

Review

The 8th International Conference of the Popular Education Network (PEN) Goedgedacht, Riebeek Kasteel, South Africa 26th-29th June 2018

I set out for South Africa to attend the 8th International Conference of the Popular Education Network (PEN) with the shallow wish that it was their summer so I could get a suntan on my new Nelson Mandela tattoo. I had saved for the plane fare and had negotiated a small grant from the kind and supportive PEN organisers in Cape Town. I had somewhat pretentiously requested that I engage with someone who took a Gramscian perspective on the current conjuncture in SA after the demise of the odious Zuma. Moreover, I had attempted to convince them that I was indeed a song and dance man and an asset at any do. I further suggested I had a measure of theoretical insight deriving, in part, from the national-popular struggles in Scotland which might be applicable to South Africa. It was, in fact, winter in South Africa and it was still experiencing one of the worst climate change droughts in its history. Nevertheless, these shallow ambitions were indeed met and more! I will attempt to explain how. I will extrapolate on a Freirean pedagogy, which underpinned the PEN conference, by drawing out some of the generative themes, exploring some of the plenaries which impacted upon me the most. I will include some references to my own trips into the Cape Flats in Cape Town and use the contributions of Ian Martin, Viviana Cruz-McDougall, Lindelwa Nxu, Astrid von Kotze and Ari Sitas, in particular, to help theorise, summarise and encapsulate the conference.

Day 1: Tuesday 26 June 2018 ‘Pre-conference ‘Open Day’ at Community House

My new comrade, host, and pal Astrid von Kotze drove me to the pre-conference ‘Open Day’ at Community House. We took a couple of selfies in front of the Workers Mural before going in to help set up. The mural, the left wing organisation’s offices, and the literature coming from associations such as the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation transported me back to the Greater London Council (GLC) events in resistance to the then British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, a sort of (anti) euphoric

recall. Thatcher smashed the GLC along with the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in 1984/85. This bitter industrial conflict between the Thatcher government and the NUM was ‘a, if not the, watershed in the transition to neoliberalism in Britain’ (Alderson, 2010: 2). Given the neo-liberal onslaught on South Africa with ‘the gap between the rich and poor in the new South Africa more pronounced than almost any other country’ (Hain, 2018:183), the event reminded me of the warning Stuart Hall gave to the Left in 1985. We need a Gramscian ‘pessimism of the intellect’, based not simply on taken-for-granted assumptions and judgments, but on rigorously-produced knowledge. If faith could move mountains, he hadn’t seen it, Hall argued in debate with Tony Benn in 1985. It was if the linguistic and post-structural turns in critical theory had not touched Community House. As Pillay (2017) argues, ‘Although South Africa provides one of the most fertile grounds for Gramsci’s ideas to be applied, there has up to this time been no systematic study of Gramsci’s applicability to this context.’

And yet, the World Café; the ‘Tafelberg’ story and discussion about ‘Reclaiming the city’, and the Salt Mine movement from Ghana – along with the vibrant vibe of music and dance – displayed the celebratory ‘optimism of the will’ also required for a popular education strategy to effectively commit to a revolutionary democratic praxis. I led one of the groups at the ‘World Café’, describing the work in Edinburgh I was involved with, looking at structural issues surrounding addiction. Part of the impetus for such work in a critical pedagogy setting is because, as Alexander (2011) points out, ‘Perceiving individuals as the sole cause of their addictive downfall makes sense morally and pragmatically in the 12-step milieu, but it rules out the possibility of social action to ameliorate the dislocating cultural environment.’ Lindelwa Nxu, a South African Freirean activist, immediately identified with Alexander’s premise and has sought to develop an ongoing international dialogue, as have many others from the PEN conference. Lindelwa Nxu very much encapsulates, for me, the other side of the Gramscian dichotomy, that is, the ‘optimism of the will’.

Day 2: Wednesday 27th June 2018 Arrival at Goedgedacht

We mustered in the morning outside Community House, 41 Salt River Road, to take the bus to Goedgedacht, Riebeek Kasteel, which gave me a chance to catch up with my Scottish comrade Eurig Scandrett and ‘chew the fat’ surrounding the role of the Scottish Labour Party, Federalism and Scottish Independence. I felt he was slightly ‘selling the jerseys’ over the independence issue but he made up for it by telling me he had just come down from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, having completed a book with Anne Harley on ‘Decolonising knowledge and learning in resistance’. Let’s apply that decolonising framing to Scotland, we agreed!

The setting for the conference was breath-taking, peaceful and scenic. Our hosts were the Goedgedacht Trust, whose ‘integrated and holistic’ vision seeks to transform rural communities, by offering children opportunities to counteract the serious problems faced by rural communities in South Africa often characterised by poverty, domestic violence, sexual abuse, drug/alcohol addiction and hopelessness. Such a vision, it would be appear, is also much needed in the trauma-struck Caribbean Island of Porto Rico.

Plenary 1: Popular Education and the present post hurricane context in Puerto Rico: because a different world is possible

The introductory popular education plenary was a wake-up call to challenge any notions of a Eurocentric gaze. Viviana Cruz-McDougal, University of Puerto Rico, Humacao, opened and closed the conference with an urgent and trauma-based account of climate change causality in Puerto Rico, and its consequences in the form of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. At the time of the PEN Conference, many people in Puerto Rico still remained without homes, drinking water, furniture, electrical power and had suffered fatalities. In response to this, Viviana Cruz-McDougal outlined how community and popular education agencies had used demands for the right to food, housing, water, energy, natural resources, the right to information, free expression and political participation to create a popular education curriculum based on action and reflection. This praxis is intrinsic to the work of the Latin America Adult Education Council (CEAAL), of which Viviana is a representative, and whose popular education methodology is derived, in part, from the work of Paulo Freire. The crisis for Puerto

Rico had, as outlined by Viviana, opened up, ironically and dialectically, spaces for LGBT+ and Disability activists and issues, interrogating and submitting to scrutiny issues around the internalisation of the oppressor and discourses around power, climate change and gender issues that crossed class divisions. Viviana, it seems to me, introduced the desire to overcome essentialist ‘class’-based perspectives in order to understand and explain popular education agency in Puerto Rico arising from the aftermath of the hurricane devastation. Viviana stressed the scientific fact, validated by the recent IPCC United Nations report on Global Warming, that we are now living through the catastrophic effects of Global Climate Change! Popular educators create the praxis opportunities for groups such as ‘Extinction Rebellion’ at local and international levels.

Thursday 28th June 2018*Plenary 3: (How) Can Workers’ Education revive its tradition as a form of Radical Pedagogy*

For me this workshop displayed some of the deepest reflective dialogue in the PEN conference, addressing critical issues such as counter-hegemony and the role of organic intellectuals through the conduit of a skills-based shop stewards education articulated with a radical pedagogy. The contributors, including Dinga Sikwebu, Saliem Patel and Ari Sitas, dealt with the current context of South Africa: the demise and experience of Zuma, the increasing inequities and inequalities, neo-liberalism unleashed, a civil society suffused with fear, the Marikana massacre, the concerns surrounding the new leadership of Cyril Ramaphosa including his role in the Marikana massacre and his corporate dealings with the transnational commodities company Glencore.

Contributors stressed the need for a curriculum which could be synthesized with a dialogical and radical pedagogy required to assist activists both to ‘decode’ and ‘encode’ this increasingly complex and harrowing conjuncture. The cultural, ideological and theoretical work of Ari Sitas provided for me the most pedagogical hope and purpose. In response to questions about what Eric Hobsbawm (1978) described as ‘The Forward March of Labour Halted?’, Sitas alluded to the importance of Gramsci’s notions of the ‘war of manoeuvre’. Later, the intellectual interventions

of the Chris Hani Institute and Sitas's own Insurrection Ensemble, a musical, cultural collaboration of Indian and South African musicians that created the haunting Dyani-Hani – an Era Ends, provided the essential sound track for my trip.

Friday 29th June

Plenary 4 Decolonising knowledge: learning in resistance to resource dispossession
Anne Harley, Jeanne Prinsloo, Eurig Scandrett, Jonathan Langdon

Plenary 5 Pulling threads together and charting the way forward Ian Martin and
Concluding remarks Viviana Cruz-McDougall & Rosaluz Molina Carrasquillo

The conclusion to the Conference was filled with intensity, insight, intuition, anger, fear, knowledge, passion and revolutionary democratic praxis. These descriptors, I feel, sum up the South African PEN conference proficiently and such expressions came into flower in these closing plenaries.

Harley, Prinsloo, Scandrett and Langdon kicked off the closing plenaries with reference to the ongoing PEN conference themes of solidarity; indigenous people's knowledges; the problem of and contribution made by settler activists; structure and agency. With reference to their practice in Africa and Palestine, the contributors, especially Langdon, talked about the 'colonialization of the mind' as an effective strategy for dividing and ruling oppressed peoples. All contributors maintained throughout that resistance involves a conscious process of decolonisation as well as challenging accumulation by dispossession, whether at community level or in wider movement processes. This requires exposing hegemonic knowledge regimes. As stated in the PEN conference handouts, the themes discussed at this final plenary are featured in a forthcoming book to which the panel have contributed: *Environmental Justice, Popular Struggle and Community Development* (in the Policy Press series *Rethinking Community Development*).

Ian Martin was assigned the task of drawing out the themes of the conference, and did it with his own veritable and partisan style. He said that the conference reiterated the proposition that Popular Education (PE) is overtly political, it dealt with the thematic of continuity and change; that the curriculum of PE is constructed socially and that it

sought to ‘articulate’ education and social action to build the notion of ‘praxis’. He also sought to illuminate the current curricular issues which differed in many ways from those of the original PEN set up 21 years ago. He drew attention to the South African conference’s emphasis on indigenous knowledge; migration and dispossession; issues surrounding the national-popular such as Catalonia and Scotland; the new spaces exposed by matters surrounding ‘recovery’ from trauma; alcohol and drugs; questions arising from the USA premiership of Donald Trump and their coherence with climate change and ecology. He argued that the conference had engaged with the ideological struggle, rejecting education as consumerism and effectively critiquing the individualism of neo-liberalism. In order to define the need for a critical edge, Ian referred to the work of Stuart Hall who asked the pertinent question ‘Are we thinking dialectically enough?’ The PEN Conference had, he suggested, dialectically encountered the contradictions surrounding old and new social movements; xenophobia and racism; violence, personal relationships and patriarchy; gender, sexuality and Trans issues. He referred to the Método Paulo Freire with its ongoing appraisal of the ‘deficit model’ which emphasised what people lacked. Popular Education in the Freirean sense celebrates the popular and the assets of those in struggle especially in South Africa with its academic/activists such as Astrid von Kotze and Shirley Walters (2017) urging the popular educator to ‘forge solidarity’ in their recent review of popular education at work. Ian concluded with the announcement that Brid Connelly and Bernie Grummel, from Maynooth, Republic of Ireland would consider hosting the next PEN International Conference.

An Independent intervention: After Ian Martin had spoken to the PEN Conference, Lindelwa Nxu, an indigenous activist who had come back into action relatively recently, jumped up and, with the fire of the dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnston, read out Lord Macaulay’s address to the British Parliament, 2nd February 1835. Lindelwa was incensed with righteous spiritual anger when she recited Macaulay’s odious words:

I have travelled the length and breath of Africa and I have not seen one person who is a beggar, who is a thief, such wealth I have seen in this country, such high moral values, people of such calibre, that I do not think

we would ever conquer this country, unless we break the very backbone of this nation, which is her spiritual and cultural heritage and therefore I propose that we replace her old and ancient education system, her culture; for if the Africans think that all is foreign and English is good and greater than their own, they will lose their self-esteem, their native culture and they will become what we want them, a truly dominated people.

Lindelwa Nxu's testament resonates with the South African author J M Coetzee's (2004 146) stark insight: 'One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era.' My experience of the Cape Flats and the frightening inequalities in Cape Town are reinforced through the population management effects of the easily accessible Tik drug (crystal meth) – 'Tik' being an especially effective means of breaking the self-esteem of the African and constructing Fanon's 'Wretched of the Earth' in post-apartheid South Africa.

By way of an upbeat finale, and retort to colonialism, Rosaluz Molina Carrasquillo mobilised the PEN Conference with the anti-Yankee Imperialist chant of 'boricuas; bariken; lucha si; entrega no!!' Rosaluz reminded the participants to remain political; scrutinising the agenda of the dominant imperialist discourses and engaging with an openness and healthy scepticism in Popular Education Praxis! Viviana Cruz-McDougal reiterated her thematics from her opening address about popular education and one of its agencies, Latin America Adult Education Council (CEAAL), making itself well placed to use the spaces caused by environmental crisis, disaster capitalism and US hegemony to promote collective solutions. Exposing the 'internalisation of the oppressor', articulating LGBT+ struggles with disability, gender and sexuality ones and recognising the possibility of working cross-class around such issues of oppression. For me, this popular educational acumen, coming from Viviana, insists on articulating the demands of the working class with those of the new social movements in order to construct a 'common will' aiming at the creation of what Gramsci called an 'expansive hegemony'. It thus, I feel, ensured that Viviana situated this engaging, committed, passionate PEN conference very much in the new conjuncture, very much relevant and important.

A Roadmap for Radicals: Car Journey to Cape Town Airport:

On 16th May 2018 I was invited to send to Yasmine Jacobs a ‘Wish List’ of expectations for my PEN South African trip. My email read ‘Given I have never been to South Africa, I would be hopeful of meeting people from the South African Communist Party and leftist activists and intellectuals keen on neo-Gramscian approaches.’ I consequently spent 10 days in Cape Town with Ari Sitas and Astrid von Kotze badgering them about the value of such texts as Anderson’s (2017) *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci* both in Scotland and South Africa. On the evening of the 1st July 2018, Ari Sitas drove me to the airport and engaged me in the critical dialogue I had been requesting throughout my stay. Ari is a traditional intellectual who sees himself as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group in South Africa. He had a role in advising both the South African Communist Party and the ANC in the early post-apartheid contexts after 1994.

As a traditional, universal and internationalist intellectual, Ari is aware that Gramsci’s key concept of hegemony has not to date appeared as the focus of any sociological or cultural study of South Africa. He argues that Gramsci’s concept of hegemony can elucidate many aspects of the construction of power during both the apartheid and post-apartheid eras, as well as offering possible solutions to the present socio-political problems, and he talked about the establishment of the Chris Hani Institute whose role is to help provide ‘intellectual and moral leadership’ exercised through civil society in South Africa. The institute was established to engage in the battle of ideas, to develop alternatives to neo-liberalism, and to deepen the links between progressive intellectuals in the South African universities and inside the democratic movement.

As the Chris Hani Institute webpage¹ maintains, its role is to ‘develop a layer of intellectual representatives of the working class grounded in our theory’.

¹ <https://chi.org.za/wp/introducing-the-chris-hani-institute/>

So, my quandries and searchings were, in part, resolved. The PEN conference with its commitments to counter the ideology of neo-liberal individualism, its challenge to the acceptance of international social and economic inequalities, and its celebration of a Freirean 'Pedagogy of Hope' was underpinned, through its strategic alliances with specific intellectuals, to an ideological and intellectual pledge to recover and deepen 'socialist' democracy.

Amandla Awethu Viva

Concluding Remarks and thanks to organisers

The 8th International Conference of the Popular Education Network (PEN) was organised and led throughout by Astrid Von Kotze, Shirley Walters and Linda Cooper with Yasmine Jacobs effectively taking on the considerable administrative tasks. These activist/academic popular educators all went out of their way to challenge, support, host, stimulate, cooperate with and enlighten all the participants to such an extent that the 8th PEN Conference will be noted for its insights, its dynamics, its celebratory and innovative reflective spaces and parties. I feel the conference encapsulated Freirean notions of revolutionary democratic praxis, and paid considerable and memorable tribute to the 1968 publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Well done, big thanks and congratulations to the 8th International Conference of the Popular Education Network (PEN)! Hasta la Victoria Siempre!

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