

## **8 | The World Social Forum and self-learning: the Popular University of the Social Movements**

The work of translation analysed in Chapter 7 is a daunting task and it will not be accomplished easily. It involves a complex process of global self-knowledge and self-training aimed at increasing reciprocal knowledge among the movements and organizations. The ecologies of knowledges I referred to in Chapter 2 of this book, as one of the features of an epistemology of the South, will not emerge spontaneously. On the contrary, because they confront the monoculture of scientific knowledge, they will develop only through a sociology of absences whereby suppressed, marginalized and discredited knowledges are made present and credible. As I said, the sociology of absences is no conventional sociology and cannot be pursued in the conventional sites for the production of hegemonic scientific knowledge, i.e. the universities and research centres. This does not mean that in those sites counter-hegemonic scientific knowledge cannot be produced. It can, and the WSF has benefited from it. What such sites cannot produce is ecologies of knowledges, that is to say promoting meaningful dialogues among different kinds of knowledges (science being one of them, and an important one in many instances), identifying alternative sources of knowledge and alternative knowledge creators, and experimenting with alternative criteria of rigour and relevance in light of shared objectives of emancipatory social transformation. The ecologies of knowledges call for context-bound, situated, useful knowledges embedded in transformative practices. Accordingly, they can be pursued only in settings as close as possible to such practices, and in such a way that the protagonists of social action are also the protagonists of knowledge creation.

In this regard, at the 2003 WSF I proposed the creation of a Popular University of the Social Movements (PUSM) with the purpose of enabling the self-education of activists and leaders of social movements, as well as social scientists, scholars and artists concerned with progressive social transformation.<sup>1</sup> The designation of 'popular university' was used not so much to evoke the working-class universities that proliferated in Europe and Latin America in the early twentieth century, as to convey the idea that after a century of elitist higher education a popular uni-

versity is necessarily a counter-university. Since 2003, the proposal has been discussed on several occasions with different groups and people involved in the WSF.<sup>2</sup> In the following, I present the original proposal and briefly describe the initiatives undertaken to carry it out.

### **A proposal for collective transformative self-learning: the Popular University of the Social Movements**

*What the PUSM is and isn't*<sup>3</sup> PUSM is not a school for training cadres or leaders of NGOs and social movements. Although PUSM is clearly oriented towards action for social transformation, its aim is not to offer the kinds of skills and training that are usually provided by such schools. Nor is PUSM a think tank of NGOs and social movements. Although it highly values strategic research and reflection, PUSM rejects the distance that one and the other usually maintain vis-à-vis collective action.

The major objective of PUSM is to help make knowledge of alternative globalization as global as globalization itself, and, at the same time, to render actions for social transformation better known and more efficient, and its protagonists more competent and reflective. To meet its goals PUSM will have to be more international and intercultural than similar existing initiatives.

*Rationale* As I argued above, the movement for an alternative globalization is a new political phenomenon focused on the idea that the current phase of global capitalism, known as neo-liberal globalization, requires new forms of resistance and new directions for social emancipation. From within this movement, made up of a large number of social movements and NGOs, new social agents and practices are emerging. They operate in an equally new framework, networking local, national and global struggles. Present theories of social change, even those concerned with emancipatory social change, cannot adequately deal with this political and cultural novelty.

This gap between theory and practice has negative consequences both for genuinely progressive social movements and NGOs, and the universities and research centres, where scientific social theories have traditionally been produced. Both leaders and activists of social movements and NGOs feel the lack of theories enabling them to reflect analytically on their practice and clarify their methods and objectives. Furthermore, progressive social scientists/scholars/artists, isolated from these new practices and agents, cannot contribute to this reflection and clarification. They can even make things more difficult by

insisting on concepts and theories that are not adequate to these new realities.

The proposal for a PUSM is meant to contribute to filling this gap and correcting the two deficiencies it produces. Ultimately, its objective is to overcome the distinction between theory and practice by bringing the two together through systematic encounters between those who mainly devote themselves to the practice of social change and those who mainly engage in theoretical production.

The kind of training envisioned by PUSM is therefore two-pronged. On the one hand, it aims to enable self-education of activists and community leaders of social movements and NGOs, by providing them with adequate analytical and theoretical frameworks. The latter will enable them to deepen their reflective understanding of their practice – their methods and objectives – enhancing their efficacy and consistency. On the other hand, it aims to enable self-education of progressive social scientists/scholars/artists interested in studying the new processes of social transformation, by offering them the opportunity of a direct dialogue with their protagonists. This will make it possible to identify, and whenever possible to eliminate, the discrepancy between the analytical and theoretical frameworks in which they were trained and the concrete needs and aspirations emerging from new transformational practices.

In this two-pronged educational approach lies the novelty of PUSM. To achieve its objective, PUSM must overcome the conventional distinction between teaching and learning – based on the distinction between teacher and pupil – thus creating contexts and moments for reciprocal learning. Recognition of reciprocal ignorance is its starting point. Its end point is the shared production of knowledges as global and diverse as the globalization processes themselves.

Beyond the gap between theory and practice, PUSM intends to tackle two problems that currently permeate all movements for a counter-hegemonic globalization. First, the scarcity of reciprocal knowledge that still exists among movements/NGOs active in the same thematic area and operating in different parts of the globe. The WSF and all the other regional and thematic forums have been powerful instruments in highlighting this need and showing the importance of reciprocal knowledge. Given their sporadic nature and short lifespan, however, they have been unable to fulfil this need. Without this reciprocal knowledge, it is impossible to increase the density and complexity of movement networks. Without this expansion it is not possible to augment significantly the efficacy and consistency of transformational actions beyond what has been achieved so far.

The other problem is the lack of shared knowledge among movements/organizations active in different thematic areas and struggles. This gap is even wider than the previous one, and bridging it is equally important. Because, as I said in Chapter 7, a general theory globally encompassing all movements and practices in all thematic areas is impossible (and if possible it would be undesirable), we need to create conditions for reciprocal intelligibility among movements through the work of translation laid out above. The PUSM is a permanent workshop of translation aimed at enhancing the density and complexity of the movements' networks fighting against neo-liberal globalization.

*Activities* PUSM has three principal activities: pedagogical activities, research activities for social transformation, and activities for spreading capabilities and tools for inter-thematic, transnational and intercultural translation.

**PEDAGOGICAL ACTIVITIES.** PUSM will be structured on the basis of workshops, attended by a limited number of activists/movement leaders, and social scientists/scholars/artists. Each workshop will last two weeks on a full-time basis, alternating periods for discussion, study and reflection and leisure.

Each workshop will have about ten discussion sessions. Activists/movement leaders and social scientists/scholars/artists will take turns in preparing and running these sessions. Study materials will be of various kinds: oral narratives and documents presented by movements and organizations about both successful and unsuccessful campaigns/struggles, and theoretical and analytical texts proposed by social scientists/scholars, dramatic plays<sup>4</sup> and art objects and activities proposed by artists. Each workshop will have two coordinators, one an activist/leader and the other a scientist/scholar/artist. Both activist/leaders and artists/scholars/artists will work as consecutive translators, whenever needed and feasible.

Each workshop will consist of two phases: thematic and inter-thematic. The thematic phase will be concerned with deepening the theoretical and practical knowledge of movements and organizations working in a given area, be it labour, indigenous people, feminism, environment, peace, human rights, fair trade, land, peasant agriculture, intellectual property rights, and so on. The inter-thematic phase will be concerned with the sharing of experiences and knowledges between at least two fields of collective action and their respective movements and organizations.

To this effect, at least two workshops will be held at the same time at PUSM. The first week of each workshop will be dedicated to deepening the theme. In the second week, activists/leaders and social scientists/scholars/artists participating in two (or more) workshops will meet together.

In its thematic phase, workshop discussions will deal with, among other things, the following:

1. accounts and trajectories of organization and action;
2. reflection on successful and unsuccessful practices;
3. discussion of the most complex issues, the most deeply felt wants;
4. discussion of objectives, strategies and methodologies;
5. discussion of topics proposed in the ambit of the two other activities of PUSM (see below), deemed by the coordinators as having particular relevance for the NGOs and movements that participate in the workshops.

Activists/leaders in particular will discuss and reflect on the basis of their practices. In addition to their role as discussion facilitators, social scientists/scholars/artists will have the specific task of conveying the compared experience of movements and organizations that are not present, but which have accumulated relevant knowledge. Participation of social scientists/scholars/artists from the Global South is particularly desirable, as in general they have more experience in linking theory and practice.

At the conclusion of the thematic phase, workshop participants will define by consensus a set of issues to be discussed with the other workshop (or workshops). The two (or more) sets of issues – one set for each thematic workshop – will be the basis for the inter-thematic phase of the workshops.

At the conclusion of each workshop, a rapporteur chosen by the participants will present a detailed report on discussions and main conclusions. This report will be disseminated among all movements, associations and social scientists/scholars/artists who have joined the PUSM network.

Fellowships and grants will be available for movement leaders/activists and social scientists/scholars/artists unable to pay for their participation.

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION. Besides being a network of plural knowledges, PUSM aims to be a network for the creation of plural knowledges. As the pedagogical activities

evolve, themes and problems deemed relevant but as yet little known and understood will emerge. Workshop participants will be encouraged to identify these topics and problems, forwarding them to the translation coordination unit. The selected topics and problems will be researched by the PUSM network in the light of various participatory methodologies.<sup>5</sup>

ACTIVITIES FOR THE DIFFUSION OF TRANSLATION CAPABILITIES AND TOOLS. These activities consist in the diffusion of the translation methods and the concrete results obtained with them in the different workshops, namely in terms of new knowledges, designations, concepts, principles and methods of collective action, etc. For example, the concepts of democracy, direct action, social emancipation, socialism, non-violence, sagacity, *Satyagraha*, human rights, *swaraj*, multiculturalism, strike action, sovereignty, revolution, *umma*, *dharma*, and so on and so forth. Every one of these items is less global than globalization from below. Some are current within a given regional or thematic ambit, but totally unknown within others. Some are valorized positively by given movements or NGOs, but rejected by others. Different items are adequate in different ways for different scales of action (local, national, global).

Based on the analysis of the final reports of the workshops, the translation coordination unit will propose criteria to assess the limits and potentialities of each item for inter-thematic, transnational and intercultural usage. Such proposals will be organized according to two large sets: the lexicons and the manifestos.

The *lexicons* concern items that are mainly discursive: designations, concepts, knowledges, classifications, etc.

The *manifestos* concern items that are predominantly performative: principles and methodologies of action, instances of successful links among practices, etc.

The proposals will be refined through the PUSM Network as well as through the set of networks that make up alternative globalization, namely those participating in the World Social Forum.

### *Organization*

PUSM comprises two operative units: PUSM Headquarters and PUSM Network.

PUSM HEADQUARTERS. This unit will operate in a country of intermediate development (say, Brazil, India, South Africa, Mexico). It includes the coordinating committee, the translation coordination unit

and the executive committee. The first workshops will take place at the headquarters. PUSM Network will be managed here as well.

The *coordinating committee* is constituted of representatives of all the movements and NGOs that are part of PUSM Network. Its job is to coordinate the activities of PUSM and select the translation coordination unit and the executive committee.

The functions of the *translation coordination* unit are:

1. selecting workshops and their participants;
2. supervising activities, both pedagogical and those relating to research for change;
3. generating materials for diffusion as translation capabilities and tools;
4. granting scholarships to activists/leaders and social scientists/scholars/artists who are not self-funded.

The *executive committee* handles the administration of PUSM Headquarters, prepares and manages the budget, and takes care of fund-raising.

PUSM Headquarters will establish a relationship of privileged collaboration (as regards training and rendering of services) with the cooperatives, organizations and movements of the city or region of its location.

**PUSM NETWORK.** PUSM Network is composed of the set of organizations and movements that adhere to PUSM's Charter of Principles, and engage significantly in any one of the three major kinds of activities that constitute PUSM. The charter will be drafted by the NGOs/social movements that take responsibility for the foundation of the PUSM.

### **The PUSM, 2003–06**

The proposal was enthusiastically welcomed, which shows that the PUSM meets an objective need. Some social movements expressed a concern to keep the PUSM under the direct control of the social movements, to ensure that the university will really be a school *of*, and not *for*, the social movements. Behind this concern was the more or less explicit fear that the PUSM might end up being controlled by the NGOs, always suspected of having more financial resources and being politically less radical. The strongest resistance came from organizations already involved with similar educational initiatives, such as cadre schools, summer courses for activists, citizenship schools. The discussions had made it clear that the novelty of the PUSM resided in its

inter-thematic character (most of the initiatives already in existence are organized by thematic movements) and its global scope (existing initiatives have a national or regional scope).<sup>6</sup> Far from aiming to compete with these other initiatives, the PUSM was intended to complement the efforts already made, focusing mainly on promoting the dialogue at the global level among different political cultures and traditions of activism. At the 2005 WSF, a group of about sixty organizations and movements committed themselves to bringing about the creation of the PUSM, and a technical secretariat was constituted to coordinate the actions to be taken to that effect.<sup>7</sup> One of the organizations in favour of the proposal, Euralat, offered to set up an international meeting in Rome to discuss the proposal in greater detail and plan the first steps leading to the creation of the PUSM. The meeting, bringing together twenty-six organizations, took place in Rome in September 2005.<sup>8</sup>

The Rome meeting was decisive in stimulating the actual process of creation of the PUSM. Its objectives, methodology and structure were identified more rigorously, and the first steps leading on to its effective creation were agreed upon.

### *Objectives*

1. The theoretical and analytical deficit in the majority of the social movements is quite obvious, as is the crisis in the social sciences; hence the need for rigorous processes of production of new knowledges, resulting from constructive dialogue between social movements and democratic intellectuals/social scientists, and from the systematization of the rich experience of the said movements.
2. It is imperative to ameliorate the political action of the social movements. Their understanding of contemporary phenomena can be improved, as can their capacity to propose and contribute to the construction of a more just world and society. In view of the crisis in political practice in the world today, the question of how to strengthen the social and political impact of the social movements must be constantly addressed.
3. The priority of the PUSM is not the training of movement leaders, which is already the task of several institutions in various continents. To be sure, systematizing experience and building new knowledges will necessarily contribute to forming social leadership as well. It is highly probable that setting up this initiative will end up having a positive impact on the current training programmes for social cadres and leaders.
4. Much elaboration and synthesis is being carried out in many parts

of the world, of which the social movements elsewhere are unaware. The purpose of the PUSM is to contribute to rendering this work visible.

5. The PUSM aims at promoting strategic alliances not only among the social movements themselves, but also between the social movements and democratic intellectuals/social scientists who are also eager to contribute to social transformation. A good number of the intellectuals and social scientists who participate in or are very close to the WSF are also social and political activists, or would like to be. The PUSM is an excellent space for such people.
6. With regard to relations with the intellectuals/social scientists, the question of the PUSM's stance vis-à-vis the existing universities, whether conventional or alternative, and particularly vis-à-vis the public universities, also needs to be addressed.
7. The PUSM must guard against ethnocentrism, careful not to presume uniformity where there are significant historical and cultural differences among the social movements and regions. Since identities are not immutable essences but rather relations, it is to be expected that they will change gradually, along with changes in knowledge, mutual recognition and joint action.

### *Methodology*

1. The work of translation between knowledges and practices is the main method of accomplishing the objectives of the PUSM.
2. The formation of translators, both inside the movements and in the academic world, occurs through confrontational dialogues to encourage an action–reflection–action process. The ultimate objective is not to reach total mutual intelligibility or transparency. It is rather to foster the level of inter-knowledge and trust capable of generating joint actions.
3. The struggle in a hegemonic system implies disputing meanings and concepts often deeply embedded in common sense, such as the naturalization of the economy and the political and military system. The actions and programmes of the different social movements do not confront each other in an empty space. They occur in a field of relations of hegemony, in which other collective actors (political, social or intellectual) have projects and strategies that are dissonant from or even antagonistic to those of the social movements. It befits the PUSM to recognize and analyse this situation, bearing in mind both the necessary confrontation and the possible alliances.
4. The work of translation is no mere analytical and rational work. It

also fosters the emotions and affections that permit progress from a relation of trust to the decision to share collective actions, which may eventually turn out to be risky.

### *Organization*

1. A balance between in-person and electronic interaction (PUSM Headquarters and PUSM Network) must be attempted.
2. The same goes for the three kinds of activities that characterize the PUSM: pedagogical activities; research activities for social transformation; activities for the diffusion of translation capabilities and tools. The PUSM will organize its activities autonomously. As a network, it will integrate in its activities all the activities carried out by the organizations and movements that subscribe to the Charter of Principles. Such activities may embrace schools, universities, summer courses, training sessions, research projects, etc.
3. If possible, the work of translation should be introduced on an experimental basis in ongoing or planned dialogues among movements. The aim is to obtain information to help design the activities that the PUSM organizes autonomously, namely its first pilot workshops.
4. The PUSM comprises an assembly, a technical secretariat and a methodological working group. The assembly is constituted by all the movements/organizations that subscribed to the Charter of Principles. The task of the assembly is: to choose the thematic and inter-thematic dialogues, bearing in mind, whenever possible, concrete requests of the WSF, namely of its International Council; to define the criteria of participation in the workshops organized autonomously by the PUSM; to designate the technical secretariat.

The technical secretariat is made up of representatives of at least five geographically and culturally distinct organizations. Their task is to organize the activities of the PUSM and manage its resources. Their term is two years with a limit of two terms.

The methodological working group is made up of people with pedagogical and knowledge-building experience in or with the social movements. Its role is to develop the translation method: to propose themes, pedagogies and methodologies; to prepare evaluations of the thematic and inter-thematic workshops to be discussed at the assembly.

### *Plan of activities 2006*

1. To implement the translation method in the 'South-South Dialogue'

currently taking place between movements/organizations that constitute SADC (Southern African Development Community) and the southern cone of Latin America (Mercosur).<sup>9</sup>

2. To prepare the first pilot workshop of the PUSM.
3. To prepare the Charter of Principles.
4. To systematize the ongoing experiences of collective and transformative self-learning, namely the experiences of Andean leaders' training, and the experiences of popular education in the ambit of the struggles against the FTAA and the bilateral free trade treaties in Latin America.
5. To identify movements/organizations interested in joining the PUSM.
6. To accept as an activity of the PUSM the proposal 'Histories of Possible Worlds: international competition on experiences of struggle and social change', presented by the Università Popolare di Roma.<sup>10</sup>
7. To add representatives of movements/organizations from Africa and Asia to the technical secretariat appointed at the WSF 2005 (whose term lasts until the first meeting of the assembly of the PUSM).
8. To create the PUSM website.

The PUSM is under way. In the short term, the most important substantive task is to proceed with the work of intercultural and trans-political translation in the ambit of the South–South Dialogue, with two meetings scheduled for 2006. The evaluation of the results will provide valuable indications as how to advance with the PUSM project.

## Notes

1 The proposal was published for the first time in *Terraviva* (IBASE), 14 January 2003, pp. 78–83.

2 It was discussed in Madrid, on 25 April 2003, at the headquarters of ACSUR-Las Segovias, with Pedro Santana, Tomas Villasante, Juan Carlos Monedero and several other activists of Spanish and Latin American NGOs; in Amsterdam, on 18 May, at the meeting of fellows of the Transnational Institute; in Cartagena de Indias, on 16–20 June, during the Thematic World Social Forum on Democracy, Human Rights, Wars, and Narcotraffic, in a workshop coordinated by Pedro Santana, Giampero Rasimelli, Moema Miranda and myself; in Rio de Janeiro, on 2 September, at the IBASE headquarters, with Cândido Grzybowski, Moema Miranda, several other members of IBASE and Jorge Romano of Actionaid; in Mumbai at the 2004 WSF and in Porto Alegre at the 2005 WSF; in Rome, on 13–15 September 2005, in an international meeting convened by Euralat, UPTER/Università Popolare di Roma and Associazione ONGs Italiane; and in Caracas at the 2006 polycentric WSF.

3 There is no consensus on the name to be given to the proposed institution. Some consider the term 'university' elitist. Others think that the term

'popular university' entails identification with initiatives of communist parties and other left organizations of the first decades of the twentieth century. School? Academy? Open University of the Social Movements? Global University of Social Movements? Global Network of Knowledges? School for Global Citizenship? The organizations that decided at the 2005 WSF to take upon themselves the task of actually creating the popular university adopted the original name, adding as a kind of subtitle 'Global Network of Knowledges'.

4 For example, the Theatre of the Oppressed, the methodology proposed by Augusto Boal and used today in seventy countries.

5 One such methodology could be that developed by the Institute of Liberation Philosophy (Brazil) after Paulo Freire's pedagogy.

6 One initiative, among the most recent ones, must be highlighted: the creation of the Florestan Fernandes School for the formation of MST cadres in Brazil. In 2004, a proposal was made to create the Urban Popular University. The initiative came from the International Alliance of Inhabitants (IAI), one of the founding organizations of the PUSM. The objectives of the Urban Popular University are: (1) to respond to the need for research on and reflection about a global strategy of justice concerning the social construction of habitat and addressing housing issues; and (2) to encourage, facilitate and strengthen the organizational development of the various members of IAI (information obtained at: <[www.habitants.org/article/articleview/1100/1/208/](http://www.habitants.org/article/articleview/1100/1/208/)>, accessed 22 January 2006).

7 The secretariat was composed of five organizations: CES – Centre for Social Studies, Coimbra University; Euralat – Eurolatinamerican Observatory on Democratic and Social Development; IBASE – Brazilian Institute for Economic and Social Analysis; ICAE – International Council for Adult Education; IPF – Institute Paulo Freire.

8 The following organizations participated in the Rome meeting: Alianza Internacional de los Habitantes; CAFOLIS (Ecuador); Central Argentina de Trabajadores; Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones Alforja – Centroamerica; Centre for Judicial and Legal Training (Mozambique); CIMAS – Grupo de Trabajo de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid (Spain); Consejo de Educación de Adultos de América Latina (CEAAL); International Council of the World Education Forum; Corporación Región (Medellin, Colombia); Corporación Viva la Ciudadanía (Colombia); Centre for Social Studies (Coimbra University, Portugal); EURALAT – Eurolatinamerican Observatory on Democratic and Social Development; Federación Colombiana de Educadores (FECODE); FIPEC – Federazione Italiana per l'Educazione Continua; IBASE; International Council for Adult Education (ICAE); Instituto de Gobierno y Políticas Públicas de la Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona (Spain); Instituto Paulo Freire (Brazil); Laboratorio de Política Pública do Rio de Janeiro e Buenos Aires; RAAB; Rede Mova (Brazil); UNISANGIL (Colombia); Universidad General Sarmiento, Instituto de Estudios Económicos (Argentina); Universidad Pedagógica Nacional de Colombia; UPTER – Università Popolare di Roma.

9 This initiative may be accessed at <[www.ibase.org.br](http://www.ibase.org.br)>.

10 This may be accessed at <[www.upter.it](http://www.upter.it)>.