# Popular education and popular movements: emancipation and change of political culture through participation and self-management

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## Popular education and popular movements: emancipation and change of political culture through participation and self-management[1]

In this research we aimed to contribute to the investigation of the role played by Popular Education in the processes of militancy and participation in popular movements and their repercussions regarding the political culture of the participants of the collective groups studied. We tried to identify the important role that these popular movements assign to education regarding their proposals for intervention, and the instances in which the activities of education/training are developed, who educational agents are and what their role is and finally how the participants of those movements view the whole process.

We selected as case studies the Settlement Don Tomás Balduíno Land Commune and the Paulo Freire Popular Housing Cooperative, base communities of the Movement of Landless Peasants and the Housing *Movements Union located in the* region of Greater São Paulo. In order to analyse the methodological options adopted, we discuss the political-pedagogical assumptions behind the actions of the Educational Agents of the Economic Solidarity Movement.

**Key words**: *Popular education, popular movements, self-management, emancipation, political participation, political culture.*

“Cantamos porque llueve sobre el surco
y somos militantes de la Vida

y porque no podemos, ni queremos
dejar que la canción se haga cenizas.”

**(Mario Benedetti – Por que cantamos)**

## A bit of history (a history that did not start in me!)

Historically speaking, housing construction by popular self-organisation is a rather common phenomenon in Brazil, both in rural areas and urban peripheral areas, as a result of low salaries, the high rents and real estate speculation. The first evidence of movements of irregular occupation in São Paulo dates from 1940 (Bonduki, 1998), and as a result of growing urbanization and lack of housing alternatives, the Sunday activity of building a house to live in by resorting to mutual help increased. In the same period, activities of collective agricultural production within the state of São Paulo (Cândido, 1998) and of collective occupation of land (Oliveira, 1988) were taking place. With the quest for land and houses in the last three decades, along with the appearance of shanty towns, slums and others form of illegal urban clusters, there emerged a whole series of organised popular movements. The influence of such spaces resulted in the creation of advisory institutions, land reform policies and social housing.

On the other hand, the crisis in the job market sparked political reactions: at a popular level the people, workers with no perspectives of either entering or re-entering the job market, have taken up the task of organising themselves as collective enterprises; at an academic level, intellectuals, created university groups that have been supporting work initiatives, collective production and developing studies on cooperativism and solidarity economy; and at a political level, public authorities have been developing programmes geared towards the capacitating or qualifying thousands of unemployed and towards job creation and its related income.

In a first moment, we wonder if the conquests of those movements have eclipsed the quests for housing, land and work. Historically speaking we believe that the processes of popular organisation generate new ways of social relations among their participants.

## Mismatches between “subjects” and “objects” (the academy draws further away from history)

In her presentation at the 13th Annual Meeting of The National Association of Research and Post-Graduation in Education in 1990, Maria da Glória Gohn predicted there would be a widening of the gap between the studies on popular education and on popular movements. Education studies in the seventies, which analysed experiments in popular education developed by various popular educational agents, categorizing them accordingly to their liberating or integrating tendencies regarding the populations, were gradually replaced in the eighties by social change studies, which centred mostly on the structure, function and relevance of those movements, not paying proper attention to the pedagogical aspects of the processes of militancy and political participation, namely the training that came from the contact with public authorities, from the dialogue with professionals in various technical areas, from repeated exercises of participative political practices and from gatherings with partners.

Still according to Gohn, the following era was to witness a stagnation of theoretical output on those matters proportionately to an overall weakening of the collective strength.

The crisis of the popular movements had settled in, either because of the absence of self-political projects, of the dependence on external agents (Technical Advisory Services, NGOs, universities, church, political parties) or because popular demands were being met by the government. The positive outcome of the whole process of popular and intellectual militancy was its educational aspect, of constructing a participation-based political culture.

After almost two decades, we still agree with the opinion that popular educational practices in popular movements had the merit of contributing to the conquests associated with citizenship of the population as a whole, although it did not prevent an ebb of the academic production on these issues. Nonetheless, some popular movements did not disappear; they underwent transformations, and presently keep attracting new people willing to join the ranks of militancy, which is a clear sign that a political culture based on popular participation continues to bear fruits.

## Impressions on the life of our city – that smiles at you today and devours you tomorrow

In this city, I've seen it all lately. I've seen people trying to impose their ideas on others. I've seen people trying to boss around others in order to accomplish what they believed was the best to everyone. But I've also seen plenty of people protesting side by side for their rights and even enduring brutal repression, relentlessly discussing in group in order to reach a mutual consent and decide on what to do. I've seen the people unite in order to accomplish what they wanted, needed and believed.

And then what? What will happen? How is it possible in some circles participants who endured such adversities together ended up leaving the movement, while in others they grew fond of it and have kept participating in forums and collective decisions till today?
The incursions into social studies and especially into experiments in popular education, political participation and self-management allow me to take a guess: that even though the experience in itself may mark the life of each one of the individuals, it is in the collective reflection that lies the ability to promote a change in the way people think and live in a group or community.

## And then the city turned into a field

In the research carried out for my master's degree over the past few years, I did a reflection on the educational processes of popular movements with national visibility. The initial focus was on the main cells of two of those movements: the Paulo Freire Popular Housing Cooperative, of the 1 East Movement of Landless Peasants (Movimento Sem Terra Leste 1), affiliated with the Housing *Movements Union (União de Movimentos de Moradia)*(UMM), and the settlement Don Tomás Balduíno Land Commune (Comuna da Terra Dom Tomás Balduíno), of the region of Greater São Paulo part of the Movement of Landless Peasants (Movimento Sem Terra) (MST), both accompanied by USINA Technical Assistance – work centre for inhabited environments.

After a brief presentation of the history of the popular movements selected for this investigation, and the process of gathering documents and interviews with inside people within the respective training sectors, we moved onto the next stage of assessing similarities and singularities between the two processes, verifying the

continuities and discontinuities between the political-pedagogical assumptions and educational agents intervention regarding other subjects of popular education, from the viewpoint of the subjects that undergo the experience of collective fight processes and militancy.

After that, we resorted to the political-pedagogic assumptions that guide the educational agent intervention in the Solidarity Economic Movement, so that we could have a better understanding of the subject. The aim was to discuss the methodological methods adopted by popular movements and verify the coherence between the political-pedagogical assumptions expressed in documents and by their organisation leaders and educational agents.

The research focused on two basic actions: the bibliographic studies and the field work, whose methodology centred mostly on participant observation. I performed visits to each one of the communities in the period between March 2005 and January 2008. In the first two groups I had the chance to witness the work carried out by the educational agents, comparing it with the political-pedagogical assumptions of the movements they belong to and performed interviews to *mutirantes* (squatter families that live in shacks installed in a public area intended for housing construction within a mutual self-help community)and settlers.

The field work was structured as follows:

- Visits to the settlement Don Tomás Balduíno Land Commune.
  Coordination meeting, assembly, meeting with the construction team, committee meeting; Interviews with settlers.
- Visits to the Popular Housing Association Paulo Freire.
  Coordination meeting, Assembly, neighborhood meeting; Interviews with *mutirantes*.

By addressing such activities in my research context, I was concerned with understanding their learning potential, to be regarded as the possibility of materializing the proposals in the researched movements. However, I was equally interested in observing the situations of sociability which occurs under these circumstances—the specific way in which subjects act, which derive from the social dynamics prior to and following the activity.

On my field trips, I have also had the opportunity to accompany other activities by the MST, the UMM and the Solidarity Economic Movement: the National MST

congress, regional gathering of The Greater São Paulo; the meeting of the 20th anniversary of the UMM, the 1st Eastern Movement Seminar; the National Seminar and the State Plenary of Solidarity Economy.

The most relevant element in these various events is the dynamic makeup of the organisation, which reflects a political culture of the groups and a symbolic structure that may also be observed in the activities developed by the base cells of the movements—in this case, the settlement and the popular housing cooperative.

On various occasions, I realized there was a need to explain the participants I got the chance to talk to the intent to show the general public how these spaces are run. I noticed they did not question the way information was going to be used, as long as decisions on action strategies were not made public.

The last stage of collecting data consisted in interviewing the participants of those movements both individually and collectively. The script for the interviews was intended to access the views the various subjects had of their history, their role in the movement, the importance of being a militant in their lives and their perception about effective changes in the way they think and act upon their development. Besides discussing their experience, the interviewees also showed interest in sharing the way they viewed the training process within the movements.

Besides entering these events in a field journal, we also produced a photographic record of the whole the process for future proof. Interviews were recorded with permission of the interviewees. In order to better characterize the studied groups we used updated personal records of the settlers and *mutirantes*.

To help me in my field work research I had access to all the accumulated reflections made by the academic educators that contributed with their experiments in participative research organised by Carlos Rodrigues Brandão (in 1983 and 1987), not to mention the guidance of professor Celso Beisiegel.

The data analysis was based on:

1. Documents produced by the movements with guidelines or directives for the development of activities in popular education. In these documents we aimed to evaluate the political-pedagogical assumptions of these movements regarding the educational

process;

2. Record of the activities carried out by educational agents working with the respective groups, in order to evaluate the coherence between the assumptions of the movements regarding the educational process and the methods used to reach the intended goals.

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3. Observation of the dynamics of participation in collective spaces of discussion and decision, monitoring some more or less democratic practices in these several spaces.
4. Interviews, both individual and collective, with educational agents/leaders of the movements to

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which the groups belong. The educational agents and I engaged in a collective reflection on their practice, from the perspective of the problematic posed by this research, granting them access to elements I gathered in our field observations.

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## Pedagogy on the move

The annual state meetings I attended gathered hundreds of people with different levels of involvement in militancy and political training. If we analyse that methodological option solely with the purpose of deepening the proposed contents as themes to be studied, certainly the initial expectations expressed by the movements would not be met. If, on the other hand, we look at it without privileging the acquisition of accumulated knowledge, but as the experience of the organisational structure, and the possibility of being in contact with lots of people who do not know each other but who share among them the identity of belonging to a common cause, we will see there is an underlying purpose which is the strengthening of that same collective identity.

I don’t mean by thatthat the contents broached in these meetings are less developed by those who have less time or experience in the movement. On the contrary: interacting with former leaderships, listening to words that are part of a new vocabulary, interacting with people that have different accents and having the opportunity to comment on different points of view over matters related to a larger political project that has consequences in their own personal lives, are subtleties that feed and enrich their overall view of the world.

The attitude adopted by the coordinators of the associated group and of the work groups was extremely professional and coherent with the guidelines of the organisation, showing openness for dialogue and stimulating the participants to express their opinions and concerns. There were very few cases of a monopolization of speech and those were generally to clarify the participants in a particular subject and not to defend certain positions.

We accompanied the work of the organisation committees with the people responsible for the report, a task carried out thoroughly in order to ensure that all discussions were being contemplated. The overall organisation of both meetings is exemplary in terms of catering and accommodations; If a mismatch between the planned and the executed activities was to be noticed, it was specifically regarding the *ciranda* (either a popular Brazilian dance or a dance hall), in the MST, and the day care centre, in the UMM, as the teams formed to take care of the children were too few considering the large number of children that showed up at the event. The atmosphere of celebration was particularly noticeable; it reflected the joyful educational and militant environment that brought hope to the hearts and minds of those who fight for a better life and a better world.

During the regional meetings of the 1 East Movement of Landless Peasants of São Paulo the atmosphere is that of preparation for a long journey. The participants, members of group coordination and families called to represent their space, have an existential involvement with the causes of the movements they belong to; the discussion and definition of a strategy from a realistic point of view regarding the political interpretation of what is happening in the space in which they act, both in the movement and in the world, presupposes the willingness to systematize all the information they have access to, studying the conjuncture, conjecturing, preparing their ideas and discussing them within the group. In that sense, regional meetings can be defined as spaces of popular education in which the educators, the leaderships and people of reference are educated themselves later to return to their associated group with a different perspective of their knowledge of the movement.

I consider the occupation of land and empty properties in the studied movements to be some of the richest moments in the process of popular education, where all the political-pedagogical assumptions regarding the performance of their leaders are put to the test. It is necessary to believe in what you are doing, to have conviction on the political sense of their action, to build that conviction alongside other participants acknowledging that what is being done is not wrong, that wrong are the injustices of the situations in which they live. The trust bonds that are established between the various members of the movements are that which enables the rediscovery of the possibility of change, of extending their repertoire of ways to accomplish it. Action demands from everyone a comprehensive view of the importance of their participation in the discussion and execution of tasks, reinforcing the idea that each one of them has an important role to play in turning the movement into something real, demystifying the idea of the movement as a separate being that will interfere in their behalf and in what they fight for.

In the operational work I observed, the leaderships revealed themselves as educational agents in line with the guidelines of their movements and with the concerns they enumerated in our meetings. I noticed a concern in their group to bring everyday themes and histories to the discussion until they denaturalized them, presenting their proposals and reinforcing the necessity of the people to choose that particular movement, thus assuming a political commitment of participation. Both in the popular housing cooperative as in settlements, the primary focus of the educational agents work lay in accomplishing a regular presence of people in the meetings, through the creation of situations in which they could understand the political reasons behind the difficulties they were undergoing,

and the proposal of a political action necessary for them to overcome this situation.

In my opinion, I witnessed a process of politicizing education, which aims to distinguish between the welfare politics and action politics, and to awake in the people an awareness of the process of change, which involves the contribution of each member for the collective whole, ranging from spaces of militancy in the movements to internal instances of the settlement and the popular housing cooperative, spheres in which horizontal relations between the leaders and the people of the settlements and popular housing cooperatives are radicalized, as a result of these spaces being themselves, at a coordination level, composed of settlers and *mutirantes*.

Regarding the assemblies, the frequency and quality of participation of the people was variable. That happened because of a number of different factors such as the construction pace and the discussion of plans. For my research analysis I selected assemblies from both spaces that featured a wide participation of families both in quantity and qualitatively, in order to evaluate the behaviour of the coordinators of the settlements and of the popular housing cooperative. In both cases, I was able to assess the involvement of all the participants in the meetings, both in terms of the defence and argumentation over the proposals submitted for discussion, and of the various dialogues within the groups formed to discuss the themes proposed that preceded the discussions and deliberations of the plenary.

The coordinators had a restricted role, introducing the proposals of the movements and the agenda to be discussed.

They served as reference from an organisational point of view, stating and explaining the sequence of activities developed, without imposing or changing their tone or mood. In the voting process the support of the technical consultants was requested, so as to reassure the coordination and the participants that there was no interference or influence on the voting process of the rest of their companions.

In every coordination meeting I attended, I saw a genuine concern over the preparation of assemblies, bloc meetings and core meetings. The discussion of the various themes in the agenda to be addressed in the assembly aimed to verify all the possible arguments and assess if all the coordination members shared a common view of the questions at hand, even though in some cases there was mutual agreement. The proposals were submitted as a coordination measure to the assembly and not as a final deliberation: a clear sign that the members of the

coordination had a notion of their role, both as leaders and as settlers and *mutirantes*.

## I think therefore I act

The settlement Don Tomás Balduíno Land Commune, officially called Fazenda São Roque by official agencies, is located in the Serra dos Cristais Quarter, municipality of Franco da Rocha, in the northern region of greater São Paulo. The farm owner is the State Government of São Paulo, which in 21 July, 2003 transferred the administration of the property from the *Secretary of Justice and Defence* of Citizenship, to the Land Institute Foundation of São Paulo State "José Gomes da Silva" (ITESP).

After seven land occupations and respective eviction processes, the settlement in Franco da Rocha was legalised in 2003. Wide discussion led to land-plot division by mutual consent without resorting to a voting process, followed by a new struggle to ensure that the families had condition to remain on the farm, such as seed subsidies, water supply wells and *housing construction funding.*

The housing project was made between December 2004 and December 2005 by the interdisciplinary group of the university extension "Land Commune", of the University of São Paulo, under the guidance of professor Reginaldo Ronconi. Since then, it has received technical support from Itesp for the production sector and from the USINA technical assistance – the centre for inhabited environments— in order to adapt the project and to construct the housing.

Presently the community of the settlement Don Tomás Balduíno Land Commune consists of 63 families from 6 basic organisational units geographically distributed on three 3 land sites: the Purple site, with 13 families; the Green site, with 28 families; and the Red site, with 22 families. Presently the families are composed of 39 adult women and 68 adult men, and 95 children (39 girls and 56 boys).

For about two years, the settlement week was divided into production days and building days. A person from each family contributed with cooperative work for the construction of houses on their land site and took care of the production on their plot; she also participated in the collective production contracts. The *ciranda* (dance hall) and community kitchen are used nowadays only in assembly days, festivities or other activities where the participation of everyone is required.

The Paulo Freire Popular Housing Cooperative is located in the Inácio Monteiro Quarter, Borough of Tiradentes, East area of the municipality of São Paulo. It is also part of the 1 East Movement of Landless Peasants, affiliated to the Housing *Movements Union,* and is constituted by families from 14 groups from the East area of São Paulo. They signed an agreement for the construction of housing units in 1999, assigning to the USINA Technical Assistance the elaboration of project of housing construction along with the elaboration and development of a social work project.

Since then it underwent a process of popular mobilization and political pressure to secure the land, to get the construction project passed and to ensure the financial backup from the Municipal Housing Funding.

Nowadays there are one hundred associated families, comprising 169 adults (62 men and 107 women). Among the 157 children and teenagers, 73 are girls, and 84 boys.

The construction work in the popular housing cooperative lasted seven years in a Monday to Monday work schedule: during the week the work was carried out by teams hired for specific functions and in the weekends *mutirantes* families would take charge under the guidance of an engineer and an architect. Social workers were responsible for overseeing the construction work and for the developing a social work plan along with the coordinators of the community.

At weekends, construction work started at 8h15 and ended at 17h, with coffee and lunch breaks. Besides being divided into 15 work groups and 3 support teams – kitchen, day-care and cleaning – people were also appointed to control the working hours of each worker and to supervise the warehouse. During that time, rotating shifts were established so that one third of the families could rest, while the other two thirds worked, ensuring at least a free weekend for each family every month.

In the settlement Don Tomás Balduíno Land Commune we interviewed the following people: Maria (36), Jacira (31), Carlos (39), Mauro (47) and Piná (41) and in the popular housing cooperative Paulo Freire: Rose (46), Clemilda (45), Meire (34), Dora (36), Roberto (39).

From the interviews we selected the most recurrent themes for us to comment.

I cannot help mentioning the resiliency of the people I had met. And when I refer

those people in particularly, it is because we have the notion that many more have quit along the way. The hardship and difficulties they experienced throughout the years is something they mentioned in some moments of their interviews, but if we multiply those reports by the 163 families that belong to both communities and if we consider that there are thousands involved in each movement, we cannot help but wonder what these people have been through.

For over 20 years, ever since the movements which integrate the studied groups were formally constituted, the Catholic Church and Christianity have been present either as references or, in many cases, as one of the main support of the popular organisations.

Although the official support has been removed as a consequence of the hegemony of the conservative tendencies of the institution, the references to their assistance in the basic organisational spaces of the movements indicate there are priests in the more progressive wings of the institution who are still very much present in the struggle against the inequalities that occur in deprived downtown areas and the distant peripheral areas of Greater São Paulo. I believe their presence does not pose any problems to the process of ideological denaturalization taken up by the movement, which allow people to become aware of their social condition as they join the movement, since they manage to separate the church from the movement and also to contribute to the growth of desirable humanitarian values in line with those practiced by the movements.

I managed to observe female emancipation through the participation in the popular movements in a number of ways. A superficial analysis could mistakenly lead us to believe that in the popular housing cooperative women necessarily go through a process of strengthening their social visibility, while in the settlement they would be relegated to the wife’s role of struggling companion. However if we think about it, we realise that the construction of equality gender relationships is present in both processes. Even though the majority of women do not take part in the construction work of the settlement houses, in both spaces they are in charge of coordination, lead the process of collective production and are present in all the support teams, which are vital for the whole movement. The acknowledged value of their participation in those spaces is something worth being remembered as an everyday conquest so that it does not boil down to merely being part of their obligations as women.

In the cases studied I followed exciting histories of people regaining their dignity,

and becoming conscious of their rights, the outcome of the pedagogical action of the leaderships of the movements, who, despite their mistakes, did not lose sight of their commitment to continue learning, of the importance of embodying examples, and of the value of each one of their fellow companions.

The histories I heard are not unique, but they are few when compared with all the other ones we do not know how they will end. The opportunity they found to debate openly and to find that those problems were not theirs alone makes me assume that the spaces provided by the movements are in fact educational environments, where people believe in the reconstruction potential of socially marginalized persons as well as emotionally and psychologically affected persons. If, on the one hand, that reiterates the thesis that the people reach out to those movements out of need, those examples show us that there are diverse necessities and that they originate from social inequalities.

In each one of the spaces there were people who assume their sexual orientation free of prejudice. To them as to the rest of the people, the coexistence based on the respect for differences means a lot, and represents a step forward in the collective process of a change of values, a political process of humanisation based on mutual understanding and acceptance, which is not spontaneous: it needs to be constructed by everyone.

The difficult balance between equality and freedom, the individual and the collective, the life you actually have and the life you struggle for, can only be reached if in the communities formed from a collective process of militancy and popular education a space of creativity and incentive to the expression of the wishes of their participants emerges.

In the mutual self-help community, as well as in the settlement, I witnessed to how people learned to resist their immediate need for housing in order to secure the autonomy of the communities in the elaboration of the housing projects developments. The effective difference of this process can only be measured when all participants own their own houses and are working; for now we know that change is possible, and that such change depends on the participation and unity of everyone who willingly joins the popular organisation through popular movements.

After the interviews we talked to the coordinators of both the settlement and the popular housing association, regarding the limitations and challenges of popular education in the basic organisational units of popular movements. Their responses

are far from ideal, which reinsured us, since they show the lucidity and the awareness that the work that is not yet finished, that this an ongoing project and that it does not depend solely on the changes in the way of life and in the political culture of the people who compose those unique and brave communities.

## What are our conclusions?

Rereading the material gathered from the field work represented for me the rediscovery of something that was always in the back of my mind and which was something desirable: the construction of democratic educational processes as a part of a political change project is now a possibility with material existence.

The speeches and practices of popular education in popular movements I observed are oriented towards the construction of values in line with those defended by Paulo Freire throughout his work: the respect for each other, the disassembly of formulae of coexistence typical of an authoritarian society, the appreciation of dialogue as the fundamental basis of coexistence and of the educational process, the promotion of popular participation in the definition of its history; the refusal of authoritarianism, welfarism and indoctrination. However, the political meaning of our work together with the popular movements were put to the test, considering that the solutions found cannot be universalised.

We conclude that, if we considered the formation processes as active, intentional processes on the part of both the leaders of the movements and the technical employees involved in the execution of their projects (constructing, producing) and not as something that is expected to happen *naturally*, then it is impossible for their work to bear no fruit—a catastrophic interpretation that entails the inevitability of the reduction of urban *mutirões* (mutual self-help communities)to a mere set of dormitories of salaried workers submitted to the capitalist logic, the reduction of settlements simply to places with lots of family farming for subsistence and of cooperatives to self-precarious work.

One should perhaps wonder if this expansion is in fact something that could only be accomplished by institutional means, through the structural change of public policies and managements mechanisms, or if the educational process of constructing the mode of collective action and life of the *mutirantes*, settlers and cooperators who have undergone such experiences does in fact constitute a pot of political culture that will ferment such changes in a quiet and authentic way, possibly surprising us all in the future, resulting in a model of society more closer to

what we are looking for… I am not sure if we will be there to find out who was right.

We have to admit that such political culture is extremely difficult to measure, but it is a bet we made: in the present.

Regarding my initial research questions:

“What is intended – and what is being accomplished – with popular education in popular movements nowadays? Have the conquests of those movements eclipsed the sheer quests for housing, land and work?”

On the one hand, from the field work I’ve done and from my readings I may answer affirmatively. It is clear that it is necessary to delve deeper into the cases studied, and consider the specific questions of methodology in order to come up with a more robust research.

One of the challenges for the development and a more profound reflection on popular education in popular movements is the difficulty of finding specific bibliography produced in the last 20 years on this matter.

The search for specific literature and a broader dialogue about the subject of methodology of popular education is another goal to be met in order to keep investigating how far popular education can be considered a training instrument of popular participative organisations and protagonists of process of radical change in society.

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## Notes

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