

A Popular University in Brazil for the People: the Way this Can Be Achieved

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Abstract

This article addresses the question of the importance of holding a debate about the current project to set up a people's university in Brazil. It is argued that a point of departure can be suggested for an in-depth approach to this question on the basis of the Marxist concept of history – which means that a people's university can only exist in a future socialist State. According to Marx, the State represents the interests of the bourgeoisie and as such, it is not in its interests to offer equal educational opportunities for everyone. The struggle for a people's university – and for people's education in general – must form a part of the struggle to replace the capitalist system with a socialist State. The big problem is to define *how*, in the light of current conditions, a pathway to socialism can be pursued. In this article, stress is laid on the importance of the "historic bloc" put forward by A. Gramsci and this, together with the legacy of L. C. Prestes, draws attention to the need to take account of *forms of transition* or *approximation* to revolutionary power, thus paving the way for a socialist revolution.

Keywords

People's university, socialism, historic bloc, forms of transition to revolutionary power.

The question of achieving or building a people's university in Brazil is currently being treated as a matter of increasing importance. The discussion of this issue has stirred up significant sectors of the academic community (the teaching staff, students and administrative officials), as well as Brazilian society. In a paper discussed at the 2nd National Seminar on People's Education which was held in August 2014, it is stated that:

The struggle for a people's university is a strategic endeavour which, as part of an overall strategy, is embedded within a broader struggle for the radical change of society; however, it needs to be viewed as a general banner to uphold the struggle to transform universities as well. In other words, it must recommend the best way to handle each conflict, whether large or small, that affects the university movement on a daily basis and which must be included in the guiding principles of the social movements that operate in universities. As a key institution, a university is a strategic bastion for changing the whole educational model, because it represents the brain of this model. Furthermore, it is a strategic means of changing the whole of society.¹

Setting out from a Marxist concept of history, a point of departure can be established for a fundamental approach to this question – we will only have a *people's university* in a future Socialist State. Karl Marx, in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*,² stated that with capitalism, it is impossible to have “equal educational opportunities”, and he questioned the position of those who support the thesis that in the (capitalist) society of his time, an equal education could be provided for all the social classes. The author of *Das Kapital* wrote that the State could not be the “educator of the people”:

That “people's education is the responsibility of the State” is absolutely inadmissible. One idea is to determine, by means of general legislation, the resources that should be allocated to public schools, the qualifications of the teaching staff, the teaching materials etc. There is also a need to check that these legal measures are being put into effect by having State inspectors such as can be found in the United States. In addition, there is something else, which is utterly different – this is to name the State educator of the people! It is necessary to detach the school from any influence on the part of the Government and Church and thus ensure it is far removed from its current position. (Idem, pp. 24-25; author's italics)

According to Marx, the State represents the interests of the bourgeoisie and as such, is not concerned with providing equality of opportunity in education for everyone. On the contrary, it is committed to educate the children of the workers in a way that will provide manpower for the capitalist companies and not question the system of capitalist exploitation.

However, there are cracks in this system caused by the inherent conditions themselves which are embedded in the capitalist system; moreover, the situation tends to be exacerbated by an increase in the rate of surplus value or in other words, in the exploitation of the workers by the bourgeoisie. This is the reason for the class struggle between the exploiters and the exploited and between the proletariat and the owners

of capital. The class struggle affects a wide range of areas of social life, including the educational sector.

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The struggle for a people's university – and for people's education in general – should thus form part of a wider attempt to replace the capitalist system with a socialist regime or rather, with socialism.

The big question is to define *how*, in the light of current conditions, a pathway to socialism can be found. The problem used to be (and continues to be) how to follow this pathway in practice without deviating into reformism, which results in revolutionary approaches being abandoned (BORÓN, 2010). Marx, Engels and Lenin teach us that without achieving *political power* through revolutionary forces, it is impossible to defeat the bourgeoisie and build a socialist society (MARX, ENGELS, 1976; LENIN, 1975).

Thus the question arises of finding possible paths to follow so that the appropriate conditions can be found for bringing about the socialist revolution. In other words, it is a question of creating kinds of *approximation* or *transition* which can enable this route to be found. Hence, there is a need to attain partial goals which do not entail stages in the strengthening of the capitalist system in new ways but rather, moments in an uninterrupted process that involves the accumulation of forces aimed at constituting what Antonio Gramsci described as the *historic bloc*.

The concept of the *historic bloc*, set out by A. Gramsci – or, in other words, of the *subject-people*³ – presupposes the *political moment* of this alliance. "Its constitution is grounded in classes or concrete groups defined by their social situation, but the ideas play a crucial role with regard to their cohesion" (BIGNAMI, s.d.: 27). In the *historic bloc*, there is "a social structure – classes and social groups – that directly depend on the relations between productive forces; however, there is also an ideological and political superstructure" (idem). In *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci wrote that according to Marx, "a popular conviction often has the same energy as a material force". According to the Italian philosopher, this statement:

strengthens the concept of "historic bloc", in which, in fact, the material forces are the content and ideologies are the form. This distinction between form and content is just heuristic because material forces would be inconceivable without form and ideologies would be individual fantasies without material forces (GRAMSCI, 2001, v. 1: 238).

The features cited in the Gramscian concept of *historic bloc*, allow us to see the frequent impoverishment of this concept among the communist parties because this phenomenon, in a general way, has characterized much of the world communist movement. In the ranks of the PCB (Brazilian Communist Party), there has been a similar stance as a result of the failure to recognize the value of ideological work in theoretical and political systems, not only among its cadres but also its popular leadership. The failure to understand the need to create a counter-hegemonic bloc that is able to lead the revolutionary process to victory, has brought about the ideological and political disarmament of the communists in face of the dominant *historic bloc* and its inevitable capitulation to bourgeois reformism (PRESTES, 2010).

In thinking of the possible *kinds of approximation* of the constitution of the Gramscian *historic bloc* (or subject-people), the legacy of Luiz Carlos Prestes is something of great value for the current scene. In 1967, on the occasion of the Sixth Congress of the PCB, in expounding his concept of a strategy for the Brazilian revolution, Prestes wrote:

(...) We are not struggling for capitalist development but for an economic development that is democratic and independent and will pave the way for socialism. At present, every anti-imperialist revolution is an integral part of the world socialist revolution.

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(...) We are marching towards a revolutionary solution which rejects capitalism as a historical perspective, but does not mean moving to socialism with immediate effect. We will achieve a conquest through a revolutionary power of anti-imperialist and democratic forces, which will not have the character of a dictatorship of the proletariat but will be able to fulfil its historic role and pave the way to further advances in the progress to socialism.⁴

In a minority position within the Central Committee of PCB, Prestes, its Secretary-General, supported a tactic of struggle against the military dictatorship that was established in Brazil, following the coup d'état of 1964 and which constituted the "achievement of a revolutionary, democratic and anti-imperialist government that is able to open up a path to socialism for the proletariat". According to Prestes, "the struggle against the dictatorship should result not only in the liquidation of the semi-fascist political regime but go on and lead to the liquidation of the system of capitalists and landowners who are linked to imperialism".⁵ The Secretary-General of the PCB wrote as follows:

This is not an abstract hypothesis since there are objective premises on the basis of which this process can take place. The crisis which is being debated in Brazil cannot be resolved without carrying out radical structural reforms – that is, they cannot be resolved unless there is a revolution. The struggle against the dictatorship should follow a course that will lead to its overthrow and with it, the prevailing social regime itself. However, before this outcome can be brought about, the forces concerned – the working-class, the urban petty bourgeoisie and the peasant farmers – must find a revolutionary solution. They must represent their force as an anti-dictatorial front and play this role in a struggle against the dictatorship. This means that when it is overthrown, there will be the right conditions to proceed with the aim of extending it until it acquires a revolutionary character. (Idem)

But Prestes raised an alternative hypothesis:

The dictatorship might be defeated and liquidated without the revolutionary forces of the anti-dictatorial front being able to deploy enough power to proceed further and establish a revolutionary power in place of the dictatorship. In this case the new government that emerges might be more or less democratic, more or less progressive, depending on the actual correlation of the forces that exist at the time of its constitution. In this case, the communists might or might not be able to take part in this government, and give it support, depending on the exact character that it has. But whether or not the communists participate in and support an anti-dictatorial government that is established in the country, it will continue to struggle for its revolutionary objectives. (Idem)

The position supported by Prestes, in his struggle against the reformism that predominated in the Central Committee of the PCB, is comparable to the stance taken several years later by Fidel Castro, in a speech about Chile during the period of the government of Salvador Allende:

A true revolutionary is always seeking the maximum degree of social change. However, seeking this social change does not mean that it can be offered at any moment but only at a particular time and in accordance with the degree of growing awareness and interrelationships between the

forces that can put this determined objective into effect. And once this goal has been attained, another objective is set although at a later date. The revolutionary is not committed to following this path.⁶

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The fact that Luis Carlos Prestes remained in exile, owing to the violent repression of the communists unleashed by the governments of E.G. Médici and E.Geisel, meant that he was able provide a precise formulation of his concepts of the *kinds of transition* or *approximation* to a power that is effectively revolutionary:

The achievement of a democratic regime does not imply (...) a simple return to the past. The fragile and vulnerable democracy of 1964 does not correspond to the wishes of the people. The struggle of all the patriots and democrats should only be designed to bring about a crushing defeat of Fascism and instal a new democracy, which can ensure wide-ranging freedoms for the people and an economic, political and social democracy that can solve the most serious and pressing problems of the nation.⁷

In the following passage, Prestes clarified what the *new democracy* involved for his proposal:

It entails achieving a democracy that is stable and can prevent any return to Fascism. In undertaking this, the new democracy will have to take measures that constrain the economic power of the monopolies and landed estates and which is driven by a need for their complete liquidation. (...) The new democracy must be a regime that is set up by a government comprising the forces of a single patriotic front that is opposed to Fascism. Moreover, it must pave the way for radical changes of a democratic and anti-imperialist character as required today by Brazilian society. (Idem; my italics)

In carrying out a critical appraisal of the mistakes made by the Brazilian communists in 1935, Prestes underlined the fact that, “instead of strengthening the popular, anti-imperialist and anti-fascist front and proceeding to gather our forces through a struggle of the masses in defence of democratic freedom and against Fascism, we acted prematurely in our bid for power”. He added that this is a lesson for modern times because it explained “the defeat of the ultra-left groups” which fought against dictatorship in Brazil. Prestes stated:

It involves struggling for democratic freedoms, the rights of workers and the “immediate economic and political interests of the working-class”. As expressed in the words of Dimitrov in his memorable address to the 7th Congress of International Communists, in reality struggling against a dictatorship (...) is a difficult and drawn-out process which does not allow any haste or risk-taking. Moreover, it will bring together the antidictatorial forces and allow us to organize a united front that is able to isolate and overcome the dictatorship.⁸

After drawing attention to the contribution made by the Bulgarian revolutionaries in the combat carried out by left-wing radicalism, Prestes (as a part of his legacy), cited the contemporary relevance of certain theses which, by reminding us of the recommendations of Lenin, stress the importance of “kinds of transition that can lead to revolution”. According to Dimitrov, the opportunists on the right “have tended to establish a certain intermediate democratic stage”, that is a new stage which as Prestes states, “in the case of Brazil can be found between the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie and the revolutionary government. This, in practice, inevitably leads to the abandonment of the revolutionary banner of the Party without which it is impossible for the proletariat to act as a united anti-dictatorial front and defeat the hegemony”. (Idem)

In seeking to define what “this government of transition for the defeat of the revolutionary government”, would be like for Brazil, Prestes states that this kind of government:

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will emerge as something that is able to ensure the independent growth of the national economy. It will be a government of struggle against imperialism and reaction and in defence of national sovereignty. Moreover, it will require taking measures against the landed estates and imperialist domination and preparing the masses to confront counter-revolution. (Idem)

On the same occasion, Prestes postulated a struggle resulting from:

a new revolutionary which will pave the way to the development of society, and which, without being socialist, will make a decisive break with the classic moulds of the capitalist structure and establish a new relationship between the inner forces of society. Or, to cite the great Lenin: “(...) It will not be socialism but at the same time, it will not be capitalism. It will represent a giant stride towards our socialist goal”. (Idem)

A few years later when still in exile, Prestes restated the thesis of a struggle to achieve a new type of democracy, which would not mean a return to the past, (in other words, a return to a liberal democracy), but rather be *a kind of transition* to a revolutionary power:

The only way of consolidating the victory of the anti-fascist forces and preventing a return to the vile system of oppression, will be to establish a new type of democracy. This will be a regime that will represent the interests of the forces attached to the patriotic and anti-fascist front by constituting a kind of transition to the national and democratic revolutionary power or in other words, to a system that is antimonopolist and anti-imperialist. This democratic regime will guarantee full freedom to all the anti-monopolist forces and set in motion the process of restricting the power of the monopolies, especially those from North America.⁹

Prestes insisted in his thesis that the communists should strive to ensure that a new type of democracy that is more forward-looking than bourgeois democracy, is established in the country and that ‘*a kind of transition*’ is constituted as the national and democratic power.¹⁰ Although isolated among the leaders of the PCB (PRESTES, 2012), Prestes maintained a firm stance against reformist tendencies and constantly supported the thesis that in the struggle for democratic freedom, the communists should fight for *a more forward-looking regime*, which would allow the right conditions for the socialist revolution:

In struggling for a democratic exit for the current situation in the country, we will support any regime that arises as a result of the defeat of Fascism, provided that it ensures that the democratic freedoms and rights of workers are put into effect. In whatever circumstances, we will continue to fight for a more forward-looking regime, together with a democracy that is not only political but also economic and social and lay the ground for the advent of socialism as our ultimate objective. We believe that by struggling today against Fascism and for democracy, we are laying the ground for the working-class masses to achieve national and democratic power which will pave the way for socialism.¹¹

The ideas supported by Prestes with regard to the *kinds of approximation* to a revolutionary power that are able to open up a route to changes of a socialist character, will not lose their validity in the current political scene when confronted by the forces of the left in Brazil, so long as they are pledged to bring about the revolutionary process that will drive our country forward.

After ten years of policies continually emanating from the neo-liberal “court”, as applied by consecutive PT [Brazilian Workers’ Party] governments, huge crowds of people went out on to the streets at the beginning of June 2013. They were spontaneous protests against several problems experienced by these sectors – public transport, public health, public education, wasteful expenditure on the preparations for the World Cup, etc. They included disorganized protests that were lacking leadership or any defined planning, protests not just by young people but among a wide range of social sectors. They were angry about the negligence of the governments and existing political parties, and the general corruption and demoralization, a lack of commitment to the electorate and finally with the violence of the police that was unleashed against the demonstrators.

In the light of these unexpected popular demonstrations, it is possible to explain the enthusiasm shown by all those who regard themselves as being on the left and count on popular uprisings as a means of paving the way to radical social and political changes characterized by social justice and democracy which are needed to achieve a future for our people. This is a future in which it will be possible to obtain a popular university and thus effectively be an achievement in education of a popular character.

It should be understood that before this future can be attained, it is essential to follow the path towards achieving *popular revolutionary power*, (and able to set in motion changes in the direction of socialism). We can conclude that this entails devising a project that encompasses *kinds of transition* to this power in building the *historic bloc*, or *counter-hegemonic subject-people*, and the skills needed for carrying out the revolutionary changes that are found to be necessary today.

Given the degree of spontaneity and disorganization that can be witnessed in sectors of the public today, is it feasible to expect *popular power* to be able to achieve an immediate victory? Is it viable, at present, to carry out a *political reform* which can address the demands of the people? Will it be possible, in the near future, to elect a *Constituent Assembly* that is committed to the interests of the workers?

How can these objectives be attained without making progress in building the *historic bloc* (or *subject-people*)? In other words, can there be social forces, and organized policies together with an awareness of their transforming role and, for this reason, can the people who have a plan unite to attain feasible goals for the Brazil of today?

The answers to these questions are clear when it is understood that we are faced with a *lengthy period that involves mobilizing, organizing and heightening the consciousness of workers and the popular sectors* in a general way. On the basis of the particular demands of each of these sectors, whoever regards himself as being on the left must take steps to ensure that through patient and steady action, they can successfully form the *counter-hegemonic historic bloc*. They can be united by a project of revolutionary change which is drawn up in the heat of the popular struggles for their demands to be met and shaped by the theoretical support of intellectual Marxists who are committed to the socialist revolution in Brazil. Thus it is a project that should include the formation of *revolutionary parties* that are capable of leading the struggle to acquire popular power, with the resulting call for a *Constituent Assembly* that can effectively represent the public sectors.

The historical experience of popular struggles in several places in the world, as well as in our country, shows that the “voluntarist stances” – the characteristic euphemism of the petit-bourgeois – do not help to accelerate the intended revolutionary changes. On the contrary, they hold back the process of constituting the social and political forces and skills that can lead the working-class masses to achieve *kinds of approximation of*

revolutionary power. This is done by isolating the so-called vanguards who, without popular support, are led to defeat, as happened on the occasion of the overthrow of João Goulart with the military-civilian coup d'état in 1964.

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The legacy of Luiz Carlos Prestes, in pointing out the need to consider possible *kinds of transition* or *approximation* to revolutionary power, which can pave the way to the socialist revolution, represent a valiant undertaking by the forces of the left. Today, these are engaged in a struggle to bring about radical changes to Brazilian society, as well as to make transformations that are at odds with the devious schemes of the politics of the dominant classes, whose only policy is "everything needs to change so everything can stay the same", in the celebrated motto of "O Leopardo" by Lampeduza.¹²

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Notes

1. Cf. 2º SENUP – National Seminar of the Popular University, 8th, 9th and 10th of August, 2014 – São Paulo – Cadernos de Debates, p. 6. In: <senup2014.blogspot.com.br>.
2. MARX, Karl. "Critique of the Gotha Programme". In: Marx, C., Engels, F. Selected works. Moscow: Editorial Progreso, 1976, v. 3, pp. 5-27.
3. Subject-people: category used by some Latin-American intellectuals, which is related to the Gramscian concept of the historic bloc, in other words, subject-people. This not only expresses the number of different social sectors in numerical terms but also the bearer of new cultural values and constitutes an alternative power (cf., for example, BIGNAMI, 2009: 23, 26, 28 e 107).
4. "Report about the de Balance Sheet of the CC at the Sixth Congress (Dec. 1967)" (PCB, 1980: 97; my italics).
5. ALMEIDA, Antônio (pseudonym of Prestes). "Karl Marx and Marxism". *Voz Operária*, 1968, n. 41, p. 8.
6. CASTRO RUZ, Fidel. Fidel in Chile. Complete text of of his dialogue with the people. Santiago: Quimantú, 1972, p. 90; apud BORON (2010: 74); my italics.
7. "Manifesto of Prestes" (29/10/1974). *Voz Operária*, supplement, Dec. 1974, n. 118; my italics.

8. PRESTES, Luiz Carlos. "Intervention in the Seminar devoted to the 90th Anniversary of Jorge Dimitrov", typed document, 10 p., Sofia (Bulgaria), 18/6/1972 (author's private file). 282
9. "Intervention of the Brazilian delegate", typed document, 17th., Jun. 1975 (Author's private file); my italics.
10. "Political report" (discussed and approved at the CC meeting of the PCB in December, 1975), mimeographed pamphlet, 33 p. (author's private file), pp. 32-33; my italics.
11. "Political Resolution Project" (Central Committee of the PCB, Feb. 1977). Typed document, 12 p. (author's private file); my italics. [This project was rejected by the Executive Commission of the CC of PCB.]
12. "The Leopard", the famous novel by G.T. de Lampedusa, portrays the capacity for adaptation of the nobility of Sicily in Italy at the end of the 19th Century, when faced with the rise of the new middle-class-the bourgeoisie.

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