Adult education as cultural struggle

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Fight is the elixir of the life, the tonic of life.
This is, if you aren’t fighting you are dead
(Milton Wolff, last Commander of the
Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spanish Civil War.
In Peter N. Carroll. La Odisea de la Brigada Abraham Lincoln)

Framework: culture, hegemony and empire.

When Paulo Freire wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he was thinking and practising a literacy method to help people – on the margins of the city – to recover their cultural identity and dignity. Freire suggested that the *method* and the literacy processes could be considered a cultural struggle to allow people to come out from the culture of silence. He concluded that this step empowers them to walk from magic to critical conscience.

Almost fifty years before Freire published *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; another thinker was trying to reflect about the defeat of the working class in Turin (Italy). In his cryptic reflection – deriving from his imprisonment – Antonio Gramsci defined the importance of Civil Society in the revolutionary process; he also defined a way for this process: the war of positions that would include other forms of organised popular movements such as the factory councils. He expounded the importance of cultural struggle to achieve hegemony in the whole of society and not only in relation to the State.

Several authors, including Peter Mayo, have drawn on relations between Freire and Gramsci. Mayo (1999; in press) tries to connect the major ideas of these two authors. One of his findings is to consider that cultural activities are a link between them. Mayo pays attention to the concept of hegemony. Following Livingstone, he refers hegemony to ‘all aspects of social reality are dominated by or supportive of a single class’ (in Mayo, in press.) and, according to Gramsci, says that education is fundamental to achieve social transformation (Mayo, in press).

Raymond Williams maintains that the concept of hegemony includes within it two powerful ideas. Firstly, cultures as a social process that gets people to understand their whole social life and secondly ideology conceived as a system of meanings and values that arrange whole social life as well. Thus, hegemony influences relationships and personal and collective identities.

Hegemony is then not only the articulate upper level of ‘ideology’, nor are its forms of control only those ordinarily seen as ‘manipulation’ and ‘indoctrination’. It is a whole body of practices and expectations over the whole of living: our sense and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and, our world (Williams, 1977, pp.110).

Deriving from this concept, the form of struggle to achieve alternative forms of society is not only political and economical in its nature but also a struggle which has to do with
culture. Williams says

If it is all true that the creation of meanings is an activity which engages all men, then one is bound to be shocked by any society which in its most explicit culture either suppresses the meanings and values of whole groups, or which fails to extend to these groups the possibility of articulating and communicating these meanings (in McIlroy and Westwood, 1993, pp.304)

According to Hardt and Negri (2005), Empire represents the hegemonic form of domination today. Here we stress three major ideas. Firstly, Empire is a response to the attempts of the working class to change the world. Empire tries to stop the cooperative work of popular groups and movements, because the resistance to preserve this cooperative work can shape another whole social life. Secondly, is the notion of non place for exploitation. Empire tries to dominate life as a whole. The place to exploit people is a non place, because it is the entire social life, relationships and dreams. In short, Empire has turned all life into productive life. The third idea is in relation to immaterial work ‘In post modernity, social wealth accumulated is more and more immaterial, including social relationships, communicational and informational systems and emotional nets’ (Hardt and Negri, 2005, pp.281). We think that connections between the last idea and the concept of hegemony are obvious. We give thought to the possibility of analysing our experience within Empire, and contemplate it as a form of counter-hegemony: a singular event against the Empire.

Finally, Cocco (2003) says that the city is changing alongside the changes that are taking place in life, the world, work and the fundamental ways that people relate to one another. He has written: ‘Internal adjustments in the city obliges low rent population to adopt day to day, to survive, strategies more entrepreneurial in the heart of their own community’ (Cocco, 2003, pp.99). San Bernardo is a site of exploitation, where people react with engagement and solidarity against Empire tendencies described by Cocco.

Old people against the empire

Seville is the fourth largest populated city in Spain and the capital city of Andalusia, one of the poorest regions in Spain. Since 1992, Seville has been in the process of gentrification in three important and historical neighbourhoods: Triana, north of the historic district and San Bernardo. We focus our attention in San Bernardo.

Context and history

On the 24th May 2004 a group of neighbours of the Sevillian district of San Bernardo headlined the news across the whole of Spain as they had occupied block of houses located in this district. This was part of a process that had begun long before and that did not end at that moment. It was simply a moment at which one was able to catch the attention of the society of the spectacle.

San Bernardo is a popular district in Seville, whose antiquity dates from Arabian Seville in the X-XI centuries. Since then the expansion of this district, like the rest of the suburbs of Seville, was populated mainly by workers from western Andalusia migrating from the country, fleeing from seasonal unemployment and the endemic hunger of the large estate, and attracted by the demand of work for industry and construction. Therefore it is a district historically populated by the working class who lived close to their work in the small iron and steel industries.
The majority of the population lived in a rent regime; very few neighbours owned their own houses. Usually, they lived in a type of house called *patios de vecinos*. These collective houses arose from an attempt to solve the problem of the lack of housing in the city (García Bernal, 2005). This solution consisted of subdividing a house into many rooms and to rent each room independently. The rise in population and increasing demand for housing allowed the rent costs to increase. The occupants therefore, had only one room for all the family and shared a kitchen, toilets, courtyard and access to water. This type of house has remained until the present time, marking a distinctive way of life and identity for the people who traditionally have lived in this area.

With the expansion of the city to the east, this suburb, in an area very near to the centre of Seville, made it attractive to the wealthy classes in the city. The process of gentrification began around the time of the celebrated Universal Exhibition in 1992. Housing and commercial developers moved into the area during the eighties and the nineties and almost completely destroyed its social composition. As a result of both the aging population and the aging buildings, evictions were easier to enforce and cheap to carry out, through successive legal declarations of buildings being below habitable standards. Following the development or reconstruction of the buildings and the area, ownership is gradually shifting to the middle and upper classes with their higher spending power. It is predicted that within two decades the district will be occupied by new owners and renters. This will result in the end of most of the *patios de vecinos*.

**Popular organisation processes**

Despite all these events the neighbours who remain in the district continually try to look for solutions to their problems. Initially they were going to the City Council and giving them information about how the proprietors had given up any attempts to maintain the buildings where they lived. However, this type of action was dealt with individually, being understood as a conflict between renter and proprietor. Thus, many of the people who on the 24th May 2004 decided to occupy the block of council social houses had previously spent up to 15 years requesting the intervention of the City Council and asking them to fulfil the law but they never obtained answers...

The work of revitalisation that some neighbours began to develop in the district resulted in the formation of a group, called *San Bernardo 52 Neighbours Assembly*. This group carried out the occupation of the block of council social houses, which were completed two years previously and remained empty despite being destined, supposedly, to rehouse the traditional district neighbours without houses.

Within this period a measurable and significant shift took place from initially facing their problems in an individual way to confronting them in a collective and creative way. Thus about fifteen neighbours, ranging between 55 and 80 years old, threatened by eviction and living in houses in an advanced state of deterioration decided to occupy the council social houses that the City Council had left empty. The neighbours then demanded to be rehoused within the district or for their houses to be renovated, understanding the occupation as a means of applying pressure to make the City Council act. Nevertheless, the answer of the administration was to try to expulse the neighbours from the block and later to review each one of the cases in an individual way. The action taken by the neighbours has awoken and created solidarity and support from the population and social movements of Seville. Since then they have remained in these houses in an illegal situation, although, with the promise of the City Council not to evict them until they have alternative housing. There are now 10 families, with an average age of almost 60 years,
living in the council social housing blocks.

The challenge to become citizen.

Evidently, all the members of San Bernardo 52 Neighbour Assembly are citizens, like other traditional neighbours of the district, and therefore enjoy the recognition of their right to housing determined within the Spanish Constitution of 1978. However, these rights are only formal and they had no way to live or use their rights until they established themselves as a collective. Being a collective has allowed them to think in a different way, they have become real citizens and have demanded and lived their rights. They are living their experience, fighting with all their power and learning with their whole bodies. We can conclude, therefore, that the problem is not necessarily what constitutes basic rights because these have been demanded by almost all societies and accepted by almost all the States, but the problem is how these rights are introduced, guaranteed and realised to ensure that they are translated into citizen practices.

The work of the Paulo Freire Institute of Spain has connected the elements that have made reflection possible, to understand the meaning of being a citizen and to carry out group practices, which favour access to and the deepening of a voice that argues and explains the decisions taken by the group. The creation of this voice from one’s own situation is a condition to reach freedom. It has been an educational task because in societies everybody needs to manage some codes to express this voice, especially if you want to be in the media and/or talking with the local authority.

Educational elements.

Bengoa (1996) raises the point that social movements try to mobilise opinions and actions to modify certain social attitudes, and that civil society exerts pressure that produces lasting improvements in public policies. Frequently the situations of social participation, like privileged spaces, are not valued to harness the learning. The action of social movements creates spaces in which learning is a result of the mechanisms of indirect socialisation that takes place, thanks to the experience of participation in different social institutions. The author considers that collective activities involve more learning than advanced training courses and other scholastic activities.

The work developed has been, on the one hand, to support the daily tasks of the group in San Bernardo. This has involved, on numerous occasions, support to write letters to the City Council, write to newspapers or to write up the agreements taken by the group. All of these situations have been used as an opportunity for the group to take advantage of their own literacy knowledge. The most interesting work is still in the development process: the recovery of the oral history of the district.

The recovery of their history will help them to become active and find the voice within their silence. This will be achieved through framing the present situation within a historical process, making possible the transition from a magical conscience to a critical one. Interviews will be conducted both informally and formally, in a collective and individual way, to take advantage of the participants’ observations in moments of the daily life of the neighbours.

The gentrification process has had a cultural impact on life in San Bernardo. The change of inhabitants has meant that this neighbourhood has changed from a popular working class culture and identity, which was very influenced by the housing (patios de vecinos) to a high-class lifestyle. An example of this is the following: when a new, high-class
neighbour, arrived in the neighbourhood, he reported to the court that the traditional custom of sitting in the street during the summer to enjoy the fresh air should be considered inappropriate, because it generated a bad image. The permanence of the group in this district implies the possibility of maintaining cultural forms like this.

**Conclusions: the long and winding road to become a citizen**

We can understand that people’s everyday experiences reproduce ways of thinking and acting which support and legitimise the status quo, as described previously, a phenomenon called hegemony. However, according to Foley (1999) these experiences can create and offer opportunities that enable people to critically think about and challenge the existing order, particularly located within sites of struggle in neighbourhoods and workplaces (Foley, 1999, pp.4). Working against the political and economical structures that affect the nature of society and looking beyond the individual to understand the relationship of the individual to society is where informal and powerful learning can take place ‘as people struggle against oppression, as they struggle to make sense of what is happening to them and to work out ways doing something about it’ (Foley, 1999, pp.2).

Popular education, operating outside conventional politics, plays a vital role in supporting groups through their struggle. Developed from radical roots its purpose, fighting for equality and justice, is underpinned by ‘really useful knowledge, knowledge calculated to make you free’ (Westwood, 1992, pp.223) understanding what the causes of conditions are and finding practical solutions.

Key to popular education is social justice which links to and plays an important role in social movements described as

> distinct social processes, consisting of the mechanisms through which actors engage in collective action: are involved in conflict relations, are linked by dense informal networks and share a distinct collective identity (Porta and Diana, 2006, pp.20).

Crowther and Martin highlight that ‘social movements have always constituted a site of resistance to exploitation and oppression and have been a motivating force for a socially purposeful education allied to social change’ (Crowther and Martin, 2007, pp.76).

Therefore the interconnectedness of these areas popular education, social justice and social movements is of central importance to groups that are in sites of struggle to find spaces where ‘democratic politics can be built and where all can realise their rights and claim their citizenship’ (Cornwell and Coelho, 2007, pp.1).

The group in San Bernardo is organised in a non-hierarchical and self-governing way and they are opposing the process of gentrification through the direct action that they have taken. They are a community of interest and of area and they are using their neighbourhood as a classroom, learning within the real context of their lives. This group are making connections and making themselves stronger through purposeful education in their fight for social justice. Through their struggle they have used really useful knowledge to understand their rights, build their strength and work as a collective to make them stronger and by becoming critical thinkers, they have made connections between their ‘personal troubles and public issues’ (Wright Mills, 1959, pp.12). Key to this is the notion of transformative learning, the development of critical thinking where education is informal
and helps grassroots organisations to work for social change.

Through their own struggle and explaining their situation to other groups, the San Bernardo’s group has become citizens. Freire describes that ‘the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through praxis: reflection and action, commit themselves to its transformation’ (Freire, 1970, pp.36). This is influenced by the process that Freire called conscientisation (Freire, 1970, pp.95), which helps the group to understand their situation, critically analyse it and understand how their knowledge has been constructed through policies and ideologies. Through their crisis they have become critically aware of their situation and conditions and through thinking about their struggle they have become conscious and enabled to describe their way to other people. In other words the process of reflection has allowed them to become the experts.

Freire would describe popular education ‘as an important source of agency where adult educators play an important role as democratic educators’ (Mayo, 1999, pp.63). The work of Tom Lovett in the 1970s Educational Priority Area Projects (EPAs) which links adult education and community development has relevance in connecting with the work in San Bernardo, particularly through the role of the educator. Lovett’s work was centred on building relationships and engaging with people. Fundamentally his approach ‘attempted to shift towards a more relevant curriculum that could be built around everyday concerns and interests of people’ (Lovett, 1975, pp.128). The work is relevant to real life and the educator attempts to build a relationship, based on a sense of solidarity with the group aims and an understanding and sympathy with their values and way of life, whilst maintaining a professional relationship with the group. This is important because it builds trust and alleviates suspicions and there is confidence that the educator is working with them for their benefit. Through this process the educator provides the space to ‘promote learning through dialogue… the learners are active participants in the process of their own learning’ (Mayo, 1999, pp.63) and engaged in truly transformative learning.

Acknowledging that the strength they have is achieved by working collectively through their struggle over many years, they have become experts, sharing their experience and knowledge with other neighbourhoods who find themselves in a similar situation. This has been important not only to publicise their plight but also to support others through collective solidarity.

Deriving from this experience, we can learn two important issues. Firstly, it is possible to fight against forces that want to change our daily life. On the other hand, this struggle, like in San Bernardo, connects with the system of meanings, the culture, etc. The role of adult education – in the sense of radical adult education – is decisive.

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