

Ralph Ings Bannell

Interview with Vera Maria Ferrão Candau

Introduction

Over the last couple of decades, human rights education has become an important topic in many countries but nowhere more so than in Latin America. The long history of colonisation and autocratic governments, either military-civil dictatorships or simply government by the elite, has left many minority groups within these countries vulnerable to human rights abuses.

The military-civil dictatorships are over but the control of economic and cultural resources is still firmly in the hands of national and, increasingly, international economic elites. If neo-liberalism in its more radical form is being questioned nowadays, the belief that the economic market will resolve all problems is still as strong as ever. Economic and political liberalism has become an ideology so dominant that it has become the default position for any discussion of social problems.

There has, of course, been a reaction to this from sectors of society preoccupied with the welfare of the poor and marginalized groups, differentiated by race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Part of that reaction has been to try and strengthen a culture of human rights, together with a democratic culture and institutions. The new democracies in Latin America are very fragile and the violent disregard for human rights in the recent past is an open wound that refuses to heal. In Brazil, for example, a recently formed Truth Commission is investigating those responsible for human rights abuses during the dictatorship (albeit without any powers to press charges) largely because of the indignation felt by many at the amnesty granted to the abusers at the end of the dictatorship.

In the context of Brazil, democratic institutions exist but a democratic culture still has to be developed. Political bargaining between powerful groups is still the norm in Congress and between the government and congress. Only very recently, such bargaining resulted in a Federal deputy known for his anti-homosexual and racist beliefs being elected President of the Congress's Human Rights Commission.

This is the context in which human rights education takes place in Brazil and, I think it fair to say, most Latin American countries. This is why we have thought it important to interview one of the leading protagonists for human rights education in Brazil and Latin America, Professor Vera Candau. She is

a full professor of education at the Pontifical Catholic University, in Rio de Janeiro, specialising in the areas of didactics, multi/ interculturalism and human rights education. Author of dozens of books and articles on these subjects, she was a member of the committee that elaborated the National Plan for Human Rights Education, in Brazil, and is co-founder of the NGO NovAmerica, whose activities include human rights education within both school and non-formal educational contexts.

R (Ralph Ings Bannell): How did you get involved in the field of human rights?

V (Vera Maria Ferrão Candau): The truth is that my involvement had different moments. Remembering, today, my trajectory in relation to this topic, my first moment was related to my activity in the student movement at university. My undergraduate degree was in pedagogy in the beginning of the 1960s. These were times of great social and political mobilization. I participated actively in the student movement. Questions related to Brazilian reality – inequality, agrarian reform, educational policy, amongst others – as well as the Latin American context, such as the Cuban revolution, occupied different spaces within the university. So, more than a conceptual approximation to the problematic of human rights, I was involved in actions of denunciation and with the movement to construct a more just and democratic society. Before the beginning of the military dictatorship in Brazil, I won a grant to do post-graduate studies at the University of Louvain, in Belgium. There, I experienced the other side of the human rights question: being a foreigner, who was considered academically “inferior”, an object of prejudice and discrimination. I hadn't had this experience before. It was very difficult, not only personally but collectively, and we Latin Americans, together with the Africans, had our meetings and associations where we shared our experiences. At the end of the 60s, I went to Spain to do my doctorate. These were the years of the Franco dictatorship. There, for the first time, I came to experience what it was to live in a dictatorial regime. On my return to Brazil, our dictatorship was already fully installed and the struggle in defence of human rights considered subversive. These were the so-called “lead” years in which the “culture of silence” was imposed. But, in spite of the institutionalised violence, the struggle for democratisation gradually imposed itself and, in the 80s, a democratic transition was affirmed, with the elaboration of a new constitution, approved in 1988, known as the “Citizenship Constitution” because of the extent to which human rights were incorporated into the text. These were times of much discussion, with strong social participation of different groups and organisations, of great enthusiasm and creativity.

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It's in this context that I started to participate in the reflections and debates on human rights and, principally, human rights education. Since the 90s, I've dedicated myself amply to this theme, especially with reference to teacher education.

R: How has this field changed over the last decades in Brazil and in the world?

V: The development of human rights education in Brazil is a process that emerged with force in the second half of the 80s, therefore, it has developed over the last twenty five years, through different stages and in close articulation with the diverse social-political contexts faced by the country. However, there is still very little academic work that systematizes, analyses and problematizes this process.

It was in the context of democratic transition, the search for a new rule of law and the concern with constructing a new political culture and an active citizenship traversed with the recognition of human rights that the first real experiences in human rights education developed.

In 1985, various professionals, principally in the area of law, were given grants to participate in the 3rd Interdisciplinary Human Rights Course, promoted by the Latin American Institute for Human Rights (IIDH), in Costa Rica. These professionals were from different regions of Brazil and, on their return, constituted a nucleus that promoted the first experiences of human rights education in the country.

Various initiatives were realised in this period in which the focus was on the construction of a network that, as well as the work developed in different parts of the country, would also establish relations with organisations and professionals in the countries of the South Cone, from Argentina to Uruguay. With the help of the IIDH, different activities were promoted, with courses and seminars in various cities within the country, many of which with the support of the State and Municipal Secretaries of Justice, Citizenship and Education, together with universities, at both graduate and undergraduate levels.

The decade of the 90s could be characterised as one of giving emphasis to the formulation of public policies in human rights. The National Programme in Human Rights was elaborated in this period as well as the creation of a Human Rights Secretary, tied to the Ministry of Justice and later directly to the Presidency of the Republic, which became important references for this expansion. The formation of activists, public prosecutors and educators in human rights, promoted by the Federal Government, through the offer of courses at various levels and within various parts of society, is also a characteristic of this stage.

In this decade two movements can be identified that came together in some initiatives. The first with a view to amplifying and continuing what had been achieved in the previous decade; the second involving new agents, particularly from the Federal Government, incorporating in some of their organs professionals from the organisations and groups of civil society committed to the questions of human rights.

In relation to the decade of 2000 until today, one characteristic is the difficulty in making a clear delimitation between initiatives of civil society and those of government. This period is configured more by conjunctural actions, partnerships and associations between the two spheres. The initiatives have multiplied. Seminars, courses, lectures and forums have taken place in different parts of the country, promoted by universities, associations, social movements, NGOs and public organs. Another characteristic is the emphasis on constructing normative instruments that promote human rights education. Without doubt, the implementation of the National Plan for Human Rights Education (first edition in 2003 and the second in 2006) has had a fundamental role in stimulating, supporting and making a diverse number of activities viable. Another important normative instrument, approved in 2012, is constituted by the National Guidelines in Human Rights Education, which makes the inclusion of this thematic mandatory in the whole educational system, from early childhood education to higher education.

Despite all of these advances in the theme of human rights education, as much on the government's part, through public policy, as on the part of civil society, they are still fragile, from the point of view of provoking a change in mentalities centred on the construction of a culture impregnated with human rights as well as reach of the work undertaken, which still only touches some segments of the population, even though they are considered strategically important.

As far as the international plane is concerned, since the publication of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), organisations such as the UN and UNESCO have stimulated member states to incorporate this thematic.

Especially after the Vienna Conference (1993), which celebrated the forty fifth anniversary of the Universal Declaration, this policy has been strengthened and monitored. Today, universities and non-governmental organisations in different countries, articulated in networks, promote numerous activities orientated towards deepening this thematic and its implications, as much for educational processes, in the formal and informal spheres, as for the society in general.

R: How do you respond to the worry that human rights education could be incompatible with a neo-liberal agenda?

V: This question is related to the polysemy of the expressions human rights and human rights education. There are various meanings in dispute. For some, in the liberal tradition, the strong meaning of human rights refers to those that are usually situated in the first generation of rights, the so-called rights of freedom. And, within these, fundamentally the right to economic freedom, freedom of expression and freedom to choose those who govern. Even so, these rights are proclaimed and affirmed in a view I consider of "low intensity", an expression used by O' Donnell, referring to

democratic processes. In this perspective, there is no contradiction with a neo-liberal agenda. This is what we see in the world today..... However, if we look from another perspective, holistic and interrelating the different dimensions of human rights, in which you cannot dissociate the so-called rights of freedom from the socio-economic and cultural conditions of different individual and collective subjects, it certainly is a very tense and contradictory relationship. I believe in this perspective and think that we should operate within these tensions, making them explicit, from both the theoretical and practical points of view.

R: Given the origin of the modern conception of human rights within the doctrine of liberalism, do you think human rights education can be made compatible with a socialist agenda?

V: This is a very important question that has been the object of reflection by various authors within the social sciences. I will limit myself to an explication of the position adopted by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, with which I am in agreement. In a text published in 1997, *A Multicultural Conception of Human Rights*, which has had a number of other versions sub-sequently published, the author starts from the affirmation that human rights were seen as suspect from the perspective of emancipation, by socialist authors, who privileged other categories, such as revolution. However, partially as a result of the crisis of real socialism, human rights became an integral part of the effort to reinvent the language of emancipation. The author asks if this is possible and argues that it's necessary to be aware of the dialectical tensions that run through western modernity: between regulation and social emancipation; between the state and civil society; between the nation-state and what we call globalisation. He discusses each one from the perspective of human rights re-read from the perspective of emancipation. Therefore, I consider it important to affirm human rights, for many authors practically the only reference that is capable today to mobilize actions throughout the planet, and to add our efforts in the direction of their reinvention as a component of the processes of emancipation. In this respect the question of multiculturalism is considered particularly relevant.

R: Which conception of human rights do you think should underpin human rights education?

V: As I've just said, I believe in overcoming the liberal perspective on human rights. I intend to collaborate in the deepening of a holistic and independent vision of human rights on a horizon of reinvention and emancipation. I consider it important to situate them historically, in each context and in tune with the struggles of different social groups present in each society, especially those who are made inferior, oppressed and excluded.

R: How can one balance the universality of human rights with the concern with diversity necessary today?

V: I don't think it's a question of "balance" as much as articulation. Universality leads us to

equality. Diversity to difference. Equality and difference mutually demand each other and are in permanent tension. Boaventura de Sousa Santos synthesises this tension and the necessary articulation between the poles in a way I consider very adequate: "We have the right to demand equality whenever difference makes us inferior; we have the right to demand difference whenever equality mischaracterises us".

R: Is it possible to learn human rights in school?

V: The question of human rights permeates all educational practices, as well as all other social practices. In everyday school life we find a variety of practices: recognition of different individuals, prejudice, discrimination, etc. Therefore, human rights aren't elements outside of school. Daily life in schools is informed by their affirmation and negation. Human rights education favours the "uncovering" of this reality, making it the conscious object of actions and reflexive intentions. In this sense, in schools, as in other social spaces, it is possible to act in favour of the consciousness of social subjects of rights and to promote rights in the context in which we live.

R: What is the best way to develop human rights education in schools?

V: I don't know if there exists a way that could be considered the best. Every context has its demands and, in schools, it's not the same working in early childhood education or with adolescents. I certainly do not agree with creating a course with this objective in basic education. I think this should be part of the political-pedagogical project of schools and developed through an integrated and multi-disciplinary approach with themes and questions of interest for each concrete situation, with dialogical and participatory methods.

R: What are the opportunities and the limits to formal education in human rights?

V: The opportunities have to come from themes that are ever more present in schools and challenge teachers, such as inequalities and differences in the everyday life of the school, manifestations of violence, questions related to the digital culture, the environment and education, family relations, the wider school community and its life conditions, etc. It's always necessary to relate the local and the global, favouring more structural analyses of reality, in tune with the cognitive and emotional development of the students. It's also important to always be aware of the commitments that can result from themes and questions studied. In relation to the limits, this has a lot to do with the limits of school education as such and with the contradictions and tensions between the presuppositions of the human rights education in which we believe and the educational policies related to a meritocratic, standardising and performance oriented perspective that informs many government policies in education these days.

R: What spaces outside of formal education are most important for learning human rights?

V: I would say the social movements and other spaces organised by civil society. They are the ones

that, in my opinion, mobilise dreams, knowledge, values and practices that have human rights as their reference. In this sense, it's important to establish partnerships between these movements and schools.

R: What are the implications of human rights education for teacher education?

V: Teacher education, both initial and continuing, constitutes a central question for the development of educational processes that incorporate human rights as one of their central axes. For this reason, this thematic should operate as a theme that structures teacher education, impregnating the different disciplines in the curriculum as well as their dynamics. However, in Brazil, teacher education courses are reduced, in the majority of cases, to the realisation of a number of disciplines without adequate articulation between them, not even a common conception of the educational process. I've taught, at both undergraduate and graduate levels, a discipline on human rights for educators. Two different realities repeat themselves: for almost all students it's the first time they work reflexively on questions related to human rights and, in general, the conception they had until then associates human rights with the "defence of criminals", the discipline therefore mobilizing a new perspective; the second reality refers to the relevance of this theme for education. All of the students are unanimous that it should be developed as a necessary part of teacher education.

R: Do Brazilian schools protect the human rights of their students? Are they improving or getting worse in this respect?

V: Brazilian schools are very heterogeneous. However, referring to the educational system globally, I believe it's possible to affirm that they are far from guaranteeing the rights of all children and adolescents. There is still a great deal of inequality of access to rights, including in this respect human rights education. Recent years have seen an advance. The implementation of public policies in this area has been the object of many actions but we are still far from their universalization. We live in a country strongly marked by inequality and discrimination of every type and to advance in the construction of a culture of human rights that penetrates all aspects of society is a great challenge.