The Political Struggles of Chilean Exiles: Social Movement Learning and Redemocratization in Chile

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Abstract: This paper presents preliminary findings of ongoing research conducted with Chilean exiles in Vancouver, Canada. The study investigates learning processes among Chilean exiles in the context of their political action in the Chilean solidarity movement oriented towards redemocratization in Chile during the period of the dictatorship from 1973 to 1990.

Purpose

During the 1970s and 1980s, the political work of exiles dispersed all over the globe contributed to the pro-democracy movement that brought an end to military rule in Chile (Wright & Oñate, 1998). While the exodus was diffuse, most Chilean exiles went to the Americas and Europe where many engaged in political work, at the local and national level, with social movements and political parties in Chile, and the international community. Though periodically marked by unrest, Chileans had enjoyed over 150 years of democracy when the military coup took place on September 11th, 1973. With the dissolution of Congress and political activity suspended, the political work of Chilean exiles was important in the struggle for redemocratization (Angell, 2001).

The purpose of this research is to gain a broad understanding of the scope and nature of the learning activities of exiles in the context of their political action towards redemocratization in Chile and an in-depth understanding of the individual and collective learning processes in which a cross-section of exiles were engaged in this context. While several analyses of the political dimensions of Chilean exile (Angell, 2001; Wright & Oñate, 2007) and the political activities of Chileans in Canada (Ginieniewicz & Schugurensky, 2006) do help to frame the broad scope of political activities of Chilean exiles, they do not investigate the political action of Chilean exiles towards redemocratization in particular. Empirical research on the political activities of Chilean exiles in Vancouver and Victoria, British Columbia that examines their political action in relation to culture as a political tool is reported by Shayne (Shayne, 2007). However, none of these studies contribute specifically to understanding adult learning within these activities.

Scholarly work examining adult education and learning in the context of civil society activities is mainly comprised of analytical papers drawing on the theoretical traditions of critical sociology and political philosophy (Holst, 2002; Welton, 2001), but without empirical backing. There are, to date, few empirical studies that examine adult learning in civil society. This study addresses this gap and the lack of research from a learning perspective on the political activities of Chilean exiles in general, and in Canada in particular.

Theoretical Framework

Together with contemporary social movement thought, various concepts developed by Gramsci, Habermas and Arendt are brought together to critically analyze and understand the socio-

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historical processes that unfolded during the redemocratization of Chile, both in Chile and among exiles in Canada. In addition to framing Gramscian concepts in a Habermasian model, Arendt’s conceptualization of action enriches this framework. Another notion important to this framework is the public sphere, which serves as a relational concept to the ideas outlined above. The conceptualization of the public sphere in this research is based on the ideas of Arendt and Habermas. Moreover, to illuminate individual and social learning processes of Chilean exiles in Canada in the context of their political action, the contributions of Gramsci and Freire to adult education and social change form an integral part of the theoretical basis of this research. While a more extensive analysis of socio-historical processes and the solidarity movement will be carried out once data collection has been completed, the analysis in this paper focuses on learning processes.

Research Design
The research methodology for the study is consistent with traditions of empirical research on social movements (Clemens & Hughes, 2002), historical research (Howell & Prevenier, 2001) and research on adult learning in social movement contexts in particular (Foley, 1999; Hall, 2004). Data sources for the study include archives, primary materials collected from participants’ informal archives and oral history interviews. Oral histories help to create ‘people’s history;’ that is, to capture voices from a grassroots’ perspective as a counter-point to written historical narratives which are often histories of the powerful (Thompson, 1988). This is particularly important, since the voices and activities of political activists and educators are seldom formally documented.

There are two main research questions guiding the study:

- What individual and collective learning processes were exiles engaged in within the context of their political activities towards redemocratization in Chile?

- How did this learning change as their political work changed over time?

Extensive archival data was collected from fonds and newspaper archives along with large quantities of primary materials that have been made available by participants from their informal archives. These sources have provided rich data on the activities of several groups, including press releases, bulletins, correspondence, pamphlets, flyers, announcements, event programs, reports and newspaper articles that covered the political activities of the solidarity movement.

Participants were recruited via community contacts who identified groups and individuals who meet the inclusion criteria: women and men Chilean exiles who were politically active towards redemocratization in Chile, where politically active is defined as members of groups and non-group members who participated in organizing and realizing political activities, and individuals who supported and participated in these activities. While this definition of politically active is being used in order to include and capture the perspectives of individuals who participated to varying degrees, the majority of participants will continue to be recruited from the pool of individuals who were involved in coordinating and implementing activities.

Out of a total of approximately 20 semi-structured oral history interviews to be carried out in the Greater Vancouver area, a total of ten have been conducted. Eight interviews have been carried out with Chilean exiles; three women and five men. Six of the Chilean exile participants were involved as members of groups and two as non-group individuals who supported and participated in these activities. To complement the data with information on the work of exiles with non-Chileans in the solidarity movement, two interviews were conducted.
with women who were members of a group of non-Chileans called Canadians for Democracy in Chile\(^2\) that was formed in Vancouver less than two weeks after the military coup took place in Chile. The duration of interviews has varied between one and a half and three hours. All interviews have been audio-recorded and conducted in Spanish with exiles and in English with the two members of Canadians for Democracy in Chile.

Hundreds of thousands of Chileans fled to countries all over the world under several different circumstances. Some were officially expelled under Decree Law 81 of November 1973, a law pronounced by the regime giving them the authority to expel citizens; others were sentenced to exile or exchanged their prison sentence for exile. Others who had not been arrested, imprisoned or tortured left independently because they lived in permanent fear – they had to constantly go in to hiding and/or hid people in their homes; their family, friends and/or colleagues had been arrested, tortured, disappeared and/or killed; their phones were tapped; they were subjected to illegal searches, looting and many had lost their jobs because they were considered a “security risk” owing to their political affiliations.

All of the Chilean exiles I have interviewed left Chile between 1974 and 1978. Two individuals exchanged their prison sentence for exile, one was arrested and left Chile shortly after being released, and though the other five were not arrested, they left because they lived in fear. All, except two who spent about six months in Argentina, arrived in Canada directly from Chile, though not all to Vancouver. Two of the exiles spent several years in Calgary and one in Saskatoon before moving to Vancouver, and one spent six years in the U.S. before arriving in Canada. With the exception of one participant, all the exiles were between 25 and 40 years old when they arrived. Some were married, several had very young children and others had children in Canada.

**Preliminary Findings and Conclusions**

Since this is a work in progress, data analysis is in the initial stages. Interviews are being analyzed thematically and a content analysis of primary materials collected from archives and participants is being carried out. Interviews and primary materials are being coded to identify emergent themes. The preliminary findings in this section present data on the nature of the political activities of exiles and the most pervasive themes evolving from the data.

According to primary materials and interview data, Chilean exiles engaged in a variety of political activities at local, national and international levels. Chilean exiles made and sold *empanadas* (traditional meat or cheese turnovers) and *arpilleras* (embroidered tapestries) made by Chilean women whose family members were disappeared, organized dinner/dances, folkloric dance performances and *peñas*, which bring people together to share folk and protest music, empanadas and wine. They also staged rallies, protests and picket lines, carried out letter writing campaigns, held lectures and seminars, organized conferences, published bulletins, coordinated boycotts and supported concert tours of exiled musicians. Moreover, individuals participated in awareness-raising on a daily basis in their personal and professional lives. In addition to publishing their own bulletin, Canadians for Democracy in Chile also engaged in many of the same activities as exiles and worked with exiles to coordinate these activities and events. All of these activities were aimed at publicizing what was happening in Chile, raising funds to support the resistance in Chile, calling for the release of political prisoners, pressuring the Canadian government to increase the number of Chileans allowed to enter Canada and assist Chilean exiles arriving in Canada.

\(^2\) A pseudonym has not been used to name this group because it is available from a public source.
Chilean exiles participated in groups both along and across party lines. In Chile, parties went underground after the coup and resurfaced after the mass protests of the early 1980s. In exile, some individuals formed and joined groups based on their membership in political parties in Chile. For example, three of the participants were involved in a group that consisted of Communist Party members. One of these individuals also participated in a group in Calgary before moving to Vancouver that included members of various political parties. Two participated both in a group of Socialist Party members and a group with cross-party membership, and one exile was involved with a group of Latin Americans that included several Chileans who had been members of diverse political parties.

Both exiles and Canadians for Democracy in Chile established networks with other groups in civil society. They worked with Chilean exiles in other cities, provinces and countries, and with civil society actors, such as unions, Church, peace and women’s groups, and Canadian political parties. Multiple group membership facilitated the development and maintenance of networks, since being a member of a union, for example, meant there was a direct relationship with another group that was often interested in supporting the solidarity movement.

**Solidarity**

It was extremely important for participants to express solidarity with Chileans living in Chile. Exiles had lived the state terror imposed by the military regime and together with people all over the world, many Canadians had followed events in Chile for years. Allende’s democratic path to socialism led to the world’s first freely elected socialist president. People watched intently as events unfolded during his presidency and were devastated when they learned the coup had taken place. Knowing that people were suffering severe repression and that a military junta had extinguished democracy in Chile fueled the political work of exiles and non-Chileans alike.

Building and maintaining solidarity was important for action and for exiles seems to have been based on a sense of shared experience with each other, Chilean exiles in other parts of the world and compatriots in Chile. For non-Chileans, it seems to have been based on their empathy with exiles and Chileans living in Chile. Broadcasting concerns to the international community to build solidarity involved establishing and maintaining networks with other civil society actors and exiles living all over the world. This was done by drawing on knowledge from previous experiences with political action and from their on-going activities in the solidarity movement.

**Creating an Epistemic Community**

Pooling existing knowledge and creating new knowledge was central to political action. The collective indigenous (local) knowledge that individuals generated by contributing previous knowledge and constructing new knowledge as a group forms an epistemic (learning) community. Participants shared knowledge and taught each other skills needed to coordinate and realize activities. They also shared learning experiences about the meaning of their political action.

*Learning by doing.* Initially, individuals volunteered to do tasks according to the knowledge and skills they already had because of their prior experiences with political action and other areas of life, such as work and studies. For example, people who had experience with organizing events would coordinate these activities and those who were skilled at writing would prepare letters for letter writing campaigns. Over time, individuals also learned to do new things by working with other members who had experience in areas new to them. This did not take
place in a systematic way; rather by sharing knowledge and skills, individuals learned from each other by doing.

Cultural and Political Aims
Many of the activities of exiles simultaneously served political and cultural purposes. Cultural events often acted as a platform for raising awareness about what had happened and was happening in Chile, and to encourage support for the solidarity movement. Chilean culture was nurtured through events, such as peñas, dinner/dances, concerts by exiled musicians and making empanadas for sale. These activities enabled exiles to live and express their culture in order to maintain their cultural identity and to foster a Chilean cultural identity in their children. It was important to exiles for their children to be proud of their cultural heritage. At home and through these activities, children learned the Spanish language and about Chilean culture.

Peñas and the Nueva Canción Chilena (New Chilean Song), a movement that played an important role in Chile during the 1960s and early 1970s that was born in peñas and universities, were integral to the leftist political culture of the decade prior to the coup in Chile. In exile, peñas and concerts by exiled musicians who had been part of the Nueva Canción Chilena were ways of expressing Chilean culture and raising awareness in communities in which Chilean exiles lived. For exiles, then, these activities were meaningful both as political and as cultural expressions.

Social Support
Many participants discussed the need for sharing experiences and supporting each other. Meetings held to organize events and participation in activities seem to have created a sociocultural space for exiles to share experiences of exile and construct meaning out of these experiences. The experiences exiles had prior to leaving Chile and as newcomers to Canada have had a profound effect on them and connecting with people who shared and understood their experiences was an important source of support for exiles.

The desire for social support was also expressed as the need for a sense of family in the absence of their extended families. Exiles longed (and most still do) for the support their families gave them in times of emotional need and in everyday life. For many, friends made through their participation in activities became like family, supporting each other by taking on the roles of extended family. Exiles were learning to cope with the absence of their families, their experiences of exile and adaptation to a new culture.

Educating the Public
Raising awareness about the situation in Chile to build solidarity was one of the core goals of exiles and non-Chileans towards redemocratization in Chile. Bulletins were published and disseminated with reports of the plight of political prisoners, local and international news on Chile, and announcements of fundraising events, concerts, peñas conferences and picket lines; arpilleras depicting experiences of loss, repression, protest and poverty were sold; talks were given by members of the Chilean resistance; conferences were organized and information tables were set up at concerts by exiled musicians. To encourage boycotts of Chilean products, such as fruit and wine, picket lines were set up at supermarkets and liquor stores that sold these products to hand out pamphlets and talk with people about the reasons they should not buy Chilean products; their purchase would support the Chilean economy and more importantly, an
illegitimate government that was severely repressing the Chilean people. All of these strategies created opportunities to educate the public and build solidarity.

Discussion and Implications
The Chilean solidarity movement supports the notion in adult education that social movements are important learning sites (Finger, 1989; Holst, 2002; Welton, 1993). Education and learning in social movements involve learning processes internal to the movement, as well as learning that can take place in the wider public as a result of social movement activities (Hall, Richards, Martin, Paavo, & Philip, 2004). By forming an epistemic community, social movements largely rely on the indigenous (local) knowledge members bring to the group and create as part of their participation in it, in addition to the various skills needed for building and maintaining the movement and for realizing action strategies. Moreover, the development and implementation of action strategies developed and employed largely depends on learning strategies, including sharing knowledge and skills and generating new knowledge and learning new skills. Therefore, the indigenous knowledge generated by social movements makes them vital sites of knowledge production (Holford, 1995).

The dialectical process of reflection and action, or praxis (Freire, 1981) that feeds the generative process involved in creating indigenous knowledge is an important part of social transformation. It is also a central part of the learning process and plays an important role in re/shaping collective political action (Chovanec, 2004). The value of indigenous knowledge and the importance of legitimating that knowledge is thus highly significant in the dialectical relationship between theory and practice.

Many of the people who participated in the solidarity movement were university educated professionals. Given the intrinsic intellectual nature of all humans (Gramsci, 1971), it is not only traditional intellectuals who have an important role to play in social movements, but also organic intellectuals that emerge in social movements. Together they contribute to generating and validating indigenous knowledge created in these important learning sites.

References


