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Universities and Popular Education in Revolutionary Venezuela

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In December 2008, Liam Kane spent two weeks in 'revolutionary' Venezuela, researching what universities were doing to tackle 'social exclusion'.

Hugo Chávez, Venezuelan president since 1998, tends to provoke extreme reactions. A friend of Fidel Castro, a charismatic if verbose speaker (the king of Spain famously asked him 'why don't you shut up?'), brazenly outspoken against American imperialism (he called George Bush 'worse than the devil') and a self-proclaimed promoter of socialism for the 21st century (what he calls the 'Bolivarian revolution'), he is generally demonised in the western press as a dangerous lunatic with dictator-like tendencies. This type of coverage reflects the panic of a frightened Venezuelan elite and a US government desperate to avert the threat of a good example, ie independent development, in its own 'backyard' (see Young, 2008 for an analysis of how the press treat Chávez in comparison to Colombia's president Uribe).

His supporters, on the other hand, can assert that Chávez has diverted oil wealth to the poorest (social 'missions' provide services such as education, health care and subsidised food), promoted a genuinely democratic electoral system (his government's policies have been tested at the ballot box 16 times, losing only once) and fostered regional independence from United States domination through developing alternative trade deals with other Latin American countries. When he was ousted from power by a military coup in April 2002, more than a million people took to the streets to protest. They surrounded the presidential palace and forced the coup to be aborted, all of it filmed from within the palace by an Irish documentary team (see Bartley & O'Briain, 2003).

Though official rhetoric talks of 'revolution', there has been little dispossession of property, entrepreneurs are welcomed into Chávez's socialist party, private media still dominate communications and revolutionary posters stand side-by-side with adverts for major multinationals. Rather than a head-on assault on the interests of the ruling class, then, some describe this revolutionary strategy as an attempt to create a 'parallel' society from below, in which old dominant interests will eventually wither away (Vera-Zavala, 2005).

What seems new about the Chávez era has been the declared intention to bring about change not by governmental activity alone but by promoting and developing participatory democracy and 'popular power' from below: of the five 'motors of the revolution', one is 'popular power' and another 'popular education' (the generally pro-Chávez website *venezuelaanalysis.com* has a host of articles in English about these initiatives). On the face of it then, Venezuela appears to be a country with much to offer those of us interested in learning about the potential of popular education to facilitate social change.

In reality, however, the situation is complex and constantly changing, there are many contradictions and, as I learned from my trip, even those supporting 'the process'

have a number of frustrations: that there continues to be considerable corruption in politics, including amongst officials hand-picked by Chávez; that in many places local administrators subvert official policy; that the rhetoric of radical change is not mirrored in practice; that Chávez combines a genuine commitment to grassroots democracy with off-the-cuff, top-down dictats. No two Venezuelan supporters of 'the process' seem to agree on an analysis of what is going on or on the particular merits or failings of their president. In February 2009 Chávez successfully urged supporters to campaign for a constitutional amendment allowing him to stand for a third term. While this was hardly a step towards the dictatorship portrayed by the international press - if so, by that criterion, the UK is also a dictatorship - many are critical that the process now focuses far too much on Chávez at the expense of supporting development from below.

Universities and Popular Education

Within this context of attempted social (revolutionary?) change, the role of at least some universities is being completely re-considered and their practice altered accordingly. Policy says universities should serve not just the elite but the whole of society, including the most excluded, and that they should actively contribute towards combating social injustice. The purpose of my visit was to find out what universities were doing in this area and, if appropriate, initiate a research project to learn from the experience: in doing so I concentrated on two different types of university.

ENFODEP and the Simón Rodríguez Experimental University

ENFODEP stands for "Experiment in the Training of Popular Educators". After severe repression in 1989, following protests against the International Monetary Fund, resistance was widespread in Venezuela and a growing number of community activists became involved in popular education, some of it in schools where there was a lack of teachers, some of it in informal settings. Key activists with a history of involvement in popular education came together to help systematically organise education and training for those who were interested. The idea took off, people built their own training centres and those who went to teach in schools also became interested in having their training recognised officially.

Discussions started with sympathetic academics in the Simón Rodríguez university's Centre for Experimentation in Permanent Education (CEPAP) and in 1991 began the experiment in the training of both school and community-based popular educators, which continues to this day. To me, this appears a prime example of a popular education movement which has sprung up outside the state, which values its independence of thought and action but also considers it important to engage with and make demands of the state (the Landless People's Movement in Brazil provides another example). It is not without its problems: the initiative belongs mainly to CEPAP, rather than the wider university, sometimes the political climate has been hostile (though with Chávez it is more favourable), there can be difficulties in agreeing appropriate curriculums, assignments and assessments and those less interested in acquiring qualifications can be tempted to break away. But it is an inspiring real live example of a genuine attempt to engage in popular education within state structures.

I attended a session run by a CEPAP tutor on the degree course run for popular educators. Talking to students, their studies were clearly rooted in their community practice and they themselves seemed the embodiment of Gramsci's notion of 'organic intellectuals'. Using a popular education methodology, the course was run by an impressively competent tutor who was no mere 'facilitator' but someone who, in addition to provoking excellent group discussions, had new knowledge of her own to contribute.

I also attended the graduation ceremony of those who had completed the previous year's course. Graduations are serious affairs in Venezuela and the top-table boasted a row of august-looking, formally-clad academics. Just as I was thinking this was a most un-popular education event, the principal delivered his speech. In their attempts to change both society and themselves, he said, each day they all strove to build "social spaces full of dignity, equity, justice, freedom, equality, solidarity, democracy, social responsibility and, more generally, the pre-eminence of human rights, ethics and political pluralism". He talked of commitment to social change, that the university should be like a social movement and that the ideas for the course were inspired by radical Latin American educationists like Simón Rodríguez, Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda. A student representative also spoke - I have never witnessed that in the UK - in a similar, though more explicitly political vein, prompting one attendee to shout out 'this is supposed to be a graduation, not a political rally!'.

A few days later, I met with the staff of CEPAP, now more relaxed in their civic attire. They were generous with their time and keen to co-operate in any research project which develops. All in, I felt extremely comfortable with the staff and students of CEPAP/ENFODEP, both inside and outside the university, and the way they went about their work in popular education.

The Bolivarian University of Venezuela

The Bolivarian University is a different institution altogether. Set up in 2003 by an on-the-hoof decision by Chávez to open up more university places (the new constitution guarantees tertiary education to all who would like it), it came into existence as part of the revolutionary project, with an explicit remit to make higher education accessible to and work for the benefit of all:

Traditional universities produce depoliticised professionals who see themselves as using technical skills but do not have any sense of social responsibility. We want to contribute to the reconstruction of our society. We want to create professionals with a sense of public service (Castellano, quoted in Podur, 2004).

On entering university grounds visitors are greeted by a mural saying "Welcome to the Bolivarian University of Venezuela: 5 years of emancipatory education" (see photo) and political events are advertised all over the campus. Every staff member I met had a picture of Che Guevara on the office wall, usually one of Chávez as well, and the day I arrived saw the release of a university publication called "Theories in Latin American Emancipatory Pedagogy: for a Popular and Socialist University of the Venezuelan Revoluion", an impressive collection of original writings in radical education from both Latin America and beyond.

The Bolivarian University is charged with bringing higher education to large numbers of students and, in recognition of the difficulties in bringing people to the Caracas

campus, it has a massive outreach programme to what have been called 'university villages' and has to be flexible in its modes of course delivery. In line with its philosophical beliefs about the purpose of education, and influenced by the various currents of radical pedagogy outlined in their recent publication, especially the need to link theory to practice, the curriculum is ambitious in its attempt to embed learning in the real world, with a view to trying to change it. I looked in particular at the programme for educating doctors and teachers and the whole curriculum is focused on

'the methodology of Learning Projects: this requires students to "unlearn", "learn to learn", "learn while doing" all the while engaging in a constant process of action, reflection and systematisation' (Comisión Nacional del PNFE, 2006:13)

Whatever the students are trying to learn, the aim is that this should be tested in the real world, in a form of participatory action research with the people outside university walls, through the community project at the heart of their studies. It also means university teachers have to vacate their ivory towers and go into the real world to carry out their supervision, something of a challenge to more traditional academics.

I have not yet spent enough time in the Bolivariana to have a proper feel for how things work out in practice. On the one hand I was impressed that political issues and values seemed to be addressed explicitly, as a I sometimes think popular education fails to do that adequately (see previous debates in Concept). It was also refreshing, and such a contrast to the UK, to see a Higher Education Institution devoted to the collective good rather than just individual aggrandisement and servicing the 'needs' of employers. And in theory, at least, the attempt at providing an alternative and appropriate curriculum looks excellent. On the other hand, the place seemed so immersed in the exultation of Chávez that you had to wonder whether a propaganda machine was overpowering the legitimate aims of a genuinely radical, popular education. To be fair, the staff I spoke to - again extremely generous with their time and enthusiastic about any joint research - were happy to talk about the difficulties: amongst these were the fact that not all staff and students signed up to the new educational values, and particularly with the absence of suitably qualified personnel, the logistics of serving so many people, having had so little time to prepare in advance, were considerable.

Conclusion

Both these examples aspire to promote genuine popular education within the state, albeit in the context of governmental attempts to promote widespread social change. In Simón Rodríguez, the reach is smaller than in the Bolivariana, though arguably the experience of the students is more focused and based on well-tested approaches developed over the years by an independent popular education movement. The Bolivariana, on the other hand, attempts to reach a mass audience and that creates its own difficulties. While very conscious of the limitations of a two week visit in being able to distinguish appearances from reality, I am certain that research into these different attempts to engage university education in the struggle for social change could be of benefit to all of us interested in popular education. With colleagues from the University of Glasgow I am currently in the process of trying to acquire funds to do just that so if anyone out there has a spare £50-100K to spend, please get in touch.

Abrazos venezolanos y revolucionarios (they sometimes get carried away with themselves in Venezuela).

PS On a lighter note, people were amused when I told them about the place of Caracas in Scottish culture. Do you remember the relevant scene in the film 'Gregory's Girl'? Total failures in the girlfriend department, two nerdy boys discovered that in Venezuela there were seven females for every male and towards the end of the film you see them hitchhiking beside a roundabout in Cumbernauld, holding up a placard saying "Caracas". If a part of my subconscious hoped that that statistic was true, that I'd be uncharacteristically feted by high levels of female attention, it was sorely disappointed.

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