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Book Review: *Textos clave de la extensión crítica latinoamericana y caribeña* (Key Readings on Critical Community Engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean)

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Book Review: *Textos clave de la extensión crítica latinoamericana y caribeña* (Key Readings on Critical Community Engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean)

Erreguerena, F. (Ed.). (2023). *Textos clave de la extensión crítica latinoamericana y caribeña*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, 668 p., ISBN 978-987-813-411-6.

Reviewed by Matias G. Flores and Paulette Dougnac

Abstract

This book showcases the tradition and high level of entrenchment of community engagement in Latin American university culture. Specifically, it focuses on a branch called “Extensión Crítica” (critical community engagement), which emerges as a rescue and revalorization of the dialogic and transformative engagement perspectives that marked the practice and reflection on this subject in the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America, in response to current neoliberal approaches to the linkage between university and society. The book aims to “contribute to a greater theoretical, epistemological and methodological density” (17) to the Latin American and Caribbean Critical Community Engagement movement. The book develops seven “conceptual matrices” from which the movement draws: the University Reform Movement tradition, Paulo Freire and popular education, Latin American critical thinking, feminist movement, anti-colonial perspectives, territory, and participatory methodologies. Three key readings were selected for each conceptual matrix. Nine authors developed its main structure and introductions, and 25 authors wrote the preliminary studies and biographical notes of the original authors of the 21 selected texts. This editorial project becomes a milestone in the tradition of Latin American community engagement, and the review contributes to a much-needed dialogue and collaboration among different Spanish-, Portuguese-, and English-speaking contexts.

Keywords: *critical community engagement, Latin American universities, Extensión Universitaria, decolonizing universities, community engagement*

Reseña de libro: *Textos clave de la extensión crítica latinoamericana y caribeña*

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Revisado por Matias G. Flores and Paulette Dougnac

Resumen

Este libro muestra la tradición y el alto grado de arraigo de la extensión universitaria en la cultura universitaria latinoamericana. Específicamente, se centra en una corriente denominada “Extensión Crítica”, que surge como un rescate y revalorización de las perspectivas extensionistas dialógicas y transformadoras que marcaron la práctica y reflexión sobre este tema en los años 60 y 70 en América Latina, en respuesta a los actuales enfoques neoliberales sobre la vinculación entre universidad y sociedad. El libro pretende “aportar a una mayor densidad teórica, epistemológica y metodológica” (17) del movimiento latinoamericano y caribeño de Extensión Crítica. El libro desarrolla siete “matrices de pensamiento” de las que se nutre el movimiento: la tradición del movimiento de reforma universitaria, Paulo Freire y la educación popular, el pensamiento crítico latinoamericano, el movimiento feminista, las perspectivas anticoloniales, el territorio y las metodologías participativas. Para cada matriz de pensamiento se seleccionaron tres lecturas clave. Nueve autores organizaron su estructura y redactaron las introducciones, y veinticinco redactaron los estudios preliminares y las notas biográficas de los veintiún autores originales de los textos seleccionados. Este proyecto editorial se convierte en un hito en la tradición de la extensión crítica latinoamericana y caribeña, y la reseña contribuye a un diálogo y una colaboración entre diferentes contextos de habla española, portuguesa e inglesa.

Palabras clave: *extensión universitaria, extensión crítica, vinculación con el medio, universidades latinoamericanas, decolonizar la universidad*

Editors' Note: Translation provided by the authors

Although Paulo Freire's influence in the field of Service-Learning and Community Engagement (SLCE) is evident, little is known about the context in which Freire developed his work and the legacy he, and many other Latin American intellectuals, left in the SLCE field in the Global South. The book *Textos clave de la extensión crítica latinoamericana y caribeña* introduces us to this context and legacy while showcasing the tradition and high level of entrenchment of community engagement in Latin American university culture. Specifically, it focuses on a branch called "Extensión Crítica" (critical community engagement), which emerges as a rescue and revalorization of the dialogic and transformative engagement perspectives that marked the practice and reflection on this subject in the 60s and 70s in Latin America, in response to current neoliberal approaches to the linkage between university and society.

The text is the work of a team of researchers from different Latin American countries, who formed the 2019–2022 Critical Community Engagement Working Group of the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO). Its objective was to promote discussion and reflection on critical community engagement in Latin America through publications and circulation of knowledge. The book is written mainly in Spanish with some chapters in Portuguese. Notwithstanding the concept used in the book can be literally translated as "extension"; we have opted for a functional translation (Dougnac, 2016) as "community engagement," as this is the concept that responds more closely to the broad type of initiatives named under the umbrella of "extensión" in Latin America.

The book aims to "contribute to a greater theoretical, epistemological and methodological density" (p. 17) of the Latin American and Caribbean Critical Community Engagement movement. The book's distribution in seven sections reflects the identification of seven "conceptual matrices" from which the movement draws: the University Reform Movement tradition, Paulo Freire and popular education, Latin American critical thinking, feminist movement, anti-colonial perspectives, territory, and participatory methodologies. Three key readings were selected for each conceptual matrix. These conceptual matrices go beyond scientific and intellectual influences, connecting different ways of perceiving the world, political and historical contexts, and cultural backgrounds. It is an expression of praxis, a concept present throughout the book, connecting theory and practice.

In the introduction, Erregerena signals a particular context, which makes this book even more important. After several decades of work, the Latin American and Caribbean Critical Community Engagement movement is spreading in a way that might break this connection with practice. The editor states: "The rapid dissemination of the approach in the region—a fact that we celebrate—has sometimes been accompanied by a certain depoliticization, adopting the general components, but stripping it of its political and ideological content" (p. 17).

A large number of people worked on this book. Nine authors developed its main structure and introductions, and 25 authors wrote the preliminary studies and biographical notes of the original authors of 21 selected texts. Among the authors, we find people from at least 13 different countries.

Seven Conceptual Matrices of the Latin American Critical Community Engagement

Each section provides deep insight regarding the "conceptual matrices" at the base of the critical community engagement perspective.

The University Reform Movement tradition section highlights institutional and social change as keys to understanding Latin American approaches to community engagement. The section describes the influence of the 1918 Córdoba student movement, which spread a democratic university concept throughout the continent, and reflects on different experiences of community engagement in Latin America since the 20s, which have been led by ideals of social justice and anti-imperialism.

The second section discusses the concept of Latin American critical thinking, which considers observing the continent's historical and spatial specificity and internal diversity. *Mestizaje* (mixture), heterogeneity, juxtapositions, denials, colonialism, dependency, and resistance are part of the debate.

The third section highlights Paulo Freire's trajectory beyond adult education and the relevance of popular education as a transformative movement that continues its expansion until today. Written by

authors who worked directly with Freire, the section provides a rich account of his trajectory, including his work at the *Servicio de Extensión Cultural* at the University of Recife, and his role during the Chilean Agrarian Reform and Integral Education Reform, and also visits the foundations of Freire's philosophy, including the influence of Marxist and Christian thought.

In the fourth section, the authors aim to boost transformative pedagogies in dialogue with popular feminisms. They draw on Afro-Latin American feminism, deepening on the links between racism and sexism, and feminisms that come from the territories rather than textbooks. These perspectives aim to dismantle domination, observe reality in its totality and complexity, and construct a feminism of the oppressed majorities.

The section on anti-colonial perspectives reflects on the links of universities with the modern and occidental idea of universality as singularity. In contrast, the authors foster diversity, encounters, and dialogue of ways of knowing and being. The different texts include a call to a political dialogue with our history, beyond diminishing stories about the Indigenous peoples, recovering their epistemologies; a discussion on the connections between economic and epistemological and ontological extractivism, which decontextualizes knowledge produced in the Global South; and also a proposal of a philosophy grounded in context that challenges European universality.

The section about territory approaches this concept from a multidimensional and multiscalar perspective, understanding it as an expression of power relationships. While certain notions of space may hide the political disputes that persist within each of those territories, they promote a perspective of territory as a spatial manifestation of power and a strategy to control resources and people.

Finally, the section on participatory methodologies provides an account of the importance of Freire, Fals Borda, Sirvent, Thiollent, Martí, Santos, and Boal's methods to facilitate the road toward dialogue. It includes a nonneutral, political, and prosocial change approach, the idea of action research as a social, scientific, and pedagogical practice, the need to promote the participation of marginalized people in knowledge production, the perspective of community engagement as a didactical tool, integrated with the other university missions (research and teaching), and the pedagogical challenges of dialogue.

Toward a Global Dialogue in Community Engagement

This editorial project, which gathers authors from numerous places and origins (men and women, Indigenous communities, Afro-descendants, scholars, and activists), becomes a milestone in a long-term project. The book's primary goal is to increase the theoretical, epistemological, and methodological density of a practice with a long tradition. The selection of seven conceptual matrices from which these practices draw inspiration and context is a convincing editorial decision coherent with a transversal aspect of the critical community engagement approach: diversity. And, as it is explained in the readings, diversity does not mean looseness. On the contrary, it is a complex connection of reflections and historical-political struggles in the region. Therefore, this book is not a handbook or textbook about what it means to critically engage with a community, but it shares sparks of a deeper conversation. In that diversity and depth, we can find the book's contribution toward "density."

Critical community engagement is not just about community engagement; the Latin American conversation leads to thinking about the university as a whole and its reform possibilities. There are no isolated community engagement projects; they represent a political and cultural action from the university, an expression of the university's position in the territory. But it is not just about universities either because their origin and meaning are attached to a broader colonial idea of modernity that privileges certain voices and experiences over others, where dialogue with the other, the different, or the diverse initiates an epistemological-level tension and even fracture.

The book condenses a Latin American discussion with universal-scope lessons. First, it offers context to understand that Paulo Freire's work did not appear in a vacuum. Latin American universities have been engaging in dialogical ways at least since the early 20th century. Second, it offers more evidence of the global character of the community engagement movement. Its history did not start in the 1990s and cannot be reduced to the Global North experience. Third, it shares a method to study the field's history

beyond the case of individual pioneers and orients its lenses toward a collective intellectual movement and a sociopolitical context. Fourth, this book enables the readers to draw parallels between the recent conversation on democratic civic engagement, critical community engagement and service-learning, and antiracist community engagement in the Global North and their counterparts in the Global South, which can illuminate the future of the “next generation” of engaged scholars.

For us as Latin American scholars, the stories shared in this book illustrate the risks of thinking critically in the Global South. The authors’ biographical notes show how several of them have had to flee their countries, being prosecuted, tortured, and exiled for developing a social justice-oriented higher education. Those forced displacements, paradoxically, reinforced the Latin American sentiment of unity insofar as countries became a haven for exiled intellectuals. Several authors were obligated to try their ideas and methodologies in contexts that were not their own, which adds a transnational and global praxis to what we can learn from the book.

Although there is an extensive development of literature about community engagement in Latin America (mostly in Spanish and Portuguese), there is a scarcity of comparative studies or published theoretical discussions involving authors from the Latin American, Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking world, and the English-speaking world. Furthermore, different concepts and different meanings for similar concepts in different national contexts (e.g., extension) toughen this dialogue. In this review, we have attempted to make a small contribution to drawing the Latin American critical community engagement perspective near the English-speaking audience. As Latin American researchers who have studied in English-speaking countries, we acknowledge the potential of dialogue and collaboration between different contexts and traditions.

Reference

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