



Pancho Arguelles: Understanding Transformation

In the United States, we don't have a popular movement. We have lots of movements for social and racial justice: a lot of people trying to resist and bring change and do good things. However, the fact that people are moving doesn't mean that we have a popular movement.

Most of the current dominant paradigms of organizations are based on the assumption that the system works. That the system is an operating democracy—a government for the people, by the people. Another dominant assumption is that we live in a free economy.

Neoliberal economists have a dogma that the free market is inherently good, and an almost religious belief that under it, all things will be more efficient.

These are beliefs. The rich and those in power benefit from this, because they created the rules of the game. They don't believe the myths, but it helps them that the rest of us believe.

Historically, popular education is about putting things in context, so that you get power as an individual and as a group to understand your reality and to be able to change it.

Starting with Dialogue

Popular education starts with dialogue. When Colectivo Flatlander starts retreats, we begin by connecting with values and healing. We ask everyone to bring one object that symbolizes why we are in struggle. It is one way to begin sharing our personal stories with other people, so we can see how our stories relate to each other being one.

Through sharing stories, we see that there are policies and decisions made by people in groups, in their own interest. Policies are not just given to us. Policies and our current realities are a historical and structural production. And the groups who made the decisions benefit from them.

Popular education also has a methodology: It is participatory, based on people's experience and knowledge; we try to break down the hierarchy of knowledge and experience. And we go one step beyond. Those who have suffered the most injustice and marginalization, and have overcome the most, will have the deeper, more profound knowledge of what it is to be human and how to be human.

The other part is doing the political and historical education around how we got here. The economy, the world we are living in today, is the product of 500 years of colonialism by Western powers.

For me, political education is a philosophy and a practice. Praxis is integral: understanding the world to transform it, and transforming the world in a way that changes the way we understand ourselves.

There is also dialogue: putting my own experience in dialogue with history and reality and other people in my community and organization, and then putting that collective group, that collective experience, in dialogue with the wider context—with history, with structures, with other communities, and on other issues.

It is also about personal transformation, collective organizing, and a commitment to resist and transform. To resist is the affirmation of our own humani-



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ty and the humanity of others. It is a radical political statement in a society that systematically denies the humanity of us on this planet. To open up spaces where people can bring their whole humanity into the room, celebrate it, acknowledge it—that is radical.

And then, to commit to work together and organize, to make leadership collective, to confront problems personally and collectively through action-reflection-action.

Leadership From Below

In the United States, a lot of influential people use the rhetoric that they are the voices of the voiceless. However, those leaders would have a very hard time embracing leadership and wisdom from below. The Zapatista definition of political leadership—to command by obeying—conflicts with the Western notion of leadership as personal. If no one is behind you, whom are you leading? Many leadership development programs create leaders of opinion based on the idea that if they can be heard, everything will be all right. Leadership in this context has a sexist, male, capitalist, and heterosexual core.

The way that the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), and Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CCIR) approach their political work assumes that the system works and that leadership comes from above. These

organizations are trying to defeat the system that oppresses us with the same kind of oppressive power. If popular movements have proved something in resisting systems of colonization, it is that we cannot beat them at their own game.

Compared with these contemporary immigrant rights organizations, the twentieth-century civil rights movement is completely radical. Last year, I deepened my study of the civil rights movement and civil rights leaders as part of training people in the South and trying to promote cross-community dialogues. I realized that Ella Baker and Septima Clark embodied a core value of popular educators: becoming unnecessary, working yourself out of a job.

A Different Kind of Power

A popular movement does not bring down the system and put a new one there; it doesn't work that way historically. In reality, communities and working people force people of privilege to do the right thing—not by destroying the people of privilege or taking away all their power, but by confronting them with their shared humanity while mobilizing the power of numbers to bring down the system.

Some people are resistant to popular education because they see it as naïve and unrealistic due to the emphasis on participation and dialogue. They have lost contact with the part of popular education that comes out of surviving, organizing, resisting, and creating a different kind of power. ■

Photos: Participants at the 3rd National Immigrant and Refugee Rights Training Institute.

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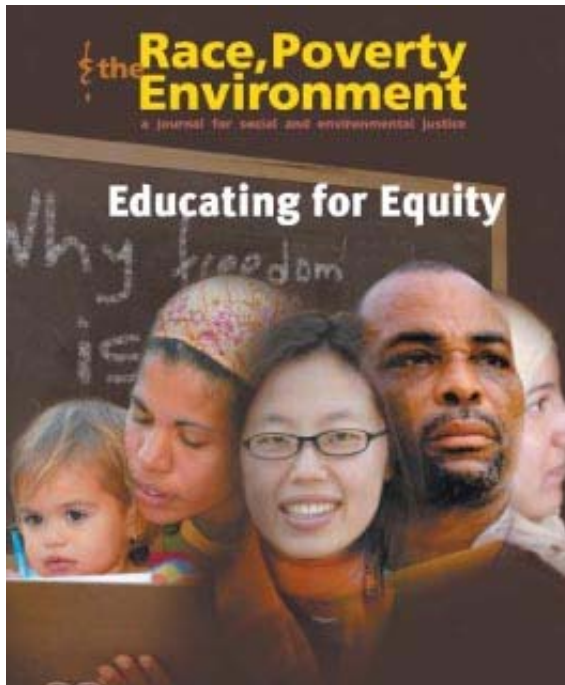
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