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# **Violeta Parra: Popular Educator**

María Alicia Vetter

**Abstract:** This study reexamines the work of Chilean folklorist Violeta Parra with the purpose of identifying her as a popular educator.

**Keywords:** Violeta Parra, folklore, popular education

The purpose of the study was to reexamine the work of renowned Chilean folklorist Violeta Parra, with an emphasis on the educational nature of her compositions as well as on her endeavors as a researcher of folklore and as a popular educator. In previous work (Rueda, 2003; Vetter, 2003), I presented similar research with an emphasis on the adult education that took place in social movements, such as in the New Chilean Song, a cultural movement that became part of the Sixties Movement and of world-wide movements that incorporated revolutionary songs as important components of the movement. Violeta Parra was not only a precursor of the New Song, but also an educator of the members of the New Song. Her educational role in society was not a traditional one, but evolved from her research with and proximity to workers and peasants.

Although Violeta Parra is universally acknowledged today as a precursor of The New Chilean Song, not sufficient attention has been lent to Parra's educational influence, nor to her role as an organic intellectual. In this study, I provide tools to analyze the "Songs of Struggle" as treatises that employ both philosophical and political analyses drawn from popular knowledge to conduct a revolutionary education of the listeners. The study contributes to existing theory on the role of folklore in popular education, as well as it provides new insights into the complexities of popular culture as reflected in the works of folklorists.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework was provided by popular education studies (Núñez, 1982), music and social movements theory (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998; Reed, 2005; Vitale, 2000), Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual (1971), and by philosophers such as Marcuse (1978) and Adorno, who took divergent positions with respect to the role of music in social movements. The study also incorporates linguistic theory and literary theory.

## **Research Design**

This was a historical as well as a literary, linguistic, and philosophical inquiry based on a close textual analysis.

Research questions:

- How does folklore, in this case Chilean folklore, play a role in Popular Education?
- Why is Violeta Parra an organic intellectual and an educator?
- What was Violeta Parra's research work, how was it conducted, and how did this work influence her own creative output?
- What are the literary and linguistic influences on her work and why are these of importance for the study?

- What does the intersection between political struggle and popular knowledge production tell us about Popular Education?

### Findings

Violeta Parra found in the folklore of Chile a dialectical way of approximating reality, and made use of the *contradiction* to expose the realities of feudal and capitalist exploitation. This personal cognitive process reflected cognitive processes the society was undergoing at the same time, and initiated a mode of expressing them that would become the common denominator for all the composers of the New Chilean Song.

In Latin America, La Nueva Canción [The New Song] has played a role in every major social and revolutionary movement the area has undergone in the last fifty odd years. And at its very roots, there was a cognitive process that involved the local in its most humble clothes. Violeta Parra walking patiently from home to home, tape recorder and guitar in hand brought on folklore of unsuspected revolutionary power which would feed the revolutionary fires of several generations of musicians and those in the movements that they played for and from. Paradoxically, it was the fierce struggles against imperialism that motivated local cultural manifestations to fight for a space being disputed by a homogenizing pop culture, and that would, in turn, become a universal and enduring voice for struggles all over the world. It is also because of their universality that Violeta Parra's compositions, although extremely regional and tightly connected to the folkloric forms of specific regions, can be played today by new generations of Chileans, who consider her "sacred but not untouchable" (Peña, 2001), as evidenced by a record homage paid to her legacy by thirteen Chilean rock bands and soloists who edited in 2001 an album called *Después de vivir un siglo* [After a century of living], as well as by current folklorists (among them her own descendants), who pay her tribute every year in Folklore Festivals, such as Talagante's and Olmue's. Along with interpretations by classical and jazz musicians, contemporary popular musicians play and sing her compositions in a variety of new genres as a tribute to her memory and to her invaluable contribution to Chilean art. As eclectic musician Nano Stern (2009) said: "I find it essential to pay tribute to Violeta Parra, because she is the most important reference we have today, not only for Chilean music but for art in general" (§ 2, my translation).

The New Chilean Song, according to Patricio Manns (2009), one of its major figures, "was born revolutionary. It not only changed the focus, the gaze on mankind; it also changed the language by making it profound, full of significance" (p. 19, my translation). That is a debt it owes Violeta Parra.

Violeta was an intellectual who arose from the impoverished class into which she was born in the Chilean countryside. As an artist, her option for folklore took her to investigate and compile the traditional Chilean folklore of the agrarian regions of central and southern Chile. It was there that she discovered the clues for her own creative works. It is after careful and extensive research and compilation that she started to produce her best-known songs, and where political cognition appears in what have been called her "songs of struggle" (Cánepa-Hurtado, 1983). Her option for Chilean folklore involved the adoption of a philosophical conceptualization of medieval origin, inherited from the conquerors and colonizers of the XV and XVI centuries, the preference for a dialect of Andalusian origin, that is not only regional, but also popular, often combined with indigenous words from Mapudungun, as well as poetic compositions, such as *decima espinela*, also inherited from the Spanish literature of the XVI century. The use of dialect to break with class conciliation, and the ingenious use of the

contradiction to denounce a system of exploitation would actively cooperate with the progressive polarization of Chilean society.

Chilean dialect exhibits two characteristics that I consider important for this discussion. First, Chilean peasant dialect has kept the same characteristics of the language of conquerors and colonizers, the majority from Andalusia (Oroz, 1966, pp. 14-36). Along with a significant number of archaisms, religious concepts, customs, and a philosophy of medieval origin were maintained. We could extrapolate that dichotomist medieval thinking translated into opposites such as good versus evil; devil against God; Moors and Christians; heaven versus hell; etcetera, not only had its origin in a particular conceptualization that is connected to the inherited language and culture, but that it also originated in the conditions of life themselves. Though arguable, one line of political analysis insists that the Chilean peasantry has lived for most of its history in feudal conditions. Those conditions are clearly dichotomist and can be represented by opposites such as serfs and lords, top and bottom, rich and poor. And the anti-feudal struggle involves a way of conceptualizing that emerges from the ideology that was used in the course of feudal oppression, in other words from Christianity.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, there was in Europe a resurgence of the study of Aristotle's contradiction (Price, 1992, p. 145). The concepts of continuity, contrariety, and contradiction were re-examined to explain how change is produced (Kretzmann, 1982, pp. 270-296). It is not surprising, then, that together with medieval religiosity, we find in the Chilean folklore that springs from the production both of cultured and popular Spain a preoccupation with contrariety and contradiction. It is when, in Spain, conditions were present for an incipient capitalism that called for the elimination of feudalism and, therefore, for a class struggle to marshal the advent of the bourgeoisie.

Therefore, to reach for popular philosophy with ideological purposes in mind, the intellectual will find that it provides language with a never-ending source of expressions that reflect the objective reality of the peasantry and that these carry in them the seed of rebellion. Dichotomist language can easily become antagonistic when objective conditions provide for the arena that will allow class contradictions to resolve themselves in favor of one of them. Furthermore, language can help to polarize the conditions even further.

The second characteristic that I consider pertinent for this discussion is that of *attenuation*. It has been argued that Chilean dialect, contrary to dialects spoken in Spain, for example, shows a marked tendency to attenuate. Two types of attenuation have been identified: one of a class character; and another, quite generalized in Chile that is manifested out of courtesy, but that it could also be interpreted as a survival instinct sharpened by a verbal communication that usually takes place in extreme proximity (Puga Larraín, 1997). In either case, it is my opinion that in Chilean society, and particularly in the middle classes, there is a great degree of attenuation in speaking that is fundamentally directed to avoid conflict; and that in a society, as intensely stratified in classes as Chilean society, the major conflict is the class conflict. It can be said that it has been essential for Chilean "democracy" to maintain at all cost a national life based on non-antagonist class relations. In this context, when language becomes antagonistic, particularly when referring to class conditions, or when it brakes with class collaboration, it becomes exceedingly dangerous, or it is perceived as such by those concerned with keeping the status quo.

If we keep in mind these two characteristics, it is possible to see how Violeta Parra, and then the composers of the "New Chilean Song", carried out revolutionary activity that surpassed the linguistic and the art arenas. When the revolutionary moment is crushed by force, the

reaction against the folklorists appears irrational in its brutality. Nevertheless, for a class that had held power for 160 years, the words of Víctor Jara (n.d.) signaled that their power was under serious threat:

you, sir, are nothing  
neither wine nor lemonade  
you spend precious time stroking  
hell, your dignity...  
And if you keep blabbing we will expropriate  
your guns, your tongue and everything else (my translation)

Reality is dichotomist; the classes have arrived or are arriving to impasse. Popular humor inspires Víctor to express the moment in such a manner. Language and tone are “crude” for the “delicate” sensitivity of the middle classes. It is popular dialect slapping the face of the eternally lukewarm Chilean middle classes. Violeta Parra had sung:

I have been asked by a great many people if agitation songs are dangerous for the masses...<sup>1</sup>

Evidently, agitation songs were dangerous for the classes in power, therefore they were also such for the masses.

### **Revolutionary Songs**

Written between 1957 and 1967, the “Songs of struggle” have been identified (Cánepa-Hurtado, 1983) as Violeta Parra’s original creations, clearly distinguishable from her previous compositions in subject matter, style, and intent. Their content is highly political and, although it borrows from tradition, it also exhibits characteristics not previously found in the folklore of Chile. Since there has been a concerted effort to portray Violeta Parra as a “naïve” composer, one would have to conclude, then, that her genius sprang from her close contact with folklore, *el saber popular*, rather than from academic knowledge.

Violeta Parra combined dichotomist conceptualization and the absence of attenuation in songs “en tono mayor a lo humano y a lo divino”: decimas, quartets, quintets, sextons in verses of eight syllables, in which there is an abundance of antithetic figures. In her compositions, there is a scientific approach to the analysis of society in a language and manner of philosophizing that are familiar to her audiences. Furthermore, the “songs of struggle” are, as a whole, a veritable treatise of Chilean society, where the composer travels geographically, as it were, through Chile, identifying the particular injustices present in each region, pointing fingers at the culprits, and calling for a reverting of the oppressive situation.

In these works, the composer systematically unveils the contradictions inherent in Chilean society, to then make a call for the resolution. At the heart of her analysis, there is a break with the institutions of “civil society,” and a denunciation of bourgeois democracy as a sham.

All through the “songs of struggle”, the composer manifests an acute sense of her own value as an artist, and of the urgency of her message. She is perfectly aware of her “mission”, and of her creative force and does not hesitate to use a prophetic tone, as she knows good, right, and truth to be on her side.

I have organized the songs under the following categories:

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<sup>1</sup> All lyrics in English are my translations from Parra (n. d.).

- *Dialectical Songs*: “At the Center of Injustice,” “The Hope,” “I Sing to Difference,” “Grateful for Life,” “Damn the Heavens”
- “*Religious*” *Songs*: “The Letter,” “What will the Holy Father Say,” “Look,” “Help me Valentina,” “Because the Poor don’t Have”
- *Historical Songs*: “A River of Blood,” “We need a Guerrilla Fighter”
- *Songs with a “National” Theme*: “Arauco is full of Sadness,” “The Nguillatun,” “Depending on the Wind”
- *Songs of Miners*: “And the Sun up High Kept on Burning”
- *Songs about the Role of the Composer*: “Mazurquica Modernica,” “Composers that Reflect”

### Conclusion

The option for folklore, and, therefore, for a popular dialect and a popular philosophical heritage, constituted a true revolution at the cultural level and provided the people with a weapon for agitation that would serve, perhaps more than any other factor, to sharpen class contradictions.

Violeta Parra did not ignore the fact that she was an organic intellectual. In fact, she articulated quite clearly that hers was the role of an educator. She firmly argued for the need for organic spaces, such as the cultural spaces she created, literally and symbolically, in the margins of society. She believed that these places were counter-hegemonic, and her last years were spent in this effort.

What we must do is to create, create a lot and profoundly, and deliver these `creations to those they have been made for. The creator must never beg to be heard. And when doors are closed in our faces, when there is so much bureaucracy and so much imbecility trotting the streets and painting its nails in offices, we must find a way to invent a space where we can be heard and understood. In that sense “La Peña” is an example. With all its limitations, it is a tool... Here will the new ones come, the ones that are beginning.... In that sense “La Peña” is not enough. That is why I have planted my tent. And we need a lot more peñas, a lot more tents the length of Chile if we want this to mature, to multiply, to give fruit. (Parra as cited in Manns, 1987, pp. 69-70)

It is in Violeta Parra’s work where we find the clues for the role played by the folklorists of “New Chilean Song” during the government of Popular Unity (UP) between 1970 and 1973. She created the space for the agitation song and for herself as a *cantor* whose duty is to educate by formulating ideology through the channels provided by the people themselves. Inside the enormous advancement of the Chilean people in their struggles, there emerged this sort of minstrel to witness and to create new knowledge that would push the processes forward. Besides her innumerable talents, Violeta happened at the precise moment:

We were starting to sing, here and there, like orphans. We talked of a truth not being said in other songs; we denounced misery and the causes of misery; we told the peasants that the land should be theirs. We talked of injustice and exploitation. In this genre of creations, the presence of Violeta Parra is like a star that will never stop giving light. Violeta showed the way: we do not do anything but follow it, and update it, of course, with the processes of today. (V́ctor Jara as cited in Alegría, 1987, p. 111, my translation)

The “New Chilean song” would continue Violeta Parra’s legacy by reflecting the conditions of struggle the Chilean people found themselves in, and agitating until the wave would turn.

## Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

This study adds new perspectives to social movement theory (Holst, 2002), to Radical Adult Education (Brookfield & Holst, 2010), and to Popular Adult Education (Núñez, 1982). It also contributes historical perspectives to the field, showing in a specific case study the intersection of political struggle and popular knowledge production. Finally, the study contributes to the growing literature on adult education and popular culture (e.g., Jubas, Taber, & Brown, 2015), in its Latin American meaning of culture that is produced by the popular classes—the peasantry and the working class.

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