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Dare to Know by Thyself (*Sapere Aude*): The Legacy of the Enlightenment and Post Enlightenment in Working-Class Adult Education

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Abstract: The Enlightenment and Post Enlightenment relationship to working-class adult education is examined in the case of the working class in Chile at the turn of the 20th century.

Keywords: Recabarren, working-class education, Enlightenment, Post Enlightenment

Luis Emilio Recabarren (1876 -1924) was an organizer and theoretician of the working class in Chile during the first quarter of the 20th century. Intellectually, he was a product of the Enlightenment and incorporated Enlightenment and Post Enlightenment theories into the education of the workers. Without losing sight of the revolutionary potential of these currents, he then moved the working class further on the revolutionary path. For these endeavors, he considered it essential that the education of workers be conducted by the workers themselves.

The Enlightenment and the Republican Strand

“We have to educate with a profound conviction in the goodness of science and in the ideas of liberty, justice, fraternity, of art and poetry” (Recabarren, 1985/1905, p. 146).

The ideals of the Enlightenment, which formed the intellectual basis for the independence struggles in the Americas, were the blazon of those republics founded by the Creole land-owning upper classes. It can hardly be said that the ideals of liberty, justice, and fraternity were fulfilled in the republics founded in the early 1800s.¹ In Chile, in particular, as Recabarren (1965c/1910) made evident in his 1910 *Rich and Poor through a Century of Republican Life*, the republic only held those ideals to be true for the upper classes.

Therefore, that Recabarren invoked those ideals as necessary in the education of children in 1905 was one of many indications that Recabarren thought that they had not been fulfilled in spite of the almost century-long independence and that the Enlightenment still held an important influence on the political outlook of those who, like Recabarren, considered themselves democrats and socialists. Due also to the failure of further attempts to establish a truly democratic republic,² the revolutionary ideals of the Enlightenment and its general approach to civilization, culture, and education remained fundamentally the same in the intellectual ethos of Chilean revolutionary thinkers.

The Age of Reason also offered a view of nature that, among other ideas, inherited by Recabarren from this era, fostered concepts such as *redemption* and *regeneration* (to be restored

¹ In the United States, there were authors such as Beard (1972/1913), who posed similar challenges to the motives and outcomes of the independence revolutions.

² Zeitlin (1984), in the *Civil Wars in Chile*, talks about the Civil War of 1851 as an “abortive bourgeois revolution” (p. xi). That revolution, which turned out to be an intra-class war, was an attempt to democratize and wrest power from the governing class and it was fought with significant participation from the trades’ organizations. Early workers’ associations, with the leadership of progressive students, were behind much of the organizing. Such is the case of the Society for Equality [Sociedad de la Igualdad], which was influenced by the events of 1848 in Europe and by the poet Lamartine.

to). Contrary to the view that these terms indicated the influence of a sort of ancestral christianity in Recabarren, as Massardo (2008) and Varas (1983) have claimed, I believe that their meanings and usages had to do with understandings of nature during the Enlightenment and post Enlightenment. As Williams (1983)³ pointed out: “The ‘state of nature’ and the newly personified idea of Nature then played critical roles in arguments about ... an obsolete or corrupt society, needing redemption and renewal” (p. 223). Recabarren, although somewhat moralistic in his overall tone, was fiercely opposed to Christianity and could not have appealed to religious sentiments when using those terms. Therefore, I believe their usage referred (as in the Enlightenment) to a return to nature and (as in post Enlightenment) to salvation from corruption. In other words, Recabarren advocated for the education of workers to save them from the corrupting forces of bourgeois society and to have their innate humanity restored to them. Furthermore, Recabarren (1986a/1913) later recognized the defeat of Christianity as a moral and civilizing force: “Two thousand years are not enough to acquire power capable of inspiring good? It proves, above all, that churches lack the power and the moral influence to do away with evil” (p. 221). This recognition of the failure of religion in its efforts to civilize society was essential for Recabarren’s thesis that it was the turn of socialism to become the civilizing force.

The concept of education as *regeneration* and *redemption* was accompanied in Recabarren’s writings by the concept of education as *enlightenment*, which he called *illustration* (using the terms illustration and culture interchangeably). This term was inherited, not by accident, from the Enlightenment era.⁴ Kant (1959) thought it was best defined in the motto *sapere aude*, “Dare to know,” or “Dare to find knowledge on your own,” while Mendelssohn (1996), answering the same question, “What is Enlightenment?,”⁵ proposed that it resided in intellectual cultivation (of which “polish” was just the external expression). While Kant (1959) considered enlightenment to be the reaching of maturity, the emancipation from the tutelage of others, Mendelssohn (1996) argued that “Education, culture and enlightenment are modifications of social life, the effects of the industry and efforts of men to better their social conditions” (p. 53). In Recabarren’s writings enlightenment [ilustración], understood both as intellectual cultivation and as polish must be one of the objectives of the education of workers. And, while the area of “culture” could mean at times European (Western) culture, bourgeois culture, most of the time Recabarren meant it to be proletarian culture: a call for the education of workers by the workers themselves to better their social conditions and an altogether new way of understanding society and its future.

The concept of culture was also linked to ethics. Recabarren (1985/1903) often made a distinction between the bourgeois ethic and the proletarian ethic. The bourgeois ethic was selfish and individualistic. The proletarian ethic demanded taking sides and it was characterized by solidarity: “among them there is a feeling of solidarity that speaks highly of the conscience that these workers have of their duties as comrades” (p. 14).

³ Raymond Williams is an adult educator and, given the importance the Enlightenment and Post Enlightenment have held in the history of working-class adult education, I consider it important to use his definitions in this context.

⁴ In Spanish the Enlightenment as an era, or as an epoch, is called [La Ilustración]. In English the Enlightenment refers to the era, and enlightenment refers to culture or knowledge; in Spanish, [La Ilustración] refers to the era of Reason and [ilustración] refers to culture as education.

⁵ Kant and Mendelssohn answered this question, thus unleashing a debate that continued to the 20th century, most famously with Adorno and Horkheimer (1982). The different definitions are of importance to this discussion because Recabarren belonged to the enlightened working class and continued to promote the ideals of the Enlightenment and post Enlightenment.

Moreover, the proletarian ethic, according to Recabarren, would conduct humanity to its happiness, which was, in his views, the ultimate reason for human existence. Loyola Tapia (2007) studied this eudaemonist⁶ aspect in Recabarren contending that “his political thought is of an essentially moral nature, where the eudaemonist aim already mentioned set as the end all be all of his combined intellectual and political action” (p. 20). But to arrive to the “happy city,” where “occupied all in useful things, there would be an abundance of everything with very little labor” (Recabarren, 1985, p. 189), workers had to be emancipated, or, rather, emancipate themselves; in other words, they must change their social conditions. Heavily influenced by *utopian socialism* in the very early stages of his activism and of his writings and by antimilitarism in later ones, Recabarren believed that this feat could be accomplished without violence. That is why his emphasis was primarily placed on the education of the working class as a means to achieve emancipation.

Emancipation as Freedom from Chains

Recabarren thought symbolically and literally of workers as *slaves*, at least until he encountered *scientific socialism*. This misconception of the role of labor in capitalist economies was not only due to his early lack of exposure to political economy studies, but also to the nature of labor in mining in the foreign enterprises in the Chilean North, and to the almost feudal characteristics of labor in the countryside. Emancipation, as freedom from enslavement and the achieving of a measure of social equality under the existing system, was all that Recabarren (1985/1898) seemed to advocate for at first, or rather, what his militancy in the Democratic Party allowed him to pursue.

Recabarren demanded at first a system of education that would provide general and obligatory schooling as a means for emancipation. In his very first published writing from 1898 Recabarren (1985) declared: “We ask for instruction for the people, as a means for social emancipation. General and obligatory schooling for the people will, in time, bring about a social transformation translated in direct benefits for the people” (p. 1). This, in fact, would have been no small undertaking given that the Constitution of 1833, in place until 1925, denied illiterates the status of citizens (only 2.5% of Chileans appear to have been eligible to vote at the turn of the century). To struggle for schooling, therefore, was to struggle for citizenship in the hopes that the right to vote would ensure a degree of participation.

At these early stages, Recabarren (1985) believed that the working-class press should be a support vehicle for the education of the workers understood as civilizing and enlightened [ilustrada]. In an article from 1901 in *La Democracia*, he combined the double civilizing role he saw the press playing: “The workers’ press has the sacred mission of contributing to the enlightenment of the people and that of bringing culture to the habits of the people” (p. 5).

Emancipation of the Working Class by the Workers Themselves: The Marxist Perspective

By 1902, the idea that workers could educate themselves towards emancipation through their own activities, such as strikes, had made its appearance in Recabarren’s writings. Citing Marx, to whom he referred as “the German sociologist Carlos Marsch” (p. 7) and impressed by the workers’ strikes going on in the north of the country, Recabarren (1985/1902) wrote to the president of the Resistance (Mancomunal) Society of Workers of Iquique:

⁶ A principle of ethics; the desire for happiness, either personal or social as the main criterion of morality and the chief motive of human behavior

Even though we live far away, separated by immense distances, we enjoy a community of ideas.... And those feelings and ideas are, my friend, the ones every worker should have: *The emancipation of the workers achieved by the workers themselves.* (p. 7)

The sentence in italics (in the original) is a direct quote from the preamble to the *Provisional Rules of the Association* by Marx (as cited in Marx & Engels, 1985): “Considering, [t]hat the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves” (p. 14). How and when Recabarren first read Marx is not clear.⁷ Most possibly the text by Marx circulated widely among socialists at the beginning of the century. At this time, and for most of his political life, Recabarren (1985/1902) considered the strike the ultimate weapon in the hands of workers for the attainment of their emancipation.

THE EMANCIPATION OF THE WORKERS MUST BE THE RESULT OF THE EFFORTS OF THE WORKERS THEMSELVES⁸, ... the experience of years must mark for you a new conduct for the future ... never again at the service of the owners, the bosses, the rich, ... let’s work but for ourselves. (pp. 8-9)

This signaled a qualitative jump in the understanding of the workers’ roles in their own destinies. Recabarren (1985/1902) argued for the necessity of labor, but he had already started posing the idea that workers could be self-sufficient: that there was no need for intermediaries; that workers could be the owners of their own labor and of the products of their labor. This was not an appeal to the whole of society but to the workers exclusively. Furthermore, “the experience of years must mark for you a new conduct for the future” (pp. 8-9) honored the history of the working class as well as the value of experiential learning; in other words, it was during strikes that the workers came to understand their own power. A “new conduct for the future,” then, went beyond a call to be regenerated, cultivated, and emancipated, to signal a turning point in social and economic relations.

Emancipation for All: The Humanist Influence

Another perspective on emancipation that ran through Recabarren’s works was the idea that the emancipation of the working class would mean the emancipation of the entire human race: the final achievement of humanity’s destiny. This belonged to the humanist current in Recabarren’s thought.⁹ This humanist influence was also related to the eudaemonist trend in Recabarren’s (1985/1904) thought, which equated good (perfection) with happiness, and both of them with “natural:”

[H]umanity can find true happiness governed exclusively by natural law and the healthy habits of the people.... [U]niversal peace and love must reign in the human family as

⁷ Millas (1962) claimed that works by Marx could be found in bookstores in Santiago, Chile, as early as 1865. Furci (1984) said that the Morel and Valdes Bookshop catalogue of 1854 listed authors such as Proudhon, Saint Simon, and Le Blanc and claimed that “There were even some early works by Karl Marx” (p. 24). Therefore, Recabarren would have had plenty of opportunities to acquire these texts.

⁸ All nonconventional usage of capitals in the quotes follows the original.

⁹ A current that Williams (1983) defined as “related to post-Enlightenment ideas of History as human self-development and self-perfection” (p. 150).

necessary virtues in the lives of people; ... in other words, we have always wanted, and we continue aspiring to the perfection of the species. (p. 53)

But, “this social state must be transformed, as everything is transformed under the action of nature ... in order to progress in the eternal causes that push the world to its perfection” (p. 53).

It was here that Recabarren (1985/1903) saw the role of the workers as not only the makers of a new society, but also the ones who would make possible for humanity to fulfill its ultimate human purpose. “Those workers are doing nothing but to clear the road of obstacles for the march of humanity towards the modern and egalitarian society with which those of us that hunger for justice dream of” (p. 15).

The “modern and egalitarian society” might have been in Recabarren views (coinciding with the Democratic Party’s reformist tendencies) an improved version of bourgeois society at first, but in time Recabarren (1985/1904) proposed that only an entire overhaul of the economic system and its accompanying social relations would secure not only equality and modernity, but ensure that humanity attain perfection.

The role of workers in *clearing the road of obstacles* was due to their place in production, which Recabarren (1985/1903) considered essential later on for their revolutionary role in bringing about and leading the new society.

Conclusion

The importance of the Enlightenment and post Enlightenment currents in working-class education has been documented in the field of Independent Working Class Education, as in the work of Simon (1965, 1990) on the different educational efforts of the British working class. Morris’s (as cited in Simon, 1965) vision of the *educative society* resembles Recabarren’s similar socialist views of education. More specifically, Morris and Recabarren shared strikingly similar views on the moral imperatives for a new society characterized by equality, where labor in combination with the arts would be both educational and a source of happiness for humankind. These traditions in the education of workers hold important examples for the field of Adult Education and motivates us to further explore the philosophical foundations of the field.

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