for struggle.

In January 1922, during the Fourth Congress of POS, the party becomes the Partido Comunista de Chile [Communist Party of Chile] and it ratifies its adherence to the Third International, although it would not be recognized as such until 1928. It became ideologically a Marxist-Leninist party.

The Federación Obrera de Chile (FOCH) undergoes a significant ideological jump under Recabarren's leadership in 1919. It changes from an organization that had fought exclusively for economic gains to a revolutionary organization. In terms of the education of the working class, it stated in its "Declaration of Principles" that

This federation will be the school from which the best thinking will come out to guide the proletariat of both sexes in accomplishing the perfection of their social and industrial organization towards total emancipation. This program of social perfection can be accomplished if the proletariat class of both sexes (workers and employees) rise to the task to build the strength to accomplish this program by joining, in the first place, the Workers Federation of Chile, in any of its sections, unions, or federations that form part of this organization, which is the practical school that teaches and dignifies the highest concept of truth and social justice. Therefore, the Workers Federation of Chile raises its flag inspired in these two profound international calls: "The union makes us strong" and "The emancipation

of the working class must be accomplished by the workers themselves.” (pp 95-96, as cited in Witker, 1977, my translation)

In 1920, FOCH attempts another ideological jump that is defeated by less progressive elements; that is, the founding of one working class party. And in 1925, coinciding with the post-war move of the U.S. to strengthen its holdings in the area, it raises, for the first time, the defense of the national resources against foreign capitalism as a working class issue.

Conclusion

Iván Núñez and others believe that the education these early organizations of the Chilean working class involved themselves in was true popular education, that something quite unique happened in this period that would never be repeated. This, according to Núñez (1982), occurred because the working class had to develop its own adult education in opposition to the one other sectors of society were attempting to impose on it as a means to integrate the workers to the “democratic” project of the bourgeoisie. In its jump from defensive societies to political organizations and unions, the working class understood the need to provide itself with an education as a class. When, according to Núñez, the working class entered “el estado de compromiso” [the welfare state phase], it lost its autonomy and began to participate in a national project which is, ultimately, a bourgeois project.

It is also certain that the ideological growth of the Chilean working class was not only due to the leadership of Recabarren, but also to the objective conditions of exploitation under imperialist conditions. Nevertheless, the influence of this organic intellectual was such that those steps not achieved during his leadership would be lost forever, the founding of one party of the working class being the most fundamental.

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