
The Case of the Popular University of Social Movements: Lessons on Dialogue *From* and *For* Humanisation and the Transformation of Institutions

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Abstract: This paper engages with Paulo Freire's dialogical proposal for promoting individual consciousness, collective emancipation, and effective social changes in order to question some of the main contemporary obstacles to meaningful dialogues taking place. Considering Freire's idea, in which dialogue is both a result of and a fundamental condition for humanisation, the question is where and why there are barriers to, and failures of, dialogical governance processes in the current global context where social fragmentation is more latent and ideological divergences more evident and challenging to address. To discuss this question, the case of the Popular University of

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Social Movements (UPMS) is analysed. In 2003 at the World Social Forum, the UPMS emerged with a challenging proposal to constitute a space in which activists, academics, artists, entities, governmental and non-governmental organisations, and local, national, and global social movements who oppose all forms of oppression, can freely and democratically exchange their ideas. Although the UPMS is a space of articulation outside traditional institutional processes, its model implies significant changes in how academic and governmental institutions relate to social movements, activists, and other sectors of society. The article concludes that for dialogue to flourish, it is necessary to define the conditions, processes and spaces that take account of the fundamental pillars of humanisation pointed out by Freire: love, humility, and the faith of individuals in their capacity to create and recreate the world together. In this sense, the case of the UPMS teaches us that it is possible to promote internal changes in structures and institutions through the consolidation of successful dialogical experiences outside institutional walls.

Keywords: Dialogue, Humanisation, Institutions, Paulo Freire, Popular University of Social Movements (UPMS), Transformation

Introduction

For more than half a century, the ideas of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire have been encouraging scholars, social movements, and organisations worldwide to reflect on the role of education as a means for social change. Freire developed a critical pedagogy based on the following challenge: how to understand the reality of those peoples who were oppressed while maintaining a permanent dialogue with theoretical reflection. Freire's work is hopeful and full of faith in the power of individuals and communities to transform their realities through collective action. He developed his political theories by re-signifying words, on the one hand, whilst adopting new words that emerged from the popular groups with whom he was in contact, on the other. As he wrote, these were 'words pregnant with the world' (Freire 1989, 13), words that have 'the gift of pronouncing new realities' (Streck et al. 2010, 27). 'Dialogue' was one such word that Paulo Freire used to express his profound belief in human beings and the possibility of 'being more human'. Freire understood dialogue to be a human vocation, a revolutionary and counter-hegemonic act threatening the established order and its project of domination to which the oppressed are subjected. This article scrutinises this Freirean concept with the aim of understanding it as a potential means of emancipation, particularly for marginalised groups in society.

Focusing on the current context, in which social fragmentation has become more widespread and ideological divergences more evident and challenging to address, we explore aspects of this dialogical process conceived by Freire that contribute to overcoming barriers to and failures in the practice of humanisation in traditional institutions. We begin by identifying aspects of the dialogical process that help explain how transformative dialogue can flourish. What separate spaces are needed for this kind

of dialogue? Moreover, to what extent can it produce perceptible benefits for individuals and social groups, especially those from the most marginalised sectors of society?

Through these questions we hope to understand the barriers to transformative dialogue as well as the requirements needed for a dialogic process with a mobilising character to occur. We also want to investigate the possible transformative effects on organisations in which those involved in the dialogical process participate, and how these organisations benefit from these effects. To address the first enquiry, we will draw on Freire's dialogical theory, whilst the Popular University of Social Movements (UPMS) case whose methodology is inspired by Freire's proposals, will be our primary resource for the second enquiry. The UPMS is an educational practice involving what Paulo Freire defines as an intense and critical dialogical process aimed at promoting new transformational relationships between individuals from different institutions and organisations. The methodology used to produce this analysis and the arguments presented here include a literature review focused on works published by Freire and scholars who have interpreted his work, ethnographic approaches, action research, lived experiences, and observations and interviews with UPMS participants.

We have divided our analysis into three parts. First, we explain how dialogue can be both a product of humanisation and a condition for its development, as proposed by Freire. This analysis is essential to understanding how it is possible, through dialogue, to overcome the barriers to social change in contexts of domination, oppression, and marginalisation that we address in this paper. Toward this end, we will, first, analyse some of Freire's central ideas. It is worth noting that although his main proposals were developed more than fifty years ago, they are both highly relevant and applicable to current social contexts, as we explain when discussing the case of UPMS. Second, we present our case study and highlight how and why the dialogical process is central to the design of this educational initiative. Third, we conclude our study of Freire's critical pedagogy by presenting some findings which we believe suggest that some dialogical spaces have the potential to become spaces of articulation, while also introducing new spaces (or mechanisms) for constructing hitherto unrealised possibilities and alternatives that benefit those involved in the dialogical process and their organisations' social and political projects.

Dialogue, a Product and Condition of Humanisation

In *Extension or Communication*, Paulo Freire (1985, 28) defines *dialogue* as a 'loving encounter of [people], who, mediated by the world, proclaim it, that is, transform it, and, transforming it, humanise it for the humanisation of all'. The educator de-

veloped the idea of critical and liberating dialogue in one of his early works, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1987). Throughout his career, he continued to develop this concept which also retained a central place in his thinking. However, as Galli and Braga (2017) argue, the democratic perspective and the concept of ‘unity in diversity’² are incorporated as primary requirements for the construction of dialogue in his later work, *Pedagogy of Hope: Re-encounter with the Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2013).

Paulo Freire understood dialogue as a radical and revolutionary praxis that involves both action and reflection which occur simultaneously, and which radically interact with each other. Freire argued that dialogue has the function of problematising any knowledge established in ‘its unquestionable relation with the concrete reality in which it is generated and on which it has an impact, in order to understand it better, explain it and transform it’ (Freire 1985, 34). It does not matter what the content is to be problematised to establish the dialogue. The problematising dialogue unfolds in the context of people’s lives, giving their life meaning and value. It therefore has a self-reflective dimension that allows for consideration of how an individual life and its social context might be transformed by producing critical detachment from the conditions surrounding individuals (Shor in McLaren & Leonard 1993, 24–35). Furthermore, Freire argues that dialogue is not a historical product but rather historicisation itself. It is a primordial characteristic that meets an historical vocation of all of us: humanisation. In other words, he recognised that we are unfinished beings, and that humanisation is a natural vocation to ‘be more [human].’ Thus, dialogue is a path that leads us on a journey which, although without a pre-defined destination, continues transforming realities along with the people who transform them.

Dialogue is always communication, and it cements the collaboration of people. The world mediates people who meet to announce, recreate, and transform themselves and the world together, in a process that involves deep epistemological curiosity. It also has a profoundly human character. In this sense, dialogue is not only a means to humanise ourselves but also to humanise the world (Freire 1987, 14). In Freire’s view, this process of humanisation takes place through the word:

2 Pedagogy of Hope, Freire (2013, 143) approaches dialogue in the question of ‘unity in diversity’ as a way of transforming the struggle of a minority group into a struggle of the majority, referring, for instance, the racial issue in contexts of oppression: ‘The so-called minorities, for example, need to recognize that, deep down, they are the majority. The way to assume themselves as the majority is to work on the similarities among themselves, and not only the differences, and thus create unity in diversity, outside of which I don’t see how to improve and even how to build a substantive, radical democracy.’

Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which humans transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world, in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. [Humans] are not built in silence but in word, in work, in action-reflection [...]. If it is in speaking their word that humans transform the world by naming it, dialogue imposes itself as the way in which [humans] achieve significance as [humans]. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity. (Freire 1972, 60, quoted by Lankshear in McLaren & Leonard 1993, 96)

Dialogue involves the recognition of the other and the recognition of oneself in the other, a phenomenon that cannot exist in the absence of three profoundly human elements:

- a deep love for the world and others;
- an intense faith in humanity, in its power to create and recreate the world, and in its commitment to becoming more fully human; and
- humility in recognising ourselves as all unfinished beings.

Love

Paulo Freire dared to tread where even Marx refused to walk – on the ground where the revolutionary love of human beings in struggle sustains their faith in each other and keeps hope alive within themselves and in history. (West in McLaren & Leonard 1993, xiv)

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1987, 121), Freire, quoting Ernesto Guevara³, calls attention to the need to assume, without ‘the risk of appearing ridiculous’, that revolution is an act of love since [humans] do it in the name of their humanisation and for the transformation of a dehumanised condition in which the oppressed find themselves.

For Freire, love is a human condition for understanding the world that needs to be transformed and for opening oneself to dialogue with others:

The pronouncement of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if there is not love that infuses it [... T]he act of love is in committing oneself to its cause. The cause of its liberation. However, this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical. As an act of courage, it cannot be sentimental; as an act of freedom, it cannot be a pretext for manipulation but must generate other acts of freedom. Otherwise, it is not love. Only by suppressing the oppressive situation is it possible to restore the love that was forbidden in it. If I do not love the world, if I do not love life, if I do not love [humans], dialogue is not possible for me. (Freire 1987, 51)

Dialogue is a human capacity involving the potential for love that takes place in human relationships. It is based on ethics and solidarity, respect, and a welcoming of differences. It is also an act of courage because it involves a commitment to a cause that is not only or necessarily one’s own (Fernandes in Streck et al. 2010, 54).

3 In the footnote to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire wrote ‘I am more and more convinced that true revolutionaries must perceive the revolution, because of its creative and liberating nature, as an act of love. For me, the revolution, which is not possible without a theory of revolution—and therefore science—is not irreconcilable with love. On the contrary: the revolution is made by people to achieve their humanization. What, indeed, is the deeper motive which moves individuals to become revolutionaries, but the dehumanization of people? The distortion imposed on the word ‘love’ by the capitalist world cannot prevent the revolution from being essentially loving in character, nor can it prevent the revolutionaries from affirming their love of life. Guevara (while admitting the ‘risk of seeming ridiculous’) was not afraid to affirm it: ‘Let me say, with the risk of appearing ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love. It is impossible to think of an authentic revolutionary without this quality’ – *Venceremos—The Speeches and Writings of Che Guevara* edited by John Gerassi (New York 1969), p. 398.’

Feminist educator bell hooks⁴, who attributed to Freire the inspiration in building her identity in resistance (hooks 2013, 65), expanded on the idea of lovingness in building community dialogue in the context of women's struggles for rights in patriarchal society. hooks defined love as an act of courage, resistance, and redemption, in a process of realising one's humanity that was and has been denied to women:

Think of love as the most heroic and divine quest that life demands us to face. And let that journey begin with the quest to love oneself completely. It is very appropriate that women, having walked so far in demanding recognition of our humanity, our equality, our talents, and daily reaping the benefits of that struggle, wisely demand a return to love (hooks 2020, 175).

Faith

In Paulo Freire's work, critical reflection on faith appears as a constitutive element of his pedagogical work. He is confident in the transformative capacity of human beings. However, he recognises that our creative capacity to transform our world is seriously curtailed by systems of domination and oppression by some over the many. Therefore, his wager on faith is that we can transcend social and cultural barriers and emerge with a new consciousness and commitment capable of mobilising transformative actions (Streck, in Streck et al. 2010, 229). Freire speaks of this faith as a 'vocation to be more [human]' and that it precedes dialogue. For him, a dialogue without faith would be a farce; a 'sweetly paternalistic' manipulative process (Freire 1987, 52).

Humility

Paulo Freire introduced a new concept – that of humility – by explaining this human virtue as a fundamental element to promote dialogue and coexistence among differences (Euclides Redin in Streck et al. 2010, 266–267). Humility is a virtue associated with respect for oneself and others that leads to unity in the struggle to transform the world. In his work *Pedagogy of Autonomy*, Freire (1996) highlights the importance of availability and openness as paths to respect. Humility involves the humble discovery of perceiving oneself as an unfinished being with the possibility of gaining completeness through dialogue and relationships with others. Here Freire reflected on how respectful and dialogical relationships can promote mediation and authentication between freedom and authority. Moreover, Freire explained the importance of humility in the constitution of dialogue whilst warning of the risks of

⁴ 'Author bell hooks opted not to capitalize her name, hoping to keep the public's focus on her work' (McGrady 2021).

arrogance and disrespect. For him, dialogue is not possible if we start from the premise that (i) there is ignorance only in the other; (ii) that the right to pronounce the world is reserved to a privileged few people, (iii) that value is inferior in the contribution that comes from others, and (iv) when we are not open to having our concepts and assumptions overcome based on the contribution of others (Freire 1987, 51).

Finally, Freire argues that the establishment of trust is the natural outcome of a dialogical process in which love, faith, and humility are present as these qualities promote horizontal relations and strengthen companionship in the pronouncement of the world. Establishing trust means learning to trust in oneself and others, and to distrust the oppressor that each one carries hosted within oneself (Freire 1987). However, engaging in this liberating dialogue is a counter-hegemonic act that demands recognising, resisting, and confronting domination strategies that aim to prevent the dialogical process from happening among the oppressed. Freire developed his theory of anti-dialogical action on the basis of this understanding (Freire 1987).

A Theory of Anti-dialogical Action

In enunciating his theory of anti-dialogical action, Freire denounced strategies (whether conscious or not) of domination, oppression, and marginalisation, which aim to prevent dialogue from flourishing. He observed that such anti-dialogical actions are part of a project of conquest that aims at depriving people of the right to think:

[T]here is no oppressive reality that is not necessarily *antidialogical*, just as there is no *antidialogicality* in which the pole of the oppressors does not strive, tirelessly, for the permanent conquest of the oppressed. (Freire 1987, 87)

According to Freire, these strategies of dehumanisation of the masses occur in four ways. First, they occur as a form of conquest – a process of domestication based on alienating myths and slogans for domination and maintenance of the status quo perpetrated by the media, which is subservient to such hegemonic projects. For instance, the myth that the oppressive order is an order of freedom, that we are all free to work with whatever means we want, and that all human rights are respected, is a strategy of dehumanisation. So, also, is the concept of meritocracy; the heroism of the oppressor class; charity, generosity and welfare; the elites as champions of the people; and from here the list could be expanded. Revolution as a sin against God is a dehumanising myth; the concept of private property as the foundation of the development of the human person is likewise a myth; and the view that hard work is a virtue of the oppressors and laziness and dishonesty deviations of the oppressed, to

which Freire also refers, is a myth that, together with the others, serves one purpose: to entrench the ontological inferiority of some (the oppressed) and the superiority of others (the oppressors) (Freire 1987, 86–87).

Second, these strategies divide the masses by emphasising a partial vision of societal problems which in turn prevents an understanding of the whole. An oppressive system based on the artifice of alienation aims to prevent critical perceptions of reality and the possibility of identifying and believing in alternatives for change:

The more the totality of an area is pulverised into ‘local communities’ in ‘community development’ work, without these communities being studied as totalities in themselves, which are partialities of another totality (area, region, etc.) which, in turn, is the partiality of a larger totality (the country, as partiality of the continental totality) the more alienation is intensified. And the more alienated they are, the easier it is to divide them and keep them divided. (Freire 1987, 87)

Such strategies presuppose that the unification of the masses is a threat to hegemony and therefore needs to be stopped, even at the cost of physically violent methods.

Third, through populist manipulation, which consists of a style of political action, defining bonds with the population creates a feeling of participation in a project that exists only to reproduce the existing oppression. Freire describes populist leadership as an ambiguous being that stands between the masses and the oligarchies and serves neither a counter-hegemonic project nor the construction of the liberating revolution. (Freire 1987, 90–92)

Finally, in the strategy of invasion or cultural violence, visible or camouflaged, a self-image of the inferiority of the oppressed masses is produced, serving to establish conservative and rigid cultural standards. This cultural invasion imposes on the invaded an alienating vision of the world that interests the invaders, inhibiting creativity and cultural diversity, whilst rooting itself in social structures (families, school, etc.) in a reproductive and cyclical social process. Ultimately, the strategy is aimed at creating interaction with the masses to get to know them and conquer them (Freire 1987, 93–94).

Paulo Freire introduced the theory of dialogical action as a counterpoint to anti-dialogical action and, thus, as a way to emancipate the oppressed and overcome systems of domination. Dialogical action is explained with reference to four concepts that appear as corollaries to the strategies listed above.

These concepts are ‘cooperation’ (instead of conquest), ‘unity’ (instead of division), ‘organisation’ (rather than manipulation), and ‘cultural synthesis’ (rather than cultural invasion and divisiveness). Cooperation involves the meeting of people for pronouncement and transformation of the world: a meeting in which there is no conquest of one by the other, but only trust that produces adherence to a group or cause. Unity is understood concretely as involving praxis; that is, practice combined with reflection on freedom from unjust reality, and class consciousness for the purpose of liberation. Organisation occurs at the intersection of freedom and authority, and cultural synthesis takes the form of action and cultural revolution for structural transformation of the oppressive culture (Freire 1987, 103–155). Several of these ideas are central to conceptualising the essentially counter-hegemonic proposal of UPMS.

So far, we have summarised some of the key Freirean ideas to be deployed in this paper in order to provide a guide for the discussion of a case study and the applicability of those concepts. With almost twenty years of existence, UPMS has become a fertile space for experimentation with methodologies and dynamics inspired by the dialogical proposal theorised and practised by Paulo Freire.

UPMS, a Dialogical Practice Based on a Pedagogy of Articulation

The UPMS benefits from being a product of a global counter-hegemonic process that emerged at the beginning of this century: the World Social Forum (WSF), an unprecedented phenomenon and a revolutionary, democratic, and experimental space that values plurality and social struggles in opposition to a hegemonic neoliberal capitalist model. The Forum had its first meeting in 2001. It emerged out of the inspiration of the protests and anti-neoliberal events (Whitaker 2000) that took place at the end of the 1990s, such as the demonstrations in Seattle against the World Trade Organisation and in Washington, D.C. against the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. From the beginning, it was proposed as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum in Davos with its emphasis on plurality and social struggles and its parallel constitution as an internationalist event, albeit open, self-organised, and self-managed by social movements and civil society organisations whose main characteristic consists of proclaiming the existence of alternatives to neo-liberal globalisation.

The WSF is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, [and the] free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to

domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society centred on the human person. (WSF 2001)

The WSF is a space that seeks to be free of leadership, hierarchies, and centralised command. Instead, it emphasises networks, experimentation, and democracy. The WSF takes place periodically through the formation of a specific organising committee that schedules each meeting, and it follows a ‘charter of principles’ (WSF 2001) which was signed at the first event. This charter aims to ensure that each forum is built as a democratic space, plural and committed to social struggles.

The enthusiasm about the WSF is primarily associated with the global dimension achieved for a counter-hegemonic event, and all the aspirations and intriguing reflections related to the emergence of this plural space are intended to resolve and promote alternatives for another possible world. Hardt (2002), while describing it as an ‘unknowable, chaotic, dispersive’ forum, was enthusiastically curious about the possibility of placing in such a monumental dimension a debate on two primary positions in response to the dominant forces of current globalisation: ones that ‘reinforce the sovereignty of nation-states as a defensive barrier against the control of foreign and global capital’ and another that ‘strives towards a non-national alternative to the present form of globalisation that is equally global’. Furthermore, the Forum had the challenge of becoming a space which could embrace different actors from the most diverse sectors and social struggles, representing, for example, consolidated movements, emerging mobilisations, non-governmental organisations and political parties, all of which advocated the most varied strategies to achieve not one but countless possible ‘world alternatives’ from the most radical to those more conciliatory to the hegemonic model (Sader 2002). The issue of the fragmentation of counter-hegemonic struggles discussed by Paulo Freire is possibly the most critical question that the Forum has to resolve: how to build unity in diversity and strengthen progressive fights and resistance, preventing it from becoming a space of disputes over a particular hegemonic alternative.

The WSF arose in the context of progressive and promising prospects for the left in Latin America. The first decade of the twenty-first century was seized with a strong sense of hope and significant advances and achievements in social areas, particularly in Latin America, following the election of several left-wing governments. In 2005, the largest meeting in its history was held in Porto Alegre, with over 155,000 participants. However, this scenario has subsequently changed radically, with the following decade marked by significant setbacks in the region, including the rise of the far-right wing, conservatism, and fascism. The change in the political context and the consequent impact on the availability of financial resources to hold an event of this

size deeply affected the continuity of the Forum, the frequency of meetings, and the number of participants. On top of that, the dilemmas inherent in embracing plurality without undermining particular struggles or strategies, along with dealing with the discontent of specific consolidated movements, pressured the Forum to take a more active political position (Therborn 2022) without demobilising organisations and activists. To add complexity to this scenario, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 limited the mobilisation of social movements worldwide, whilst the availability and enthusiasm to organise the event was immensely hampered. More than two decades later, the WSF has changed significantly, and, to some, lost its creative and innovative character. The WSF has also been marred by significant discouragement from the people organising the event to take part in it. However, we will not address these issues in this article since the UPMS has, from the beginning, developed independently from the WSF. Nevertheless, it is essential to mention that the complexity of the political context and the pandemic also significantly affected the UPMS workshops.



Figure 1: Opening march for the WSF 2022. Mexico City / Mexico, 2022. Source: authors' archives.

Two years after the first meeting of the WSF, the Popular University of Social Movements (UPMS) emerged. It was an experimental idea proposed by Professor

Boaventura de Souza Santos⁵ as an immersive, interactive, and dialogical, experience, and it was embraced by the movements and academics involved with the WSF. One reason for proposing this new initiative was the recognition that the Forum is not a space that allows for or would allow the development of deeper relationships or deepening of mutual learning between social movements due to its sporadic nature, short duration, and because it involves the participation of a multitude of people and many dispersed activities (Santos 2006). Moreover, attendance at WSF events is usually accompanied by organisation members, a practice that does not encourage participants to meet people from other organisations and establish dialogue and deeper relations outside their group during the events themselves. Therefore, it was necessary to create a new space informed by dialogical methodologies that could be introduced as an educational and training place for social movements.

This new space emerged having a trans-scalar, intercultural and inter-thematic character involving multi-territorial actions. The UPMS was thus created to be a space for meetings and exchanges between social movements originating from different parts of the world. A primary goal was to attain maximum diversity, as inspired by Paulo Freire's culture circles and popular education methodologies developed by consolidated social movements, such as the Landless Workers' Movement (MST). UPMS had no ambitions to be a physical institution or to have a curricular structure like traditional universities. The blueprint for the new organisation was more akin to an itinerant centre for meetings dedicated to the self-education of its participants, where everyone would be both educators and learners during the workshops. As the proposal to be a common good of the social movements, the organisation of the UPMS workshops should be open to all as long as they respected its two funda-

5 As one of the creators of the Popular University of Social Movements, Professor Boaventura de Sousa Santos has become one of the biggest enthusiasts and promoters of this initiative inside and outside the World Social Forum, contributing to the engagement of several social movements worldwide, mainly in Latin America. His ideas and theories also inspired the experimental methodologies of the UPMS, which were elaborated, tested, and revised as the meetings went on.

mental documents, elaborated and deliberated collectively: the charter of principles (UPMS 2012a) and the methodology guidelines⁶ (UPMS 2012b).

Regarding its name, Gadotti (2003) noted that the adoption of the expression *popular university* was not intended to point to the idea or to repeat the experiences of the workers' universities that multiplied in Europe and Latin America at the beginning of the twentieth century, but to convey the idea that, after a century of elitist higher education, a popular university must necessarily be a counter-university (Santos 2004b, 141), besides responding to a deficit of the WSF.

UPMS aimed to promote meetings that were essentially dialogical and conducted for the exchange of knowledge and experiences. Moreover, it also aimed to operationalise the epistemologies of the South⁷ proposed by Professor Boaventura de Sousa Santos, which focuses on intercultural translation (Santos 2004a) thereby promoting mutual understanding between social movements, to link diverse forms of knowledge and to strengthen new forms of resistance.

[The epistemologies of the South] deal with knowledges present in or emerging from the resistance to and the struggle against oppression, knowledges that are, therefore, embodied in concrete bodies, whether collective or individual. (Santos 2018, 87)

Such a diversity of knowledge disowned by the dominant order finds in the UPMS, on the one hand, space to articulate and claim in solidarity struggles for radical

6 The methodological guidelines emphasise that UPMS 'is not a training school for the cadres or leaders of social organisations and movements' but rather a process of reciprocal learning among all participants, whose goal is shared knowledge production. It is oriented towards popular education, as taught by Paulo Freire, intercultural and interpolitical translation and the ecology of knowledge. It is structured by alternating periods for discussion, study, reflection, and leisure. It highlights critical tasks for the organisers, such as fundraising, mobilising workshop participants, and building the event's memory. It also suggests an agenda that includes a time for deliberations on what will come out of that meeting. (Access the full document at UPMS 2012b.)

7 What best defines the *South* of the epistemologies of the South is not geographical location, but rather epistemic location, so that the idea of *South* incorporates both the hierarchy of the South in relation to the North and of the East in relation to the West (Araújo 2014, 20). In epistemologies of the South, the *South* is used in the sense of an epistemological reorientation and conceived not as a physical or spatial South (although it also is), but rather as an epistemic and metaphorical South, 'a metaphor for unjust human suffering caused by capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy, and for resistance to these forms of oppression' (Santos, Araújo and Baumgarten, 2016: 18) (Merladet 2020, 90–91).

democratisation, decolonisation, depatriarchalisation, and demercantilisation of hegemonic knowledge, and on the other hand, a methodology to promote reciprocal intelligibility between the most diverse knowledges and experiences of worlds and those that can still be created (Merladet 2020). In the case of intercultural translation, it should be essentially horizontal so as not to hierarchise either the knowledge, whether it comes from movements or academia, or the struggles represented by the participants (Benzaquen 2012).

An essential premise of UPMS is that understanding is contextual, which means that dialogue is necessary for bridging differences. This idea converges with Freire's idea of the hegemonic strategy of domination through anti-dialogue, in which oppressed social groups or those who struggle to resist the dominating order are separated in their struggles and subjected to strategies of manipulation, conquest, and cultural invasion. The UPMS, recognising such an agenda, implements methodologies aimed at overcoming domination and proposes a fundamentally dialogic space with the humanising character that Freire elaborated upon. Thus, the UPMS is an initiative space dedicated to facing the challenges of building the 'unity within diversity' that the Brazilian educator had envisaged, a space where liberating dialogue can break down the barriers of anti-dialogue and domination.



Figure 2: Conversation circle at the UPMS Workshop 'Marielle Vive! Os movimentos sociais e as lutas pela construção de alternativas democráticas frente às múltiplas faces da violência'. Museu da Favela da Maré – Rio de Janeiro/Brazil. Source: UPMS archives, website.

UPMS is designed to welcome activists, leaders of social movements, non-governmental organisations, academics, social scientists, researchers, and artists committed to issues such as social justice, human rights, diversity and multiculturalism, global peace, and respect for the environment. UPMS meetings use educational methodologies that involve a process of reciprocity or mutual exchange in which people come together to learn about each other and about the issues that affect everyone. Any knowledge, whether traditional or academic, can be shared, and will be recognised and valued. An important premise of these meetings is the recognition of mutual ignorance and, as theorised by Freire, the stimulation of epistemological curiosity to learn from others. In practice, UPMS involves encounters with individuals from various sectors and movements who come together to educate each other. It is an encounter involving intensive activities in an immersive environment that extends for two to three days, during which participants live, eat, and stay overnight in shared accommodation.



Figure 3: Moment of conviviality at the UPMS Workshop ‘Health, Sustainability and Living Well’. Aldeia Velha, Casimiro de Abreu, Rio de Janeiro/Brazil. Source: UPMS archives, website.

The purpose of describing the practical workings of UPMS in this paper is to provide a background for understanding the process of articulation that takes place

in UPMS activities. The term ‘articulation’⁸ in its political and multi-relational sense has become prevalent in the context of social and political strategies in Latin America. In our analysis, articulation occurs through a pedagogical process which converges with the Freirean idea of dialogue previously discussed. However, it adds a strategic element to this process that drives transformative action. Merladet (2020) proposes that the ‘pedagogy of articulation’ is a strategic coalition, a process involving an invitation to participate in a fraternal, high-intensity, and trust-building dialogue. It is an educational practice that takes place in the UPMS workshop activities and takes shape through subversive methodologies aimed at the reciprocal learning of the participants. It embraces moments of sharing and solidarity as well as moments of silence, tension, and conflict, as this pedagogy navigates between divergent and convergent issues addressed by the participants. Its goal is to promote unity through alliances, create common agendas for those individuals and organisations represented, and to understand collective actions.

Articulation happens during the exchange of knowledge, practices, and experiences. When reflecting on humanisation, which takes place in (and for) the dialogical process discussed above, the UPMS relies on what can be thought of as ‘tools of articulation’. These tools include the *mística*⁹ (mysticism), festivities, rituals, and experiences of contact with human suffering that make hearts and minds more open to dialogue, love, and the exercise of faith and humility.

The *mística* and all UPMS relational experiences play a crucial role so that the dialogue in its humanised character with faith, love, and humility can happen. The moments of *mística*, rituals, and cultural activities, are usually interspersed with moments of discussion in a circle, seeking to stimulate an interrelation between critical thinking and deep feeling, promoting an ethic of care, involvement, respect, and commitment to that moment, to those who are there. and to everyone’s struggle. Thus, discursive dialogue is complemented by other suprarational faculties that make

8 According to The Oxford English Dictionary, ‘articulation’ has several meanings and predominantly in the biological area, but articulation in the figurative sense means ‘a conceptual relationship, interaction, or point of juncture, esp. between two things.’ In this article we consider the political and dialogical aspect of this relationship and interaction between two or more individuals.

9 ‘The term *mística* refers not just to the performance, but to the whole world view that underlies it, drawing on traditions of Christian mysticism to affirm unity with a transcendent reality. *Mística* is sacramental in that its manifest physical reality is taken to represent the deeper meaning. It is impossible to separate the enactment of *mística* from the engagement with transcendence. Through participating in or observing *mística*, people express their ideals and believe that they come closer to attaining them’ (Hammond 2014, 372).

possible the relationship of complicity between struggles. Each one of these distinct moments has a methodological function in the construction of the dialogue that, at the same time as it becomes humanised, humanises its participants:

[A]s important as discussions are silences; as important as words are symbols; as important as speeches are gestures, postures and looks; as important as theories are practices and experiences; as important as articles are poems, poetry, theatre, rap, graffiti and cordéis; as important as reason are emotions, feelings and spirituality (Merladet 2020, 245).



Figure 4: *Mística* in the UPMS Workshop ‘*Territory, Culture and Rights: Intercultural Education in Minas Gerais*’. Xacriabá Indigenous Territory, São João das Missões, Minas Gerais/Brazil, 2016. Source: UPMS archives, website.

Spaces for Dialogue, Articulation and the Emergence of Possibilities

The third and final section of this paper discusses the extent to which the different aspects of critical and liberating dialogue of the kind analysed above and concretised through the experiences and practices of the UPMS, sensitise, question, or challenge the norms, structures, and processes of the very organisations and universities that have participated in this pedagogical project. Here, we highlight situations in which

the UPMS methodology has created subversive sparks within rigid structures, as in the National Council of the Public Ministry (CNMP) in Brasília, Brazil. In addition, we discuss instances in which UPMS partnerships have resulted in the development of new initiatives led by partner institutions – some of which involve the creation of new institutional structures, as in the case of the Federal University of Southern Bahia (UFSB). Although these are small-scale initiatives, the construction of spaces – such as the WSF on a more global level, or the UPMS in a local context – offer possibilities of experimentation through which the dialogue proposed by Freire can flourish. We focus on exposing new points of vulnerability in rigid institutional structures so that revolutionary and counter-hegemonic action can develop.

The Case of the National Council of the Public Prosecutor's Office (CNMP)

The UPMS workshop *Human Rights in Movement: The organisations, the institutions and the street*, held in 2013 in Brasília, Brazil, attracted the participation and financial support of the National Council of the Public Ministry (CNMP). The Public Prosecutor's Office is a Brazilian public body of justice, which has the role of defending social and individual inalienable rights, the legal order, and the democratic regime. It is common for the CNMP to hold meetings and forums with representatives of social movements. However, the innovative nature of the UPMS workshop held in partnership with this public body was precisely the proposed dialogue discussed above. The workshop brought together different generations of activists, artists, and intellectuals engaged in social-justice struggles. Its main objective was to foster a broad critical discussion on the value and effectiveness of the fight for social and political rights in a context of growing mobilisation and strategic action by different institutions.

It is worth noting that in 2013, Brazil experienced a wave of protests and demonstrations which erupted in hundreds of Brazilian cities. The reasons for indignation were the current political regime, corruption, and a shortage of public investment in education and health. This underfunding was contrasted to financial support for significant sporting events hosted by Brazil, such as the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games (Gondim 2016). The June 2013 protests focused attention on the effectiveness and application of human rights in Brazil, and the role of institutions. Furthermore, established issues such as systematic violence, the harm caused by large development projects, and the multiple difficulties in accessing rights in socially authoritarian urban contexts gained publicity through this political confrontation. In that context, the UPMS workshop in Brasília intended to reflect on the challenge of reinvigorating the State from below, building up a cognitive justice strategy which (i) recognises the voice and the contribution of extra-institutional knowledge and prac-

tices, (ii) promotes inter-knowledge transfer between groups and social movements, and (iii) creates spaces for the articulation of the struggles and needs arising from different claims (UPMS 2013).

As usual in UPMS workshops, this event promoted convivial, dialogical, and cultural activities which stimulated a profound dialogue.¹⁰ However, it was marked by a significantly higher level of tension than other events. Although the UPMS participants from the CNMP were progressive and sympathetic to social struggles, there was a significant attempt to ensure that *concrete results* were produced from the workshop activities to justify the investment made by the federal public institution.

All the proposals of the Public Ministry were debated instead of imposed. The movements systematically rejected most of them, preserving the collective's autonomy in the workshop. The discussions were characterised by participants' subversive attitudes and the inability of the CNMP to manage some demands. For instance, during the public session¹¹ of the workshop, which concluded the programme

the CNMP wanted the movements to choose only two representatives to go on stage and the speeches to be only 10 minutes long. However, in the public session, six representatives of the movements spoke (among them an indigenous woman and a former homeless woman), and they disregarded the stated time limit when they spoke. Similarly, campaign flags were not allowed in the auditorium; however, the movements not only brought them but also placed them directly in front of the stage. (Merladet 2020, 289)

10 See photos of activities carried out at the UPMS Workshop *Human Rights in Movement: The organizations, the institutions and the street* at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/upms/sets/72157637614515416/>

11 Public sessions are usually activities that close the UPMS workshop with the aim of presenting the results of the discussions and debates held to an external and wider audience (Merladet 2020, 278).



Figure 5: UPMS Workshop ‘Human Rights in Movement: The organisations, the institutions and the street’. Brasília/ Brazil, 2013 Source: UPMS archives, website.

Unlike other participatory experiences and instances of dialogue between movements and the State, in the UPMS workshops the movements were not fighting for resources or policies. Therefore, the state actors involved with the UPMS did not inhabit the central role traditionally played by governments. Even though they were proposing, organising, or funding the workshop, it was not the State dictating the rules of the game and, therefore, it did not have the power to influence or guide the activities, the methodology, or the content of the discussions. That was a significant challenge, as the State lacked the knowledge of how to legitimise spaces of deliberation which need to be established, coordinated, and regulated, by it.

We chose to discuss this case for two main reasons. First, this UPMS workshop reveals that dialogue will not always find a context or conditions thoroughly prepared for it to occur in a harmonious way; rather, we can see tensions and conflicts also making up the dialogical process. Indeed, we should not read conflict as an anti-dialogic act; Paulo Freire wrote a book with Moacir Gadotti and Sérgio Guimarães (Gadotti et al. 1995) in which the educators argue that ‘dialogue is embedded in conflict’ (94) and that ‘conflict and dialogue are articulated as a strategy of the oppressed’ (9):

We argue that dialogue takes place between equals and those with differences, never between antagonists. Between those [the antagonists], at most, there can be a pact. Between them, there is a conflict,

but one contrary to the conflict between equals and those with differences. (Gadotti et al. 1995, 9)

Second, we understand that the intention to stimulate dialogue in contradictory contexts opens possibilities, even if the dialogue materialises in a manner different to that which was planned. The CNMP, like many federal public bodies in Brazil, is a space inhabited by contradictory people who are not there to serve the institution's core purpose, in this case, the non-negotiable defence of human rights:

Today, the fight for human rights requires the Public Prosecutor's Office to play an active role. We know that there are contradictory people in all state bodies [...] if the Public Ministry is not active, it will be responsible for the frustrations of millions and millions of Brazilians; if it is active, it will be responsible for all the aspirations [goals] achieved. (Comment by Prof. Boaventura de Sousa Santos at the public event of the UPMS Workshop (Santos 2013))

It was because of the initiative of some members of the CNMP that the UPMS workshop took place, making it possible to promote a form of meeting, relationship, and dialogue between the movements and the institution that had not yet happened in other events with the same attendees. The moments of tension and subversion were important, not only for the movements to perceive themselves and adopt a leading role in the dialogue, but also to allow CNMP participants to understand the movements and their claims from a different perspective.

After the statements by the participants of the UPMS workshop, CNMP Council member Jarbas said he was 'touched'. For him, the 'institutional elite' of the Public Prosecutor's Office 'cannot stop this type of approach', involving grassroots members of popular organisations; that is, 'listening to the social movements' is the 'right path'. He acknowledged that members of legal institutions often develop 'a somewhat limited view' of issues involving human-rights violations and that it 'hurts' when he sees that the institution itself still mirrors, internally, existing social inequalities. (Hashizume 2013)

The Case of the Federal UFSB

In contrast to the previous example, the second case we will discuss took place in a fertile environment for building dialogue, cultivating articulations, and unfolding progressive initiatives. The Federal UFSB is a Brazilian institution founded in 2013 during the period of 'reflourishing public and free higher education in the country' (Lima et al. 2021, 20) – a process of expansion of higher education that

happened predominantly during the governments of Presidents Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2010) and Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016), and which gave rise to new and innovative public educational institutions in Brazil. Those new universities aimed to ‘provide structures for the reduction of regional inequalities and offer conditions to articulate knowledge to regional development [while targeting] internationalisation, interiorisation, curricular innovation and social inclusion’ (Lima et al. 2021, 79–80). As a result, the UFSB emerged as one of the country’s most promising experiences of progressive public universities.

Inspired by the proposals of a ‘21st-century university’ (Santos 2010), its project plan embraced the idea of an ecology of knowledges as a means to produce a revolutionary epistemological movement and as a way to promote university outreach¹² in reverse, that is, from outside the university, to inside the university (UFSB 2014). From this background, UFSB, which was established significantly connected to UPMS and Santos’s ideas, made cooperation agreements that would (i) envisage the adaptation of UPMS’s methodology to courses, projects, and programmes developed by the new university; and (ii) build collaborative spaces for experimentation with new ideas. Amongst others there was the proposal of ‘the ecology of knowledges laboratories’ for medical and legal knowledge resulting from with UPMS and its partners’ and participants’ ecosystem. This initiative had the pedagogical objective of establishing new relationships between the academic community and the experts and leaders of the local communities in order to produce knowledge together – a proposal of solidarity and social commitment to local populations that emerged from the relationship with UPMS aiming to become institutionalised in the curriculum and structure of a public institution.

The case of the UFSB (Federal University of Southern Bahia) encourages us to think that the UPMS is not an end in itself. The impact of its activities should not be analysed based only on the ‘concrete results’ of a workshop, as was desired by the CNMP representatives who held the Brasília UPMS workshop which we analysed above. Instead, it makes more sense to consider UPMS as a space for building relationships, multiple dialogues, and sets of articulations, which have both separately and collectively the potential to define the possibilities for radically new and different dialogues, spaces, or actions. In the case of UFSB, an institution born from the

¹² University outreach (or university extension) involves activities carried out by the university that aim to engage with communities and sectors outside the academic institution in order to transfer, exchange, or jointly produce knowledge. In his book *Extension or Communication*, Freire (1985) discusses this function of the university.

same context that led to the development of UPMS¹³, there was from the beginning a fertile ground to create and transform what the UPMS has as one of its central purposes, that is,

[to promote] inter-knowledge and self-education with the double objective of increasing reciprocal knowledge between movements and organisations and making possible alliances between them, thus facilitating the realisation of joint collective actions. (UPMS 2012a)

As Merladet (2020) notes, the UPMS can be envisioned as a hub for the unfolding of other counter-hegemonic initiatives, which, although still ‘a tenuous emergence [process], we can identify signs of their future potentialities’ (179). At the heart of this potential for emerging possibilities is the nature of the dialogue promoted by UPMS. Following Paulo Freire, this is a dialogue that implies social praxis; that is, a deep commitment to the spoken word that pronounces the world to be transformed into humanising action.

Discussion and Conclusion

To conclude, we offer some reflections on the role of dialogue in governance processes, especially in marginalised contexts, which is where the UPMS acts to transform them. We also provide a brief update on how this counter-hegemonic initiative has survived the challenges of recent years and has taken its next steps.

First, we reflect on the idea of ‘governance,’ referring to what Santos (2009) defines as *insurgent counter-hegemonic governance*. Santos argues that *governance* was globally consolidated as a *political and social matrix* between the 1970s and the 1990s that played a mediating role in response to crises of legitimacy and governability. He suggests that the idea of governance was constituted at the expense of silencing and excluding people’s participation, in favour of concepts that ensured the reproduction of the dominant, mercantilist, capitalist social order, as in the case of self-regulation, compensatory policies, social cohesion and the stability of flows. In this sense, Santos defines the idea of *globalised neoliberal governance* as a form of government that has been *genetically modified* to resist the risks of bottom-up, potentially chaotic

13 Like UPMS, the proposed Federal University of Southern Bahia (UFSB) project was conceived in promising years for progressives and leftists in Brazil, during the advancement of policies focused on social inclusion. However, with the *legal-parliamentary coup d’état* (Merladet 2020, 26–27) that occurred in Brazil in 2016 and the rise of the ultra-conservative and neoliberal right-wing in the region, investments in projects in public education were drastically reduced, impacting significantly the development of the UFSB that had just been created. The suspension of the ecologies of knowledges laboratories project resulted from this situation.

pressures and ensure an increasingly insignificant role for the state as a social regulator. Santos then argues that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a new notion of governance emerged from the strength of social movements and civil society organisations that ‘through networking and building up local/global linkages, are conducting a global struggle against the inequality, destitution, dispossession and discrimination brought about or intensified by neoliberal globalisation, a struggle most generally guided by the mobilising idea that another world is possible’ (Santos 2009, 58). Drawing on this perspective, we suggest that insurgent initiatives such as the WSF and the UPMS have emerged to play an important role in strengthening popular participation and advancing social transformation.

Based on Freire’s argument discussed in this article, which alerts us to the possibilities of fragmentation in social struggles arising from a strategy of domination, we consider it necessary and urgent to focus on strengthening the articulation of social movements. For this reason, a methodology that is dialogue-centred and capable of promoting robust alliances amongst marginalised social groups is required. By focusing on dialogue, the ecology of knowledge, the promotion of reciprocal learning between social movements, activists and academics, and intercultural translation, UPMS has emerged as a space that pushes forward a viable counter-hegemonic governance approach. Based on our analysis of these two cases, we highlight two main insights. First, we argue that the dialogue *from* and *for* humanisation contributes to breaking down the barriers of domination that produce fragmentation in the social struggle, thereby opening and building spaces for the construction of articulations and alliances. As we observed in the case of the UPMS workshop held with the CNMP, dialogical spaces and methodologies contributed to raising *silenced subjects* to positions of greater prominence and visibility by amplifying their voices and empowering their participation. Second, the experimental character of these dialogic processes promotes creativity and engaged participation, thus advancing the construction of new counter-hegemonic agendas, practices, and actions. In the case of the UPMS and UFSB partnership, we can observe a public institution becoming a laboratory for the development of new possibilities for institutional structures and processes. This broadens and transforms the vision of the university’s social function by rethinking university extension¹⁴ from the outside in, drawing on an ecology of knowledge and the leading role of marginalised subjects from outside the university.

UPMS has been determinedly resilient in the face of two major challenges that have marked the last decade: the issue of funding shortages following the fall of left-wing

¹⁴ University extension is an academic function as are research and teaching. It involves collaboration between the university and society through various actions led by academics aimed at the exchange of knowledge and social transformation.

governments in Latin America, especially in Brazil; and the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented what is at the heart of its methodological proposal: face-to-face human contact. Thanks to the strong links with social movements, academics, and activists developed over its first decade, UPMS managed to overcome these two phenomena by finding alternatives to stay alive, such as running online workshops and through voluntary collaboration. More recently, UPMS has been resisting and strengthening itself in two main directions. In Brazil, a partnership with the National Association of Postgraduate Studies and Research in Education (ANPED) – a traditional and influential non-profit organisation in the Brazilian academic community – has contributed to promoting new collaborations with Brazilian universities and accessing public funding. Thanks to this partnership, and in spite of the pandemic, UPMS has successfully delivered four workshops in the past three years and plans another three for 2023–2024. Moreover, UPMS has been expanding to the central regions of the global north. In 2022, a UPMS workshop was held in Gipuzkoa in the Basque Country, in partnership with the Emaús Social Foundation and the University of the Basque Country, as part of a social programme that aims to build dialogic spaces for political consciousness-raising, debate, and intercultural translation. This was a collective agenda-building initiative that aimed to formulate strategies to transform university through collaborative governance and a new university-society relationship (EMAÚS 2022; Casado et al. 2021). In the same year, UPMS started interacting with activists from the University of Cambridge academic community¹⁵ to discuss and rethink the relationship (and responsibility) of that traditional institution towards its local community, given that Cambridge has been identified as Britain's most unequal city¹⁶ (Cities Outlook 2018). This developing collaboration finds in the UPMS methodological approach the potential for engaging community leaders and local activists in a dialogical process that sees them as protagonists in designing actions to change their unfair reality.

To conclude, the UPMS still has much to teach us about how a methodology focused on dialogue and political and social articulation can transform institutions and governance processes, as well as question what we refer to as 'governance'. Since it began two decades ago, much has been published on this counter-hegemonic initiative.¹⁷ However, this research mostly focuses on the impact of the UPMS on social movements and social struggles. Little has been written on how the public institu-

15 See <https://news.educ.cam.ac.uk/latin-america-popular-education-inequality>.

16 See <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/feb/04/cambridge-most-unequal-city-population-divide-income-disparity>.

17 See some examples at <http://www.universidadepopular.org/site/pages/pt/documentos/leituras/leituras-sobre-a-upms.php>.

tions that have been involved with the initiative, either through the participation of their staff in UPMS workshops or by hosting events, have benefited from it. Indeed, a social institution that can be transformed (with the potential for much more) by this sort of engagement is university. Potentially, this engagement can divert this historic institution from an increasingly likely destiny: that of being reduced to a *hopeless university*, as framed by Richard Hall (2021).

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