A knowledge production, as practice of the political and social struggle?

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Introduction

This text's function is to present the "Building an Urban Popular University in Latin America" international meetings, from the Urban Popular University (UPU) it's an initiative of the International Alliance of inhabitants (IAI).

As a start we'll present the objectives of said University followed by the presentation of the experiences that were obtained in the UPU meetings realized both in Buenos Aires (Argentina) in may of 2006, and in Santo Domingo (Dominican Republican), this time in April of 2007. We'll take our time to delve into this, to be more precise, right at the appropriation and production of new knowledge by the part of the participants in the second meeting.

From the reports, as a methodological resource, we compromised ourselves to investigate any sighted subjectivity, the related experiences, the struggles and the possibility of being a reality changer through each other's experiences and knowledge.

Finally, all the reports will put in debate the progresses in the proposed method of meeting discourses, whose speciality parts from the persistent intent of sharing and producing each others' experiences in the process of knowledge production.

The Urban Popular University and its objectives

The UPU (established at the time of the Social Forum of Mumbay in 2004) is an initiative of the International Alliance of Inhabitants (IAI); an international network composed of residents and organizations that fight for the right to have a residence, in other words; the right to housing. Among the objectives the IAI pursues, the main ones are to reduce the evictions rate to nil, and also the creation of funds at a national level to help the struggle for the right to have a piece of land and the right to have a residence, this objective involves the civil society which would be the responsible for management of the obtained resources that may result from the cancelation agreements of the external debt. To give more power to these

campaigns it's indispensable the exchange of experiences of good practices realized by the local and national based associations and by the institutions dedicated to things like habitat problems and social construction. The UPU was born from a feasibility study realized with the support of the Basque Government, it's a fact that shows the necessity and the aspiration that the different entities integrating the IAI have to accomplish the following objectives:

- Rise the general conscience for the habitat problems, clear all existing doubts about residence or urban houses through research, publication and training activities with an informing and inclusive approach.
- Entrust the staff and the voluntaries from various associations of habitants to learning areas perceived as relevant to their work and struggles.
- Assure that the staff and the voluntaries from the associations of habitants have access to experiences of intercultural learning that will guide to a critic and transforming culture when it comes to habitat questions.

The UPU facilitates activities of investigation, preparation, experiences' exchange, and publications in the following areas:

- Key questions in the organization and preparation: particular attention given to planning, evaluating, development of policies. Other areas of interest include communication, time management, resources management and participation.
- Global/local dimension concerning the housing problematic, and the ability to exchange experiences between peer organizations and develop relations of collaboration.
- The construction at a social level of habitats and the right to a city. Key tensions and concepts among the which are the security of the proprieties, the residence's durability, the space of the residence, access to water, toilet, etc.
- The role of the social housing movements and its communities and their political action at the local level as well as at a national level, and the results of the World Social Forum's (WSF) and the Local Authorities Forum's processes.

In this context the use of technological information and communication (TIC) and the ability to use TIC's strategic applications inside the respective organizations assume an important key role. Sharing that same important role are the networks and intranet in the main sectors of activities of the UPU, preparation, investigation, investigative co-production, documentation and systematization, they are all important.

UPU’s regional meetings

Until now two UPU’s “Building an Urban Popular University in Latin America” regional meetings were held, the first one in Buenos Aires (Argentina, May 2006), the second one in Santo Domingo (Dominican Republican, April 2007). The participants are:

a. Actual or potential neighbourhood’s leaders, organizations of centralization of micro-enterprises associations, community banks and other woman organizations, youth groups, parishes, etc.

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b. Young people, be it with secondary school completed or uncompleted.
c. Guiders of local economic activities.
d. In our educative option we pretend to give fair opportunities when it comes to a person's genre, (masculine or feminine participants), age (old or young

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participants) and the type of organization (economic units and associations, etc.)

The regional meetings “Building an Urban Popular University in Latin America” set as their goal to provide the development of capacities among the popular leaders as agents of their own destiny and agents of the development of their locations; with governing capacity and status to suggest changes; capable of leading the reflection around the key issues directly related to the needs and objectives of the IAI, they are complex objectives that demand an active and consequent participation of the several living forces of a location or region.

The UPU does not pretend to deal by itself with the accomplishment of these objectives, the UPU just wants to contribute to the effort in trying to reach those goals, by generating and providing more and more alliances and agreements to reach as many people as possible. Nevertheless, we know that the educational work isn’t neutral and that it isn’t detached from the big problems of a region or country. Therefore, our educative alliances should be based in precise objectives and in a common vision that brings about a change for the better. This is a decisive constitutive element in the outline the educative program wants to give to its graduates.

In this effort, the educative program does not pretend to create new leaders as its main objective. In the great majority of the cases these leaders already exist and actively participate in the daily life of their communities. What we pretend to do is to contribute to their development, to forge their identity and harmony with reality, and thus awakening their sense of solidarity in a clear perspective of social transformation.

The practice of the investigative coproduction was adopted as the methodology in practice during the meetings; it was adapted depending on the different contexts that aren't on the front to be first investigated. We're talking about a method for the collective production of the scientific knowledge, that's what it's about. The discursive meeting is one of the components of said method, not as a methodological analysis, to allow the investigator "subject" to subtract knowledge from the studied "object", but as a necessary condition to the collective production of that knowledge. It's about the instance in which both terms normally meet to carry a process of a joint research, one with the other, a devil-like convergence in which a way of knowledge is promoted, a knowledge easily acquired by the part of the social actor as he participates as a co-producer of himself (Bialakowsky et al., 2006). One of the ideas of the discursive meeting is the non violent communication (Bourdieu, 1999: 528-9), which radically differentiates itself from other methodological techniques like an interview or a survey that end up imposing the purposes and the rules of interaction of the researcher and the one being investigated. However, a discursive meeting is not limited to the active and methodical audition postulated by Pierre Bourdieu as mechanism of violence reduction in the communication, it goes well beyond that when it compromises the social actors in that practice, turning them into researchers, in other words, co-producers of knowledge, and now it's no longer only suitable to the academic people that converge with them in the discursive meeting. Other premise is the recognition of the cognitive complementarily as the pivot of the dialogical convergence, before the rooted hierarchy of knowledge which is dependent on the academic knowledge and socially legitimized knowledge (de Sousa Santos, Meneses, 2009). The discursive meeting allows a collective and simultaneous interrogation of complementary discourses, therefore they are asymmetrical, discovering together the inherent cooperation to the production of knowledge. Thereby, the discursive meeting may be considered as routine: it does not stop at the discourse, but it is critically interrogated in its materiality each time its material anchor is the basis of the theoretical foundation of knowledge, allowing to make the collective process of the cognitive production more dynamic. If we talk about terms of knowledge like subjectivity, within the logic of co-productive research, there are at least three central dimensions that are highlighted: On one hand, the productive collective as instrument for the recognition of not only the other but also the recognition of himself; on the other hand there is the resourcefulness of the method, and the final highlight, the possibilities of appropriation and reapropriation starting with the joint interrogation. What the co-production finds is, precisely, that the relationship between the object and the subject has a social emphasis; then the

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conflict would be created by the plot interpretations in this “new epistemological figure”. This way, the relation between two subjectivities (the one which investigates and the subjectivized object) would be revealed, one in each terminal, a relation that causes a subjectivity effect.

The participants of the second UPU meeting intervene in the following concepts:

- *The coproduction should be moved to where the problems are, and the search for solutions should be the norm.*
- *It’s the citizen participation, integrating the expertise to investigate.*
- *It’s necessary to generate enough space for an encounter where the discourses are articulated with each other, and where we construct a collective discourse between all of us, a non violent space where we listen each other. The possibility of implementing that takes time, no doubt. The mechanism of intervention may be implemented through the institutions or organizations of the neighbourhoods themselves.*

The meetings’ specific objectives

The regional meetings “Building an Urban Popular University in Latin America” had three main objectives:

a. Promote the capacities’ development of the popular leaders as agents of their own destiny and the

development of their locations.

b. Promote the capacity of command and proposal of the leaders.

c. To give new life to the reflection around key issues directly linked to the needs and objectives of the IAI and the popular movement.

And the objectives the process of learning is in search of are:

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a. To develop the capacity to link together the specific problems with the causes that originate them and the consequences they produce, and therefore, to plan alternatives with viable solutions from a practical but also radical point of view, in the sense of attacking the

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root of the problem and of the solution.

b. To deal with specific problems referred in city related topics, the land and the residence, to actively participate in the debate around these issues, to make proposals and negotiate favourable measures to the people with the

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correspondent authorities.

c. To promote the strengthening and coordination of the different local actors generating between them favourable synergies to improve the quality of life of the townspeople.

d. To encourage self-esteem, the cultural identity and the

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moral values of the townspeople in the horizon of a collective project of change.

To achieve the goals that were set the UPU identifies four components that should have the educative proposal:

a. The planning, the systematization and the collective potentiating of the empirical knowledge of reality, as well as

the experiences of community organization and citizen initiative.

b. A transference of information, knowledge and right techniques to the needs of the indicated objectives of learning, linking all that with the enhancement of knowledge and the local abilities in a way to guarantee a

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process with return and mutual learning.

c. The design of specific educative proposals related with each local's reality and with the plans of comprehensive development.

d. Development of educative mechanisms that allow the favouring of the

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“appropriation” of local space by the part of the students (so to say, that they visualize it in all its extension and when the time comes incorporate that as a ordering perspective), using maps, cadastres, the size and the form of the local streets etc. as well as their history and sociocultural

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identity.

The thematic of the UPU encounters

The developed issues in the Meetings result from the debate and election of the present organizations, be it the ones that were the host organizations or the visitants. This way, once the issues are to be discussed an immense work is required by the UPU in order to search experts/teachers/facilitators that may be available to built a program that contains the participants' concerns and a participative methodology that energizes the process of education (learning when inserted in the academy).

For the first meeting the social organizations selected the following themes:

A. The problems for the local development

Visualization by the participants' part of the different local problems happening in their birth place, similarities and differences, likely unions.

B. Sustainable development

To plan and critically implementing the means to promote, favour and/or increase the sustainable development in areas like the economy, society, politics and culture, all with Social Justice and Gender Equity.

Planning and implementing the means to promote, favour and/or increase the improvement of the habitat and the environment.

Identify, analyze and investigate the main factors that interfere in the local sustainable development; as well as the relations between its different variables. Said tasks are underway to understand the process of development and in detecting the variables that make the process easier or harder.

Elaborate, implement and evaluate, alongside the different actors, proposals for local sustained development plans. Advising public and private institutions about the local development's methodology.

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C. Public and citizenship management

Identify the actors and the most significant variables and thus guaranteeing the governability when inserted in a democratic environment, showing respect to the rights to actively participate that the citizenship concede us with no limitations in the planning, execution and evaluation of the decision making by the local government's part.

Creating and implementing proposals of management models according to the needs detected in the diagnostic.

Investigate the knowledge and level of ability of those who work in the public function and the vigilance of the citizens' rights. Proposing plans and implementing them to surpass the deficiencies through programs of diffusion and communication.

Advise the authorities, public officials, businessmen and chairperson, about the rights of the citizens in the different development areas.

D. Solidarity Economy

Investigate and know the roots and actual possibilities of the solidarity economy as a tool to promote local development, in the economy, politics and in the cultural area.

Think of implementation proposals of the cooperative system in different areas of the industry, trade business, culture and social organization. Being capable of implementing and evaluating the results and propose correctives.

The evaluation of the meetings

There are two moments, one in group patrol, and the other individually written.

It's possible to read the following in the assessment documents of the meetings:

I feel proud and thankful, I'm opening a space of great value for me, to my neighbourhood, to my country, and to Latin America, and so that my children can be proud of me as well as my country.

It's of note to highlight that the participants find their own co-productive spaces, during the way from the hotels to the university and vice versa, during the free

afternoons or when they are having fun in the amusement spots at night after the days of intensive work. Since these meetings some interesting productions emerged, created during the spaces of evaluation:

The song of the UPU

IAI has organised a great event
Looking to help
Together as organisations
To build a space for people
The Urban University will be
What we'll make of it
Countries are already united
So we're getting there..
Chorus
UPU is a space
For unity and progress
For proposals and actions
In the fight for a solution.
UPU is a space
For unity and progress,
Building power from below
The UPU is here...(Repeat)

Life

(Poetry by ***Kiuver Agramante***)

The problems are too strong
We die with no life
What have we done?
The tradition is lost
What have the governments done?
How many are we in this life?
How many are well enough?
Where will we go in this world?
When will this war end?
When will we translate this world?

Only the technology works.
The economic life is though.
But our houses are dreamed.
But the shipments are aggressive.
But the childish efforts are ignored.
So many efforts end up falling on the ground!
Let the negative stuff fall to the ground instead.
Let all see that together we'll change the world.

Production of knowledge as social practice?

Under the second UPU meeting we worked with residents of the Dominican Republic and the Caribbean, besides other participants from Argentina, Bolivia and Peru which had already participated in the first meeting.

Through several dynamics we worked with the participants from one's own subjectivity to the participation in collective, from there on experiences and knowledge reports about their struggles arose, we believe their stories speak for themselves, telling one's experience gives a voice to the ones that cannot make themselves to be heard. These meetings allow that each one's knowledge may be used for new struggles to come.

"…I'm single but I have a 18-months daughter, my father died and I have six siblings, I live in a parish in Venezuela where 107 families live and fight for the right to a city, the fact that we don't have electricity motivated us to organize and fight. We want to draw people who want to help and participate in this process of change. I like percussion instruments, people say I can sing. I believe in the reciprocity of services between corporations, cities and organizations, and I also believe in the investigation." Nora, Venezuela.

"…I'm a widow, I have three children, I fight for the possession of the land along with all the peasantries, the right to a piece of land and a ceiling, so that the ones with no voice can be heard…" Margarida, Campesina federation, Lingo, Dominican Republic.

"…I like cacusas, my organization is dedicated to the nutrition, but it works in the knowledge aspect of nutrition. The reason I'm part of it is to fight for an economic and social movement united with nature; after all we had several earthquakes here.

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I’m part of the Free and Democratic Fidel Castro University, whose function is to face the problems we have in our education. Any knowledge is produced by practicing and the practice belongs to the people, the government should have recognized by now the fact that the knowledge starts and is born from the people, no one cares enough to legitimate the popular knowledge. They took the knowledge from us the same way they took our land…” *Galileo, FUPANSAL, Fidel Castro University, El Salvador.*

After the presentations where it was possible for the people to express their expectations, it was time to share each one’s praxis with social theory, and that resulted in a work of group, the following story is that of one of the groups involved.

“…*In 25 of November of 2005 there was some noise and voices that caught people’s attention during the night , more precisely at 5 in the morning of that day, after that a strong sound of gunfire and bombs followed. Some families of the Brisas sector in the east were being bombed.*

In this incidents a gang of delinquents called los Buitres and more than 100 militaries from different organizations were involved, they attacked by bombing and shooting the community taking from the people their belongings when they were in the street, stealing everything they could and causing destruction to the houses as they were passing leaving the people in the middle of the confusion without knowing where to go and whom to resort to.

Of the houses people were dumped from, one of them belonged to the community leader Soler Peres, chairman of the UPROBRISAS; we tried to investigate and ask for some explications about what was happening since no one had notified him of nothing. But they gave him a reception with gunfire, he was shot once in the back of his left ear, and since it wasn’t possible to extract it, to this day he still has the bulled inside his head.

He went several times against the lawyer of the state, Nelson Montos, in his struggle to put an end to the dislodge the people of his community were being victim of, as compensation he was threatened by that same lawyer, they threatened to rip his head off if he didn’t give up on his struggle, and that’s proof enough to make clear that the dislodge had the intention of putting an end to his life, not to mention the fact that when his uncle and brother tried to help him the shooting did not stop, they were also shot, one in an arm and the other in a leg.

When the neighbours and friends managed to take the wounded out of the shooting zone they still had to run because they kept being followed, only after awhile they managed to take Soler to the hospital, and immediately after arriving there, full of courage and showing no fear, Soler declared to the press what had happened. The abuses were so many that while he was still in the hospital room there was a constant vigilance over every move of his, they put on him a day to night vigilance as if he was some kind of criminal, a treatment unworthy of a school principal and chairman of the community association.

The militaries managed to advance the day when Soler's brother and uncle were going to leave the hospital so that they could arrest them even though they didn't have any accusations against him. They didn't arrest Soler only because a group of pastors and people from the community managed to call attention and pressure the bad guys' leaders, it also helped that Soler's family put the blames on Nelson in case something bad happened to Soler.

Already out of the hospital, Soler kept making declarations to different media and denouncing what happened, putting the blame of all on the lawyer of the state, Nelson Montos.

With some lawyer's help, the situation Solar went through keeps being investigated to this day, as the investigation went on it was found out that the site that its supposed owner demanded to be returned to him wasn't the same site where the 16 destroyed houses of the families who were kicked out of their homes were located on.

To this day Soler keeps his struggle showing the situation of the land right on the lawyer of the state's face, not only in the zone where he lived in but also in the east Brisas sector and other zones that might need his collaboration to make themselves notice" Sara Payano (Soler's companion) COPHABITAT co-op (a written story which was related and delivered in the second UPU encounter, Dominican Republic, 2007).

This report of a participant of the first UPU encounter in Buenos Aires was very important for the contribution it provided to us all.

"*…I've a mate, I have three children, I like music, and love my country's folklore, tango, cumbia, valsilho, merengue, salsa and ranchera. We, the forgotten marginalized countries resort to the reaction of the masses to invade the unoccupied lands where we form a place to live in community.*

In Peru there is politic violence and disarticulation of the popular movement, they used to label us as terrorists in the past. With the experience of the FEDEVI (Argentina Republic's Village Federation) we consolidated ourselves, we're stronger, we've got some help from the hygiene advisors, and legal advisors. The federation was born in Peru in 28-01-07, and that's when the IAI starts to get itself known. We want to launch the "zero dislodge" project because in our country there is far too much corruption of the judges, they always favour and protect the powerful people and powerful organizations and end up leaving nothing to the townspeople" Nicanor, Peru.

"…I'm a single woman, I like chocolate, dancing, create things with my hands, drawing, painting, fight to remove all the municipal garbage, I'll keep fighting to the day housing construction begins. I'm a health promoter, social educator, I work in the economy of women, I give it all for my genre, I fight for the right to have a sexuality, and fight to stop violence against women… "Maria de los Angeles, Mexico, second UPU meeting.

In relation to the process initiated by Maria, she used her experiences to first help herself and then, by telling of her will, she also helped the community, this story, her story became visible through her passage by the meeting where she presented her ideas and told her experiences, and by doing so she ended up being one of the active actors in the fight for the well being of her community.

"Since my nine years of age I used to visit the garbage dump in my suburb. A dump where you could see all kind of things, from a nail to a dead body, for me the fun memories of searching and finding so many strange things among the garbage when I was a kid were still fresh, but all changed the moment I saw a dog carrying a dead child in his mouth in that same nostalgic place. As the time passed and after my infancy the garbage was left forgotten_ But in April 30 I returned to that place, the day the dump was on fire, the same day of the Children's Day, I live about 200 meters from the local and it was the big black clouds that called my attention, the sight of all that black smoke caused me an instant impact that I can still feel it as if it were today, I can't forget how despite all that smoke the people insisted on staying in their houses with fear of losing them. As the minutes passed the smoke grew stronger, the people were asking for fire-fighters from other boroughs, but the reality only brought one truck with only four fire-fighters that in the end did almost nothing to help. I know that the memories I have from that day will not go away until I die. There were kids who grabbed the hoses and tried to put out the fire, they risked their bodies using rags and cardboards to go through the fire. When I saw

this, my eyes finally opened themselves; I asked myself what I was doing. The kids could've died there, thank god nothing happened, but the kids' actions opened my eyes and due to that I ended up staying working at the place helping everyone. 9 years of struggle have passed and finally we managed to take out all the garbage from our space. Today, our home, Popular Health, is no longer a place of death, but instead a place of life.

To my brothers and sisters Obdulia, Felipa, Juanita, Ignacia, Margarita, Lucia y Belén.
María de los Angeles Prieto Linares Veracruz. México(a written story which was related and delivered in the second UPU encounter, Dominican Republic, 2007).

In the story told by Maria de Los Angeles, we can delimitate three dimensions, the subjective one, when she presents herself, a social one, which is her story, and finally a collective one, represented in her words: "*my eyes finally opened".*

When she said " *the kids' actions opened my eyes"* she's talking about a new awakening for her, the moment where she realises that even her contribution can help to fix the problems of her society, everyone's contribution is needed.

Additionally, just to finish, a general meeting was organized where each participant could evaluate the discussion and visualize the results the collective reflexions.

"*To acquire knowledge and give an impulse to the organizations. To acquire the knowledge through each owns' experiences. To create attachments between organizations, to let their work be known".*

"Experiences exchange, to see how a community should be organized, for that it, would be good if the UPU could reach into not only the community but also the country's leaders".

"I thought that the universities were in places where all the people like us could have access to".

"I believe another world is possible, enrich my knowledge, and know my rights. To get to know and learn the problems of the other countries."

"I wanted to improve what I learned in my first course in Argentina, with Peru and Brazil. There are more countries out there, it's interesting to know the other countries' expectations, what they are going through and act according to one's

experiences, to take them and recreate them in my neighbourhood to help fortify the organization and the management both quality and quantity wise in order to push the people to participate. To captivate those who may join our organization.“

This process is going through multiple dimensions which involve a certain degree of challenge for us as social science researchers; our job is to interact with the villagers in meetings to make those dimensions visible and to produce knowledge about them.

“The investigators may also focus in something new: stimulate the apparition of organizational conditions of collective production that lead to the creation of a political project. After all, the Constituent Assembly of 1789 and the Philadelphia Assembly were composed of common people which had some legal culture, people who had read Montesquieu and invented democratic structures. Today, in a similar way, there is the need to produce new accomplishments. (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 154).

It’s possible to visualize in all the meetings a component in the process of knowledge production, which emphasizes the possibility of giving a new meaning to what we call the space for reflection, as much as it happens in the experiential space in the towns where the experience of the participants is the main protagonist, through the meetings focused on the discourses. By co-investigating we try to change the act of producing knowledge, what was dependent on the subjectivity of both interaction partners now puts them in a position where they can interchange, therefore, the coproduction allocation is competence of both, the in-distinction is product of the collective action: this way, the traditional asymmetry is reduced (in general hidden in the recollection instruments) and the necessity of the translator isn’t needed as much. The exercise of the interchange round is operated in the UPU meetings as an analytical synthesis. First, the route to the knowledge is indicated, and then, in the second phase, it’s time for the institutional history, and finally comes the autobiographic phase. After that, the convergence obtains the identification of the participants in respect to the told facts, and is accessed through the route towards a knowledge free of inconsistencies, with no concealments, and no subtractions. And finally, what was put to debate can be taken by the participants as something they can use and that became part of them, with the value that the collective work made it possible by sharing perspectives of resistance against the bio-political domination (Agamben, 2002).

The only thing that’s left to ask is to what point could these identities make use of this as a tool to search for alternative ways of change.

“It’s from these unknown and no name lands, from these disturbing indifferent zones that people will think of ways and new forms of politics. (Agamben, 2002, pag:216)

The value of these meetings is not exclusive to the interchange of experiences that they promote, instead it’s in the appropriation and production of visible knowledge where they show their importance, but above all, the new questions these meetings may ask become important in the long term.

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