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Youth and Adult Education in the Context of Student Movements: The Cases of Egypt, Puerto Rico, and Chile

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Youth and Adult Education in the Context of Student Movements: The Cases of Egypt, Puerto Rico, and Chile

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Keywords: social movement learning, neoliberalism, student movements

Abstract: Participants of the student movements in Egypt, Puerto Rico, and Chile present on their experiential learning in the context of the social movements that took place between 2005 and 2019.

This symposium is a follow-up to the publication of an article (Atta et al., 2021) in the journal of *Andragogical Studies*, in which the participants presented and discussed their experiences in the theoretical contexts of Andragogy and Social Movement Learning. In the context of the symposium, the presentations will address the nature of the learning and the manners in which it took place in each context and from movement to movement. In other words, we will address the lessons that can be learned from these movements in terms of social movement learning.

We will also discuss how learning in social movements impacts social policy, explore the relationship between education and learning in the movements, and highlight what these movements tell us about youth and adult education and its impact on society at large.

Narratives from the Student Movement in Egypt

When I first joined a student organization at Cairo University, I did not expect to be on the executive board in two years; nevertheless, I marched on the streets to demand the ouster of a president. I grew up as a middle-class Cairene when Egypt was experiencing a second wave of neoliberal economic reforms represented in waves of school and universities privatization, among other strategies (Beinin, 2012). Until witnessing the Egyptian uprising of 2011, I considered myself the product of the mainstream education that followed these neoliberal reforms. This neoliberal project dismantled old systems and created a mass discontent that catalyzed resistance and social movements. Finally, in 2011, Egypt witnessed an uprising against police brutality and deteriorating economic conditions.

In this symposium, I want to engage in the scholarly discussion of social movement learning, given that the Egyptian revolution as a historical moment has not been attended to in

this field. Furthermore, I want to shed light on how a generation raised to be apolitical found its way to utilize the university campus and become politically engaged.

Historically, universities in Egypt have been known as social movement territories and spaces for resistance against a government that does not allow students' political participation. Despite all the educational reforms at the time in Egypt, the formal educational system was based on memorization and solely measured students' performance through standardized tests in both K-12 and higher education. This form of schooling discouraged critical thinking, discussion, debates, or questioning. The pedagogies and curricula used in formal education were a seed to cultivate a passive and non-participatory political life among educated Egyptians. Additionally, education reforms fostered the individual's responsibility to search for knowledge online to advance their education and equip them with the needed skills to match the labor market demands. These reforms were "well-suited to the neoliberal agenda" (Milana, 2012, p. 111).

During the protests that followed the Palestinian intifada, while playing an essential role in organizing these protests, the "Kefaya movement" also triggered the necessity to take political education from the classroom to the streets (Ezzeldeen, 2010). Students became aware of the contradiction in this era's educational reform. Mubarak's privatization of universities did not mean letting go of his control over the content offered by these institutions. For example, political education was only allowed, whether in schools or universities, under state control and conducted in a very superficial manner so as not to provoke opposition but build instead a taboo around political participation (Mirshak, 2020). At the time, the student movement's purpose was to educate middle class and working-class students to create social and political change. It also ensured that its educational activities included marginalized voices such as women's.

Between 2011 and 2013, we witnessed an exceptional openness in the political space; many organizations started engaging in different forms of collective action across the country and with various causes and political affiliations. This movement helped us expand the traditional definition of learning and education beyond the limits of schools and universities. Informal learning experiences occurred when participants started reflecting on and developing their educational tools and pedagogy. Student-led organizations began to create educational tools such as board games, and experiences such as retreats and educational camps and make them available to a broad public, preferably to people that would not otherwise have access to them. The content of these educational tools was mainly related to community participation, redefining citizenship, and political education.

In this symposium segment, I want to elaborate on how those student organizations witnessed some pedagogical and structural shifts post-2011. The student groups had adopted in the past the same educational methods that they were taught within the formal education system when it came to educating. This practice meant replicating the power dynamics, non-dialogical teaching, and offering corporatized teaching methods. Before 2011, student organizations used to have a human resources management unit responsible for recruiting and training incoming volunteers. After 2011, some of them changed their practices and adopted language to meet our work's needs and nature. We started to recruit volunteers and encourage members' participation. In terms of structural changes, the repressive nature of the regime post-2013 inspired movements to become less structured and more flexible in order to maneuver around the tools of repression. Additionally, we stopped using the vertical matrix structure in our work and changed those to horizontal structures.

Student Uprisings in Puerto Rico

Studying at the University of Puerto Rico has been a rite of passage for many trade union organizers, social justice activists, and pro-independence political militants in Puerto Rico since the beginnings of the institution in the early 20th century. From organizing against the prevalent colonial status of the Island to the mobilizations against global neoliberal reforms, the students at the University of Puerto Rico are known for their resistance and their strikes. When I started my bachelor's degree in 2006, the students had just ended the strike of 2005 against a tuition hike. No imminent organizing was in sight, but some students were regarded as the brightest minds on campus. Nobody knew what their academic performance was, nor was it relevant; they were the smartest because they could articulate the students' demands in any forum, present eloquent socio-structural analysis behind state-led policies or local administration imposing measures, appeal to thousands of students to march, paralyze academic operations and call for indefinite strikes until the students were heard. Contrary to the higher GPAs on the campus, who would not risk their status by being incarcerated, these students taught many that proving oneself was not about preserving the individual right to public higher education but about developing the political commitment to guarantee such right to incoming generations. Mobilizing resonated with following leaders, and the wheel was turning in favor of those advocating against neoliberal policies (Atilés-Osoria, 2013) and in favor of the most vulnerable populations.

In the aftermath of the 2005 strike, the movement was active; to be involved or at least informed, one had to participate in student assemblies held by the official student council and forums organized by political organizations. Mobilizing efforts could come from different places; often, students, faculty and university workers' unions would unite upon agreed causes or clash due to opposing interests. With so many political events happening, it became evident that the learning transcended the classrooms for anyone interested in challenging the status quo at different scales. Before engaging in the student movement, I interpreted strikes as the default path taken by any sector to defy any threat to their interest. That perspective changed during my bachelor's and master's degrees years due to my active involvement in the strikes of 2010 and 2017. Parallely, engaging with Popular Education among the grassroots, and later studies in Adult Education helped me reinterpret the lived experience and leave behind the notion of a strike as a dreary attempt to change oppressive systemic structures and, instead, embrace them as rich places for social movement learning.

Tracing edited and unedited students' reflections and research about their strike experiences became the door to identifying learning processes and critical factors influencing non-formal and informal education. In searching for a global logic for the experience, I revisited the experience. I remembered that student activists carried memories and lessons learned from one striking period to another through writings and participation in forums as guests. Though each strike seems unique to those who lived them, having former student activists participate became a common feature in the strikes of 2005, 2010, and 2017. Despite the fast-paced 4-year generational change of student cohorts, this practice helped newer generations to revisit past mobilizing experiences in search of approaches, participation modes, and decision-making structures to improve the articulation of demands, set achievable movement goals, refrain from past mistakes, and gain broader popular support. A dual process of visiting the past while navigating inwards to acknowledge diversity enhanced the traditional class struggle perspective with a theoretical-practical approach to the intersections of race, gender, sexual orientation, and

functional diversity (Tormos, 2019). In this symposium, I share accounts of the mobilizing tone, what provoked each strike, and the learning efforts at each juncture.

The student strike of 2005 responded to the implementation of a tuition hike as part of the neoliberal policies in Puerto Rico (Atilés-Osoria, 2013). Non-activist students would join the movement after fearing the repercussions of not doing so for future generations; “something had to be done immediately, and they could only think of the strike as the immediate tactic” (Roberto, 2017). More than striking, students implemented a new participation structure, the University Committee Against Tuition Raise. Though the assembly remained the legitimate participation space, students resorted to the creation of this committee, a representative structure led by non-council officials, to achieve greater organizational autonomy compared to the limited powers granted by the official student council; but, keeping representative systems, regardless of who led them, became problematic when they reproduced patriarchal and homophobic oppression. Feminist groups and the LGBTTQIA+ sector withdrew their support (Tormos, 2019). Mobilization resonated with striking but remained vigilant towards pseudo alternatives proclaiming autonomy while keeping a representative structure.

In the spring of 2010, students organized against the Certification 98, an internal measure threatening the tuition exemption for honor students, athletes, work-study program students, and university employees’ children (Gerónimo-López & Tormos-Aponte, 2021). What started as a 48-hours stoppage favored by 3,000 students quickly turned into the longest strike lasting 62 days. Students revisited the organizing modes, and participation structures and procedures changed again. New college-based action committees lacked hierarchical structures, increased student direct participation, and extended to the 11 campuses, enacting the first ever national student movement. Dialogues in action committees and plenary sessions opened the floor for students to challenge academic offerings, teaching methods, and pedagogical orientation. This analysis extended to movement educational outreach efforts. Students spear-headed a community radio station from scratch (Reyes, 2021). The strike turned into a school for many, and the gates turned into non-traditional classrooms for open lectures, workshops, and capacity-building sessions. The time the strike lasted allowed for more intentional and intensive educational experiences. Mobilization resonated with direct participation, national organizing, improvised education efforts, and a critical approach to formal education.

In 2017, the implementation of Law 114th by the United States Congress created the Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico (PROMESA), which prompted the most recent student strike, mobilizing more than 5,000 students to the streets under the newly constituted National Student Confederation (Meléndez, 2017). Public high school students joined the movement, and Black and queer organizers were elected as movement speakers. Diversity influenced the articulation of common interests, putting forward a gender perspective education. A new Activism Committee developed educational efforts inwards and outwards with Popular Education methodology; student activists began to question their leadership practices and how they affected direct participation and challenged messianic outreach approaches, or the notion of “carrying a message to the masses,” with open intergenerational dialogues with the grassroots. This process was no longer unidirectional (from students to supporters and communities) but reciprocal, inspiring the creation of a Student Federation and a multisectoral congress against colonial austerity measures. Learning and non-formal education were at the core of these newly attained goals. Mobilization resonated with direct participation, national organizing, intentional education efforts as well as with consonant subaltern pedagogies, questioning outreach practices, and articulating multisectoral fronts.

Chile under Neoliberalism

The collapse in 1982 of the Milton Friedman-inspired neoliberal economic model implemented under an authoritarian military regime permitted the democratic forces in Chile to rearrange their strategies against the Dictatorship and move to defeat it through a plebiscite in 1988. The transitional nature of the system claimed by successive democratic governments thereafter allowed them to implement and administrate a neoliberal model anew, without either the restraints or the drawbacks of dictatorship; at the same time, these governments claimed that the evident economic inequalities and arbitrary political constraints were residues of the Dictatorship and the military constitution of 1980. Although modified, the Constitution of 1980 continued to be a mechanism that allowed the economic elites to expand a model that benefited them exclusively.

In the uprising of October 2019, the main demand of protesters was a new and truly democratic constitution, and the main slogan at the protests - “It is not 30 pesos but 30 years”- referred to the strike by students against the raise in fare that spearheaded the uprising, while identifying at the same time the thirty years the neoliberal system has been in place under democratic governments. As it has become abundantly clear in Chile, the implementation of neoliberal practices of labor flexibility has not only led to transformations of production and of the labor market; it has led to work precarity and to a culture of permanent competition, radical individualism, a degrading of collective action, a fear of associating with union activity, and a banalization of the precarity of work (Muñoz, 2012). Therefore, neoliberalism is not only an economic phenomenon, but also a cultural one. It has not only fragmented the working class, but also weakened its organizations in the process.

In the area of public education, this meant the deterioration of state provisions and the exacerbation of social and economic barriers to the exercise of the right to education at all levels of the educational system (Assaél Budnik et al., 2011). Students have persisted in social mobilization processes throughout the post-dictatorship period (1989-present); both university and high school students have been relevant actors in the struggle for better and just living conditions in the country during this period (Aguilera Ruiz, 2012; Thielemann, 2017).

The student movement

Since the student movement of 2006, better known as the “Penguin” protests because the protagonists were high school students who protested dressed in their black and white school uniforms, high-school students as well as university students have been at the forefront of all major protests such as the one in 2011, known as “The Chilean Spring”, and the 2018 mobilizations. Their main demands have centered around the demand for free and equal public education. Also, a powerful feminist movement coming out of the universities has had an important presence in massive marches with an array of feminist demands. University occupations have been a common occurrence for several years, and a prominent issue in occupations and marches has been the Native Question, as native (Mapuche) territory is continually under siege by the Chilean state.

Gains from the movements

The gains, which were achieved through protests and marches, occupations or “tomas”, university student assemblies and public performances, the creation of secretariats, and the participation in government, are directly connected to what the students learned by participating

in the protests and from movement to movement. After the 2006 protests, the Ley Orgánica Constitucional de Enseñanza (LOCE) was reformed and, although the system adjusted, the rebellion spearheaded by high-school students opened the debate in civil society about education. In 2011, the Confederation of Chilean Students (CONFECH) implemented and escalated public demonstrations, and students managed to take control of the agenda; they were invited to participate in reform talks and some were elected to Congress. A scholarship system was put in place, and student selection was eliminated. Grounded in the work of 2011, in 2018 secretariats of Gender and Sexuality were created at the universities (Campos-Martínez, J., & Olavarría, D. 2020).

The 2019 uprising led to a referendum on the demand for a new Constitution. A constituent assembly was voted in with important citizen participation. The new constitution is being drafted at this moment and should be approved by the citizenship in September 2022. The new constitution being drafted is considered the most advanced in the history of Chile, and the constituent assembly the most democratic instance in its history. With 155 members, including equal female and male representation and representants from all sectors of the society, including those traditionally excluded as were the Indigenous nations, the assembly is nearing its one-year goal to present the new constitution to the country for its approval.

Discussion

The newly elected government in Chile, conformed by a Left coalition under the leadership of several ex-leaders of the student movements of 2006 and 2011, highlights the impact of the movements themselves on the nature of the politics of the country. While for the constitutional assembly to write a new constitution for the country the members were elected from the 2019 popular uprising, the newly elected president of the country and several of his cabinet members fought as students on the streets and from their educational establishments for public education and university reforms, and in opposition to the neoliberal economic model. These recent successes underline several important points and concerns as to social-movement-learning in the context of student movements:

- Does the learning taking place in student movements prepare participants for power? How?
- Can veterans of these struggles effect real change in society by joining its established structures?
- What are the dangers of cooptation that such successes entail?

Conclusion

Neoliberal economic policies implanted all over the world have created precarious living conditions for most populations affected by the measures. At the forefront of the social movements that arose in the first two decades of the 21st century have been the student movements. Widespread privatizations affected public education most harshly, and a neoliberal approach to education favoring individualism and touting meritocracy has made it obvious to masses of students that they have no future but one of debt and limited opportunities.

That these struggles take the same forms in places as different as Egypt, Puerto Rico, and Chile should come as no surprise. The economic system has become a universal phenomenon and created the same conditions for revolt wherever it has been implemented. What must be rescued is the unending ingenuity and creativity of youth and their willingness to struggle for a

better world. The three experiences presented here tell us that education can be transversal, inclusive, and revolutionary, and that a new world is possible with their agency.

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