

# Research on education: social movements and epistemological reconstruction in a context of coloniality\*

Danilo Romeu Streck

Telmo Adams

University of Vale do Rio dos Sinos

## Abstract

This article seeks to clarify some epistemological aspects that ground an investigative action consistent with emancipatory education in Latin America. The background from which the knowledge and alternatives for the transformation of reality are drawn consists of discussions of coloniality. History reveals that, along with epistemic servility, there has been a counter-hegemonic movement which values not only autochthonous' knowledge but also the different ways of knowing. We have adopted the concept of *epistemologies of the South* of Boaventura de Sousa Santos to designate the expressions which have historically been made invisible and which have found multiple ways to survive, resist and express themselves. After a historical philosophical-epistemological review which aims to contribute to the reconstruction and expansion of our theoretical framework, we discuss the role of social movements in Latin America as a place of genesis of popular education and of forms of participatory research which may continue to inspire transformative research practices. We argue that social movements, despite their political and ideological heterogeneity, may contain theoretical potential to be an epistemological place of critical assessment of the ideological currents of the *North*, to foster the dispute about the interpretation of realities and to stimulate research methodologies which are participatory and promote citizenship.

## Keywords

Research on education – Participatory methodologies – Popular education – Social movements – Coloniality.

### Contact:

Danilo R. Streck

dstreck@unisinos.br

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# ***Pesquisa em educação: os movimentos sociais e a reconstrução epistemológica num contexto de colonialidade\****

Danilo Romeu Streck

Telmo Adams

*Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos*

## **Resumo**

*O artigo busca explicitar aspectos da epistemologia que embasam uma ação investigativa coerente com a educação emancipadora na América Latina. O pano de fundo a partir do qual se desenham alternativas para o conhecimento e a transformação da realidade é constituído pelas discussões sobre a colonialidade. A história revela que, junto com a subserviência epistêmica, houve e continua havendo um movimento contra-hegemônico que valoriza não só os saberes autóctones, mas também as distintas formas de conhecer. Adota-se o conceito epistemologias do Sul, de Boaventura de Sousa Santos, para designar as expressões historicamente tornadas invisíveis e que encontram múltiplas maneiras de sobreviver, resistir e expressar-se. Após a retomada histórica de cunho filosófico-epistemológico com o intuito de contribuir para a reconstrução e a ampliação do quadro de referência teórico, discute-se o papel dos movimentos sociais na América Latina como espaço de gênese da educação popular e de formas de pesquisa participativa que podem continuar inspirando práticas investigativas transformadoras. Argumenta-se que os movimentos sociais, em que pese sua heterogeneidade política e ideológica, podem conter potencialidades teóricas capazes de constituir um lugar epistemológico de avaliação crítica das correntes ideológicas do Norte, oportunizar a disputa na interpretação das realidades e impulsionar metodologias de pesquisa participativas e promotoras de cidadania.*

## **Palavras-chave**

*Pesquisa em educação – Metodologias participativas – Educação popular – Movimentos sociais – Colonialidade.*

### **Correspondência:**

**Danilo R. Streck**

**[dstreck@unisin.br](mailto:dstreck@unisin.br)**

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*Potency is never performed,  
it does not materialize into a thing,  
it is always unfinished transformation. [...] Taking care of potency as the sacred fire of the movements is a daily task of anyone who is committed to creating a new world.*  
ZIBECHI

We assume that research and education in Latin America are imbricated in the historical constraints of colonialism and later of coloniality. These processes have produced the cultural legacies of subservience which tend to perpetuate us as imitators in the context of the productive restructuring of capitalism. Those who imitate or copy do not create and tend to tread the wrong paths. Simón Rodríguez<sup>1</sup> (2006) said “and let us go on imitating and going wrong” (p. 202). This article seeks to clarify to what extent the current state of education and research developed in civil society movements and organizations with popular character aim to find their own path, a path capable of enhancing the skills and knowledge produced in our continent. From this perspective, we propose to explain an epistemology of the *South* which underpins research that is a potentiator of emancipatory movements so that they can better fulfill their historic role. Knowledge and technology have become increasingly critical components in the directions of societies. Therefore, as agents of education, it is essential for us to seek clarity of the grounds on which we anchor our strategies to overcome the coloniality of knowledge, power and being.

The analysis of the sources of the educational thought in Latin America and the Caribbean (STRECK, 2010b) enables one to see strong evidence of resistance and self-development proposals made explicit by characters who are in general unknown by current generations. Those voices have not been heard because of the strength of the Eurocentric

civilizational matrix which *drowned diversity* (ESPINOZA, 2010). In times of crisis of the hegemonic civilization, when the unity between modernity and coloniality reveals its limits (MIGNOLO, 2007), a return to these sources of emancipatory pedagogical thinking supports us in arguing for an epistemology of the *South*.

We believe that this option unites us in an ethical, cultural and political identity concerning the methods of production of knowledge and education which can strengthen the various movements of society which effectively contribute to a process of social emancipation (ADAMS, 2010a).

As a starting point, we present a brief background and characterization of educational and investigative practices developed during the second half of last century. After the historical review of philosophical-epistemological character in order to contribute to the reconstruction and expansion of our theoretical framework, we shall turn to social movements in Latin America, which have historically consisted of the field of popular education and the forms of participatory research which can continue to inspire transformative investigative practices. Finally, we shall return to a discussion of a research method consistent with education that, based on an epistemological attitude of the *South*, faces coloniality and contributes to the expansion of emancipatory ways. This attitude seems to us to be essential for research to capture the dynamics of social movements at the end of the first decade of the new millennium and, thus, enhance the pedagogical mediations in these and other spaces.

### **A methodological turn**

In Latin America, the second half of the twentieth century produced a movement in the form of knowledge production which can be characterized as a turn, in the classic sense of this term: to describe changes in direction. In the educational field, such movement is manifested in the practices of popular education; in

<sup>1</sup> - Simón Rodríguez was born in Caracas on October 28, 1771. In 1792, he was invited to deal with the education of the boy Simón Bolívar, and was his teacher from 1792 to 1997 (RUMAZO GONZALEZ, 2006).

research, there are several strands which often do not have direct links with each other and which find expression in methodologies of participatory and emancipatory nature for those involved. The best known methodologies are the participatory action investigation (IAP<sup>2</sup>), participatory research and the systematization of experiments. In this article, we identify such set of methodologies as participatory research.

IAP is associated with the name of Orlando Fals Borda, a Colombian sociologist who started his research work with peasants in the municipality of Chocontá, about 75 km away from Bogota, in the sixties. In a text written in 1979, Fals Borda summarizes the main features of his method in four items: (1) the work of action investigation aimed at the historical and social understanding of the groups most exposed to the impact of the capitalist expansion in Colombia, such as workers, *campesinos* and indigenous people; (2) the activity implied attempts to articulate the historical understanding with local and national organizational practices in the context of class struggles; (3) conducted in rural and coastal areas of Colombia, such experiments united intellectuals and professionals committed to the proposal of action-study with agents from local organizations; (4) the work was independent of political parties, although in the course of the investigation there was dialogue with political bodies which shared interests in the methodology (FALS BORDA, 2009).

In Brazil, one of the pioneering experiments in participatory research was the literacy project led by Paulo Freire (1979) in the city of Angicos in 1960. The generative words and themes to be learned would no longer come from other cultures, but should be investigated by an interdisciplinary team and by the population to be taught. The investigation, which was already part of the educational process, should allow the apprehension of the generating themes, as well as the awareness of the historical, political

and cultural conditions and circumstances in which such population lived. In the words of Freire (1978),

this is why (consistent also with the liberating purpose of dialogical education) it is not about considering men the object of research and considering the researcher to be the subject. (p. 103)

With distinct roles, they all share the protagonist role in the unveiling and enunciation of the world.

Both the versions of Orlando Fals Borda and of Paulo Freire used the principles of action research already developed elsewhere, but they included the investigation process in the political movement of society. Marcela Cajardo (1986), in her classic book *Pesquisa participante na América Latina*<sup>3</sup>, sums up the four main areas of this process in which investigative, educational and political actions merge: (1) breaking the monopoly of knowledge and information which intellectuals and researchers have through the collective production of knowledge and the acquisition of such knowledge by the *marginalized groups* in their struggles; (2) collective analysis of information and how to use it; (3) critical analysis of the data, searching for the causes of problems and for alternative solutions; (4) understanding the relationship between individual and collective, functional and structural problems<sup>4</sup>. The collective, dialogic and emancipatory dimensions of the investigative process, and not just occasionally of its results, are a milestone of what we characterize as a methodological turn.

More recently, the movement to systematize experiments has grown in Latin America. In such movement, one can highlight the following characteristics: (1) an intended

**3-** Translator's note: In English, *Participatory research in Latin America*.

**4-** A list of founding and current texts and studies on participatory research in Latin America can be found in the book *Pesquisa participante: o saber da partilha* (BRANDÃO; STRECK, 2008).

Translator's note: In English, *Participatory research: the knowledge of sharing*.

**2-** Translator's note: IAP stands for *investigación-acción participativa*.

production of knowledge; (2) a collective production of knowledge; (3) the recognition of the complexity of social action practices; (4) the reconstruction of practice in its density through the recovery of history, of collective memory; (5) the critical interpretation of logic and the senses that make up the experiment; (6) beyond the cognitive scope, the seeking to improve one's own practice in order to generate the necessary changes that enhance the social effectiveness and cultural wealth of experience (see JARA HOLLIDAY, 2006; TORRES CARRILLO, 2006).

In the information gathering, the systematization methodology suggests the use of *memory activation devices* best suited for each reality in order to rebuild ties of solidarity and to nurture collective identities. These processes require moments of analysis, interpretation of memories and oblivion, categorization and organization of information, development of *matrices*, typologies, conceptual networks and models of interpretation, always with creative reconstruction. Maintaining the same principles of participatory research and IAP, systematization emphasizes the role of collective memory, recognizes the complexity of social phenomena and values the diversity of languages to name and interpret reality.

The methodological approaches summarized above must be understood as historical constructions which stand as resistance and reaction to other forms of knowledge generation which have for centuries served the maintenance of a cultural and epistemic matrix which in this article we characterize as coloniality. They did not stem from nothing, but were generated in the emancipatory movement of society and are thus largely linked to practices of popular education. That is why the research committed to the processes of change cannot be oblivious to the new configurations of social movements, as we aim to explain in the following two items.

### **Roots of epistemic subservience: ways to overcome coloniality**

Epistemology – as a science that deals with methods, organization, origin, validation and limits of knowledge, as well as its relationship with historical reality – is a space of power relations and, in that sense, of dispute. In an hegemonic way, inside and outside academic circles, the paradigm of Eurocentric modernity prevails, placed (and accepted) as a measure of knowledge that has defined itself as superior and universal, with the consequent *downgrading* of the knowledge of the *South*. This paradigm is also incorporated into a way of being and is constituted as an *ethos* (ADAMS, 2010a) of cultural dependency or subservience, a mainstay of coloniality.

For Anibal Quijano (2005, 2009), Eurocentrism designates a perspective of knowledge which was systematically developed in Western Europe from the early seventeenth century and became globally hegemonic in the following centuries. After the occupation of the Americas, Europe became global. As stated by Enrique Dussel (2005), since 1492, Modern Europe, the *center* of world history, defined all other cultures as its *periphery*. Luso-Hispanic imposed his will on the American Indian in the process of conquest and colonization which has been perpetuated in the legacy which we call coloniality.

The coloniality engendered in colonialism (QUIJANO, 2009) differs from colonialism by being more profound and lasting, acting at the level of intersubjectivity. This is an updated and deterritorialized form of relationship of dependence and subalternity. In summary, while colonialism has clear geographical and historical links, coloniality acts as an underlying matrix of the colonial power which has continued existing after the political independencies of our countries and which today is perpetuated today through various forms of domination by the *North* over the *South*.

Historically, this imperialist relationship took place according to the dictates of Eurocentric rationality (later American), reaching the dimensions of power, knowledge, and even of being. It is an epistemic subalternity in which other skills and interpretations of the world *declared* as non-existent – or described as epistemologies reminiscent of the past – are disqualified and kept in oblivion.

From this colonial legacy springs an indolent reason (SANTOS, 2004) which underlies the environment of the coloniality of the *South*, characterized by the feeling of inferiority and powerlessness in the face of the hegemonic knowledge of Western modernity, both in philosophy and in science. Powerlessness and passivity are the reverse of the hegemonic reason that manifests itself as: a) arrogant, which thinks that it is superior; b) metonymic, because it is presented as the only form of rationality, despising the other expressions c) proleptic, i.e., deterministic and based on the monoculture of the linear time which grounds the pragmatic idea of unlimited progress. The emancipation of the peoples who sit in idleness requires an active attitude in the face of the metonymic reason “of the alterities excluded by the Eurocentric currents” (ARGUMEDO, 2004, p. 135).

With basis on the critique of Eurocentrism – from the perspective of those who were *declared* inferior or incapable by the dominant logic –, Enrique Dussel (2005) proposes a *transmodern* perspective of knowledge decolonization from the *periphery*. This is not a dualistic or Manichean view, as if the issue between the *North* and the *South* were only geographical, as if it were just a matter of reversing the hierarchy. The proposal of decolonization of knowledge recommends “learning that there is the *South*, learning to go *South*, learning from the *South* and with the *South*” (MENESES, 2008, p. 5). This is the decolonization of being, knowledge and power, from a critical, not passive, attitude before the epistemologies of the *North* characterized by the monoculture of the scientific knowledge which disqualifies alternative knowledge.

In his analysis of the relations of dependence of the *South* toward the *North*, in the work *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire (1991) reflects on the issue of the ideological relations hidden in language. Instead of the term *nortear*, why not use *sulear*? – he questions. As noted by Ana Maria Araújo Freire, he anchors the debate on the theories of the physicist Marcio D’Olne Campos, with whom he worked on the development of teaching materials on environmental education. Here are some arguments of Campos (apud FREIRE, 1991) about the issue:

In any local reference of observation, the rising sun on the Orient side – East – allows ORIENTATION. In the Northern Hemisphere, the Polar Star, Polaris, allows the NORTH EMENTO. In the Southern Hemisphere, the Southern Cross allows “SULEAMENTO.” (p. 219)

In this sense, Campos suggests that, if we do not want to keep turning our back on the *South*, we can use the left hand pointed toward the East (sunrise), avoiding turning back on our reality. By demystifying the ideological content of this relationship, *sulear* infers the commitment to struggle for the emancipation of the colonized peoples. In summary,

it implies an autonomous action from the *South*, facing the integrality of the issues presented in the coloniality of knowledge and power which has to do with another life project involving culture, economy, politics, science and other dimensions. (ADAMS, 2010b, p. 386)

The sense of *sulear*, according to Freire (1991), suggests building endogenous paradigms rooted in our realities, reversing the logic which has historically determined the destiny of our peoples from the outside to the inside. In *Education as the practice of freedom*, he argues that our countries should be reconsidered with a

thinking that is our own, autonomous, creative, and not dependent on imported alienating models. Freire denounces the education system that acts as a servant of the economicism which understood our reality as an object of the European thinking and later of the Northern-American one. Analyzing the Brazilian case, he also denounces the attitude of the intellectuals who introjected the European view of Brazil as a backward country (FREIRE, 1976), an attitude which further strengthened coloniality. Freire made such criticisms in the context of a developmental policy accompanied by a paternalistic control of poverty and encouraged by programs such as *Alliance for Progress*, of the government of the United States.

Boaventura Santos' current analysis suggests recognizing the totalitarian epistemic foundation of modernity – epistemology of the *North* – as a situated discourse which has claimed for itself the totality, establishing itself as the imperial/colonial matrix (SANTOS, 2006)<sup>5</sup>. As a result, in the mutual constitution of the *North* and the *South*, the hierarchical nature of the *North-South* relations of modern rationality has excluded the knowledge that did not stem from the global *North*.

It follows that the colonial relationship of exploitation and domination has persisted also in the form of epistemic coloniality, along with the economic and political systems in place (see MIGNOLO, 2004, 2007; QUIJANO, 2005, 2009; SANTOS, 2004, 2006; SANTOS, MENESES, 2009).

From the ethical point of view, the epistemologies of the *South* propose a dialogical and procedural construction of another paradigm of life, with justice, solidarity and respect for diversity from the perspective of *the wretched of the earth* (FANON, 1979). This perspective is founded on the intrinsic relationship between epistemological, pedagogical and philosophical

issues. To address coloniality, it is necessary to consider its causes: the colonial ideology (including religion), that is, the fundamentals of the ethics in dispute in various fields of life in society.

In Latin America today it is vital to have a relationship with the so-called philosophy of the pre-Columbian peoples to support a non-exclusionary view of the *South*. An example of that is the Andean philosophy of the *Abya Yala*<sup>6</sup>, which suggests ways to recover a wisdom oppressed and made invisible by the logic of coloniality. Contrary to the traditional philosophy of Greek origin – which is characterized by the dichotomies between inside and outside, transcendent and immanent, eternal and temporal, essential and accidental, universal and particular, material and spiritual, earthly and divine –, the Andean philosophy is founded on the principles of *relationality, correspondence, complementarity, cyclicity, inclusiveness and solidarity*.

What are the practical consequences of recognizing the latter conception of the world, with its respective way of understanding life in the cosmos? In the cosmivision of the original peoples, one can infer that the *South* takes its emerging condition and proposes not a reversal, but an ethical dialogue as equals, despite the conditions of domination or subalternity historically constructed (ESTERMANN, 2007; DUSSEL, 2009). In the words of Fals Borda (2009),

Investigative-participatory work is both discovery and creation, and it develops in an *epigenetic space*. Its style is historical and anthropological. (p. 312)

In other words, it is about being open to the new which may erupt at any moment in the dialogue.

Analyzing the historical process in Latin America and the Caribbean, we have identified

**5** - After Paulo Freire, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, started using the idea of *North-South* relations. In Latin America, the theme has been developed by authors such as Enrique Dussel (2000, 2005), Anibal Quijano (2005, 2009) and Walter Mignolo (2004, 2007).

**6** - *Abya Yala* means *mature land, living land or land in bloom*. It is what the ethnicity Kuna of Panama and Colombia called the American continent before the arrival of Christopher Columbus and the Europeans.

characters who represented resistance to coloniality by proposing a social and epistemic construction grounded in the features of our peoples. Based on critical attitudes to colonialism, they proposed ways to create autonomous, sympathetic, fair and democratic nations in which emancipatory education was always pointed out as important. Of these resistances and knowledge produced outside the dominant environments, little has been recorded or little has been reported, especially with regard to women's participation.

The historical record of the first original criticism coming from the indigenous themselves who suffered the modern colonial domination was made by Philip Guaman Poma de Ayala (1550-1616)<sup>7</sup>. He showed the contradictions of modernity and its practices rooted in Catholicism, identifying the ills brought by the Spanish colonization of his people. Later, we highlight the contribution of Simón Rodríguez (2006), who insisted on the need to seek our own solutions to the problems of Hispanic-America. For the Latin American originality, he advocated solutions also original, pointing out that the imitation of external models would lead to error. Despite the influence received from thinkers of European modernity, Rodríguez was recognized as the *Socrates of Caracas*, a creative figure, a passionate educator, a (re) creator of practical educational models and of ideas<sup>8</sup>. According to Marcos Raul Mejía (2006), we can recognize our father in Freire and our grandfather in Simón Rodríguez as the latter established the foundations of popular education in Latin America and the Caribbean in the early nineteenth century.

Some women should be mentioned here because of their heroic conquest of space and

because of their search for the appreciation of their contribution to the philosophical and political thought in several countries (STRECK, 2010b). Nisia Floresta (1810-1885) stood out as one of the precursors of feminism in Brazil. She struggled for women's rights to scientific knowledge, whose access was only allowed to men. Among other less well known women, we also highlight the poet and educator Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957).

One of the characteristics of popular education – understood from the point of view of its goals, methods, content, contexts or subjects – is to follow the socio-historical movement of society led by counter-hegemonic forces “toward a horizon that only lets us catch a glimpse of what Paulo Freire called *viable unprecedented*” (STRECK, 2010a, p. 300). Social movements have been the fertile ground for the political dispute over the interpretation of realities (SOBOTKA, 2010) and the diffusion of popular education combined with other mediations, such as participatory research. In the midst of these spaces of struggle of social movements one can perceive a link between participatory research methodologies, the construction of ways to overcome coloniality through the development of transformative actions and the practices of popular education. How can research be enhanced in the current context of emancipatory collective actions?

### **Trends in social movements and the role of research (in education)**

The set of collective actions – consisting of organizations which are non-governmental, non-economic (mercantile), non-corporate, non-partisan and of more or less structured movements – has carried different nuances in the process of history. Due to the loss of centrality of the labor movement in the first half of the twentieth century, a diverse set of movements also began to formulate non-material claims about contradictions other than those imposed

**7-** Philip Guaman Poma de Ayala was a native Quechua and Aymara speaker who learned Spanish and wrote harsh criticism about the nefarious effects of the Spanish colonization on the indigenous communities in Peru (DUSSEL, 2009).

**8-** We also highlight names such as Simón Bolívar (1783-1830), Francisco Bilbao (1823-1865), José Martí (1853-1895), Franz Tamayo (1878-1956), José Mariátegui (1894-1930), Leopoldo Zea (1912-2004), Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) and Manoel Bomfim (1868-1932).



by the classic pattern centered on class conflicts (DOIMO, 1995). Yet, the presence of some typical elements is recognized in social movements in greater or lesser extent. Among such elements are: they break the limits established by the dominant segments in relation to what one is allowed to think, speak, dream and do; when they carry broader transformation projects, they challenge the limits of legality and, conversely, the dominant interpretation will always try to delegitimize and criminalize these movements (SOBOTKA, 2010). In this diversification and complexification of social movements, it is therefore possible to recognize a differentiated and non-linear process of new emphases, new causes or new struggles (BRANDÃO, 2002). In that sense, Raúl Zibechi (2007) argues that, by lamenting the fragmentation of social movements in recent decades, intellectuals have moved in the logic which sees such movements as forces parallel to those of the state, failing to see that their performance effectiveness lies exactly in the fact that they have adopted a different logic.

Was it not the unification and centralization of the movements from the past that allowed the state and the capital to neutralize or tame them? On the other hand, how can one explain the popular rebellions in Latin America, at least since *Caracazo* in 1989, which have won very significant victories without having been led by connections or structures which were formal and in place? (p. 149)

In Latin America, in various ways, especially in dictatorships, there was a centrality in the agendas in the struggle against the authoritarian state and for human rights. Later, during the (re) democratization period, movements emphasized the claim for political agendas demanded from the state, keeping in general the principle of autonomy in relation to it. In this understanding, especially since the 1970s, social movements have been recognized

for playing a public role when they assume a strategic role, becoming autonomous political subjects (SCHERER-WARREN, 2008). Here we mean (since the nineties) in particular the movements which have defended ethics, solidary citizenship, participatory democracy and the search for a new development paradigm which generates social justice and social-environmental sustainability.

Due to the election of democratic governments since the beginning of the 21st century, because there has been an ideological identification with the managers of the state, the dynamics of social movements (including civil society organizations) has been oriented mostly to partnerships with governments. We have observed this process in several countries with governments that are more democratic and responsive to social issues, including the Brazilian one. The institutional placement in state channels, especially those focused on social policies (health, housing, education, etc.) has marked the present period<sup>9</sup>. The centralized, bureaucratic and explicitly authoritarian state was replaced by the neoliberal model (mixed with elements of the welfare state), which decided to share with society the responsibility of taking care of the social ills left by the exclusionary dynamics of the capitalist market.

Analyzing the Chilean case, Cecilia Dockendorff et al. (2010) conclude that:

Incorporating the for-profit private sector into the promotion of solidarity through social marketing and corporate social responsibility has implied major changes in the way of thinking, practicing and promoting solidarity. (p. 191)

As the nature of the market is characterized by the function of economic production for profit, the responsibility of

**9** - The strengthening of the *third sector* is noteworthy. *Third sector* is an ambiguous name (ADAMS, 2010a) because it includes civil society organizations, private non-traditional profit (non-economic profit), along with corporate foundations.

solving the gap left by the state has been assigned to civil society, within extremely contradictory processes (ADAMS, 2010a). Even traditional organizations such as the centers of popular education make projects feasible with funds from the state or from foundations of private companies. This has been justified as a condition of survival of such organizations in the face of the drastic reduction of resources from international cooperation, which used to be the sponsor of many organizations which support popular social movements.

It is possible to characterize the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a time of social experimentation for many organizations and institutionalized movements, with emphasis on actions in partnerships to implement government policies. In many cases, there has been a depoliticization of solidarity (DOCKENDORFF et al., 2010), but also an ambiguity in both the forms of action and the intentions of these civil society actors. In practice, this occurs when social projects set as a goal the mere inclusion of individuals in the consumer market, losing the focus of transforming the causes of social inequality. These actions are intended to change certain realities partially only. In general, these new social movements work to ensure the rights of everyday life, and no longer as a strategic way to bring about profound, revolutionary changes, contrary to popular social movements which, in the Latin American tradition, had a strong relationship with a popular project of social transformation (BRANDÃO, 1999, 2002).

In the current context, for a didactic understanding, one can identify at least three major trends in social movements in Latin America. The first trend is related to the so-called *neoliberalization of solidarity* (DOCKENDORFF et al., 2010). We identify this trend in Brazil with what is generally called the *third sector*, that is, organizations identified with *corporate social responsibility*. Through social projects, one seeks to minimize the misery in accordance

with an ideological stance which accepts that there is no other way out for humanity but to *perfect capitalism*. Their speech proposes to make individuals able to compete *freely*, but disregards the unfair and unequal conditions in our societies. Today, many civil society movements and organizations invest their energy in projects of that nature.

In the second trend, organizations and social movements seek to develop a critical evaluation of the capitalist model and the role of civil society organizations in the current context. Here are associated organizations and movements that reaffirm their commitment to education and their role in promoting the organization and mobilization of the population excluded from the capitalist market to advance in the process of immediate emancipation without losing sight of the utopias of transformation of society as a whole. The choice of participatory and transformative methodologies in tune with the principles of popular education is reaffirmed. In general, this trend emphasizes the need to re-establish the conditions of autonomy in the relationship with the sponsor (state or private sector), but there are movements which bet on the engagement in the implementation of social policies as a kind of arm of the state, supporting governments that are more responsive to popular issues.

In addition to the two trends mentioned above, there is another kind of movement known for its radical challenge to the current developmental civilizational paradigm of unlimited progress – a result of the colonization process characterized here by the intrinsic relationship between Eurocentric modernity and coloniality – which threatens life on the planet. These are the movements led by original / indigenous peoples and African descents. The first ones, after five hundred years of resistance and protest, have moved on to the phase of proposing the reconstitution of civilizational alternatives (ESPINOZA, 2010). They challenge the myth of unlimited progress and defend

other forms of knowledge which integrate again the unity of the human and natural, which respect the diversity of cosmovisions, allow its control and social monitoring and the equitable redistribution of its benefits. (p. 57)

To what extent do traditional social movements, even the ones of popular nature, remain on the paradigm of unlimited progress or are sensitive to dialogue, aligning themselves with this more radical perspective of social change, which proposes, at the same time, a new individual and social paradigm? Regardless of the trend in which the movements are, they nurture the dispute over views of the conjuncture, interpretations of realities, on which the focus of the so-called re-foundation of popular education depends. As another instrument of dispute in this environment of production of understandings, research should capture the dynamics processed there, highlighting the educational and transformative potential in each type of social movement. In our view, participatory research brings together the right conditions to remain as a practice which contributes to strengthening the perspective of de-coloniality of power, knowing and being, for the construction of emancipatory processes. Therefore, it is necessary to recover and rewrite, that is, to systematize and analyze a wide range of experiments in order to broaden the horizon of concrete possibilities, taking into account the potential present in these practices and identifying trends of an emancipated future in them.

Argumedo (2004) states that thinking from Latin America (from the *South*)

requires theoretical and conceptual instruments to recover cultural resistance, mass political demonstrations, *chansons de geste*, literature, essays, forms of knowledge and popular mentalities; testimonies, micro-histories, parties, small or large dignifying episodes: the knowledge that is on the “fringes of science” (p. 136)

As already mentioned, in these elements are the foundations upon which we anchor the proposed methodology of participatory research, specifically IAP, participatory research, action research and the systematization of experiments. What these methodologies have in common is the collective construction of knowledge within the movement of society as an instrument of struggle for emancipation and social change.

To contribute to this process, let us rethink and deepen our understanding of what Alfonso Torres Carrillo (2006) proposes as research *from the margins* to face the different expressions and forms of subalternity of the condition of the *South* to the *North*. The relations of domination present in local areas connect to the critical reflection grounded in the perspective of the *South*, from where our understanding of participatory research also derives. Such research was born in the environment in which socially marginalized populations used to mobilize and still do to struggle for their rights. In our view, such social practices are always pregnant with pedagogical mediations, whether implicit or explicit, through which the people and the groups involved learn together.

## Final thoughts

When entering the third centenary of the independences in Latin America, we thought it was essential to remember historical figures like Simón Rodríguez. In his time, he stated the old and ever new relation between theory and practice:

Knowledge is divided into theoretical and practical; and theoretical knowledge is only a set of principles (reflections) extracted from a completed experiment; theory without practice is pure fantasy. (RODRIGUEZ, 2006, p. 181)

A Latin American educator and teacher of Simón Bolívar, Rodríguez planted seeds

which resulted in a wide variety of practices in our America two hundred years later. Among the *plants grafted* onto the pioneering roots of the precursors mentioned are popular education and other manifestations, such as IAP and participatory research, philosophy and liberation theology, and more recently the systematization of an Andean philosophy.

In line with an epistemological perspective of the *South*, the investigative path of participatory research is a more flexible methodology, proposing a relationship between knowledge and action to contribute to capture the dynamics of the society movements with emancipatory proposals. In other words, participatory research methodologies are not mere tools, but refer to the way we approach problems and seek answers. This understanding emphasizes that the dialectical relationship with problematics guides the permanent reconstruction of the method, and not vice versa, when predefined schemes are applied as hermetic matrices to frame (a generally fragmented) analysis of the phenomena of reality.

In participatory research, a complementary relationship between the subjects involved is established. Besides, the researcher always has a special task, especially in the critical reading of the context. When researchers have an active attitude in the investigation of the educational field, they note, intervene, educate others and themselves (see FREIRE, 1978, 2004). "Researching, teaching and learning are parts of the same process of knowing" (STRECK, 2006, p. 266). The participatory process in the dynamics

of research stimulates the attitude of active subjects, recognizing and reinforcing their leading role in the production of socio-cultural space, where knowledge no longer seeks certainty, but creativity. This is fundamental to free oneself from the legacies of coloniality.

Social movements are a special epistemological place because they represent, as Zibechi stated, the transformative *potential* in contrast to the *limits* inherent to the state. Against the centralizing and standardizing force of institutionality, social movements represent the forces of society in motion. Such forces are characterized by the constant tension between dispersion and organization, going against the grain of the unifying force proposed by the state, the academy and the parties. The emergence of new subjects represents a sort of *epistemological earthquake*, challenging the subject-object relationship in different ways, and bringing other ways of knowing along with new forms of action (ZIBECHI, 2007).

Finally, epistemological reconstruction in the context of coloniality implies research committed to social change to overcome the paradigm of Eurocentric coloniality. It is research that mediates educational processes which emancipate through the involvement of all the participating subjects and through collective thinking and the consequent impact on practice. Thus, social movements can be valued as spaces that stimulate participatory methodologies of education and research, while they contribute effectively in the dispute over a critical interpretation of social realities and strengthen the transformative popular social movements.

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**Danilo Romeu Streck** holds a Ph.D. in Education and is a professor of the Graduate Program in Education at the University of Vale do Rio dos Sinos. Research Line: Education, Development and Technology. Research Group: Pedagogical Mediation and Citizenship.

**Telmo Adams** holds a Ph.D. in Education and is a professor of the Graduate Program in Education at the University of Vale do Rio dos Sinos. Research Line: Education, Development and Technology. Research Group: Pedagogical Mediation and Citizenship. Email: telmoa@unisinis.br