ANOTHER WAY OF READING AND CHANGING THE WORLD.
MYSTICISM IN POPULAR EDUCATION

Abstract
The article analyses the role played by mysticism in the context of popular education in Latin America. According to its etymology and the tradition of the classics, mysticism suggests something which is not easily understandable by perception, thus promoting another way of reading the world, living in it or with it. Some remarkable examples of mysticism are our religious groups linked to grassroots Christian communities of the Catholic Church and the Landless Workers’ Movement of Brazil. The meaning of the concept is explained through a confirmation taken from the research work carried out with popular groups in which the following aspects stand out: Empowerment, identity, solidarity, shared values and collective reflection.

But what is characteristic of the human being is loving and knowing. One of the issues being posed in this context is to know what essential happiness is. Some experts will say that it is in love, others in wisdom and even others will say in love and wisdom and these are the ones that are more accurate. We, however, declare that it is not in love or wisdom, rather something in the soul and that is where love and wisdom come from, something that love does not know: the strengths of the soul. Whoever gets to know that something understands what happiness consists of. Something he did not have before and does not expect as he cannot win or lose anything. (Meister Eckhart, 2004, p.37).

Addressing the issue (1)
It may seem strange at first sight to propose mysticism as an object of reflection in the academic context. Modernity makes divisions under which it seeks a science free from subjectivity. And within subjective factors, mysticism occupies a special place as a result of being related to religiousness (2) if not to esoteric phenomena which usually seem associated with the underdevelopment of rationality or to a subjectivist postmodern thinking.

I will thus start from what “the word” could mean within the general issue of the meeting of the Corredor de Ideas (2011) (3) entitled “Our Latin American face”. Recalling the participation in popular education meetings in Latin America, it is not difficult to verify that what then happened, decisive for many people and important events, is significantly connected to “mysticism”. It could be a simple liturgical celebration, a cultural festival at night or a ceremony celebrated in Guatemala before dawn. But it could also be research meetings with grassroots groups. It is mysticism

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that helps us to perceive what is behind the diversity of faces we find in Latin America and perhaps it is what best reveals the face of the people as a whole.

The etymological origin of the word is the Greek verb myein which means remaining or permanence, mainly associated with our organs of perception. The exegetes of the New Testament say that the term entails two different meanings: a) it refers to hidden things, concealed to our senses; it is a type of knowledge that faith has; b) it refers to what is not perceived by our senses and only belongs to God (Silva, 1995). Its present use, however, is secular and is only recalled by the great mystics of the history of Christianity, such as Meister Eckhart or Ignatius of Loyola.

In daily life we prefer the term mystery that not only has the same radical but is the noun from which the adjective mystic derives: the mystery of detective novels, the mysteries of the universe, the functioning of our brain and the meaning of our life, among others. Mystery is related to searching, to what makes us “get to the bottom of things”. It is a place of challenges and a place of risks. In a sense, it is also mystery that motivates us in education: as a researcher in this field, I want to know more about what happens when pupils learn or do not learn, or the circumstances in which they learn. An intercultural perspective helps us to understand the blindness that does not allow us to see and recognise the other. Mystery and mysticism have to do with the awareness of our world, our relationship with it.

In this article we are not interested in having a philosophical discussion about knowledge and its production, but rather in pointing out the fact that mystery seems to be what challenges us to want to know. For Paulo Freire, it is the curiosity with which we arrive in the world and which needs to be developed in the educational process, becoming what he calls “epistemological curiosity” inasmuch as becoming acquainted with an object is in itself part of the reflection. In his own words: “The exercise of curiosity makes it more critically curious, more methodically rigorous in regard to its object. The more spontaneous curiosity intensifies and becomes rigorous, the more epistemological it becomes”. (Freire 1997, p. 97)

We will now specifically focus on the central issue to which this work tries to make a contribution: “Latin American popular mysticism”. The title suggests that there are more kinds of mysticism and, thus, popular mysticism is one of them. I understand the term popular as referring to the knowledge and powers outside of resistance and survival, that is, the knowledge of those who do not necessarily need or want to change place, but to create a new one. There is also the mysticism of those who do not want change, with their rituals and liturgies. Mysticism thus has its place in history, within the fights for power. The specification contained in the title (Latin American) also suggests that mysticism in this area shows itself in a different way than in other places of the world. The chants and dances, the silences may have different meanings in different cultures. Even in Latin America, there are multiple types of mysticism depending on the popular groups concerned.
The following three examples illustrate the different places of mysticism. The latter is a constituent part of the grassroots ecclesiastical communities and youth movements within the sphere of the Roman Catholic Church (4). Leticia Da Silva (5) describes the mystic sense of her group of young people as follows:

The mysticism of our group occurs in all the encounters, every time we meet to combine activities, readings, songs, objects; everything is connected and this is what makes the mysticism emerge. We don’t plan if people will cry or laugh, if they will be moved or just participate; we just plan moments and during these moments, participation and emotion spontaneously emerge. Even those who come for the first time to the group comment at the end how pleasant it is to be part of that moment.

Another space where mysticism occupies a prominent place is the MST (Landless Workers’ Movement). Many of the articles concerning the MST deal with this issue, showing its importance for the sustainability of the movement and debates. It is impossible to think about the MST without their flag, their caps, their music and, above all, their marches. Ademar Bogo (MST, 1998, p. 15), one of the leaders of the MST who writes more frequently about this issue, shows the difficulties found when trying to define it:

Mysticism for the Landless people is more than a word or a concept. It is a condition of life which is structured through the relationships between people and the things of the material world. Between ideas and utopias in the ideal world. That is, different motivations we use to keep on fighting for a fair cause, trying to bring the future closer to the present moment.

Mysticism, however, is barely present in the great movements. In a survey carried out with the popular groups linked to the work of the Urban-Rural Training Centre Irma Araújo (CEFURIA), in Curitiba, it was usual to listen to somebody saying “And who is in charge of mysticism?” That is the reason why the research meetings incorporate mysticism to allow the collective search for knowledge. Thus, at the beginning of a session, we try to integrate some physical movements, a popular chant or we make up a mandala where we put objects which had become meaningful for the members of the group during their experience. A book on the cloth in the centre of the circle made by the workers of the community, educators and researchers certainly has a different meaning for an academician who writes books than for an illiterate person who, at that moment, gathers to read and change reality.

The role and place of mysticism
When looking for theoretical definitions and explanations of mysticism, these always seem to be partial, maybe due to the very nature of the phenomenon. Either they emphasise mysticism as a phenomenon connected to the alleged centre of the human being or with transcendence, or as a political instrument, or simply as a group dynamic. I found what I was looking for in the notes of an assessment round that the research group carried out with entities of popular education groups, in this case with
a group of Solidarity Economy within the CEFURIA project previously mentioned. When asked about the importance of mysticism in the processes of creation of Solidarity Economy groups, this was the answer we obtained:

*Mysticism gives a voice to the person, it’s a sign of our group, it cannot be missing; it brings people closer, makes them think and reflect, awakens other senses, it’s a part of the values. We use sentences of Paulo Freire, food, symbols, the Bible.*

We will briefly analyse each one of the parts:
- The mysticism of the voice: Its purpose is to go further, being the voice of the other and allowing and helping it to happen; letting each person to “say his word” (Paulo Freire, 1981). According to Hannah Arendt (2004), this is the first step towards the setting-up of public space. Stephen Stoer (2004) talks about the rebellion of the differences, when they no longer want to “be said” by others, but they say them themselves. In Latin America we see how through the decades, since the appearance of popular education and the liberation theology of the poor and oppressed, different faces and voices emerged and became widespread, such as those of indigenous peoples and groups of young people, women and workers from different areas of the market.

This has important implications in a context where politicians, academicians and clergymen have got used to talk in name of the people. In the field of research this happens when participatory action research or participatory research is recognised. Among its principles is the recognition of the other as a subject capable of producing knowledge concerning his/her life situation and reality, and not only as an informant for a specialist who has to interpret the questions and answers. One of the functions of the research is to serve as an instrument of self-recognition in the community and as a support in carrying out actions for change. (Brandao and Streck, 2006; Fals Borda, 2009)

- Mysticism is a trademark of our group: Why does the MST put mysticism in its agenda as a matter which is not negotiable? Or what is the CBEs train? Or what is the meaning of the demonstrations and marches of social movements? The answer is that the objective is to look for a “trademark” of the group, its identity. It can be a slogan, chants or prayers, all of them help to build, using sociological language, internal cohesion. And, within this context, they contribute to preparing for action in the world “out there”.

When we talk about “our group” it is understood that there is a plurality of mysticisms, since the objects or symbols come from the reality of the group. According to the sentence used as a reference for this reflection, this symbol could be a word of Paulo Freire, the Bible, something to eat or any other object that establishes some relationship with daily life. The idea of transcendence is now built from concepts or ideas which come from outside, but emerge when things or events from daily routine are used as a starting point for the reflection and projection of new realities. Leonardo
Boff explains the sociopolitical meaning of mysticism as follows: “Mysticism is, thus, the secret motor of all commitment, the enthusiasm that permanently inspires the militant, the internal fire which arouses the individual in spite of the monotony of everyday tasks”. (Boff and Betto, 1994, p. 25).

- Mysticism brings together: Mysticism is related to physical contact: an embrace of fellow men, tuning the tone of the chant, recalling a fellow member who is ill or in difficulties, celebrating the achievements of the members of the group. It is a kind of “foundation” for the establishment of collective spirit. The feeling of communion created does not make the differences disappear, but they are symbolically assumed within the unity.

Talking about our close-knit assessment group, we mentioned some of our greatest thinkers. José Martí wrote that the masters of our America must spread throughout the land tenderness as well as technical knowledge. Why? To pour the coagulated blood into the veins of the people. Paulo Freire talks about being loving as a way of being in the world. However, this is not an idealisation of an alleged loving nature of the Latin American people, but a necessity for the recovery of the oppressed.

- It makes you think and reflect: It is an error to relate mysticism with an excessive sentimentalism. A research assessment showed that a bakery in one of the outlying communities of Curitiba had an underlying mysticism. The women took elements of their daily life to the meeting: a glass of water, some sugar and oil. What happens when you mix water and sugar? And when you add oil? This makes people think about life and their relationship with the group, with the community; it is a very simple step and becomes an exercise within reach of everybody. Introducing a stimulating and disturbing element not only helps you to think, but it “makes you think”.

A well known biblical scholar said that in the golden times of popular reading of the Bible, the very study of the same was the liturgy. I think that this is the meaning of making you think and reflect. We have heard about grassroots groups which encouraged their etymological curiosity and studied Greek and Hebrew to be able to read the non-vernacular Bible. Furthermore, “making one think” provides elements for the survival of experience through reason. Eymard Vasconcelos talks about his experience as a doctor and a popular educator, having Carl Jung as one of his main references:

*The intense dynamism felt in the mystic experience comes from the depth of subjectivity and the unconscious, in which ‘will’ can only agree or disagree to participate. What follows this experience is unpredictable and has a great impact on the lives dedicated to it. Intense feelings and emotions are set in motion, capable of releasing surprising energies of internal transformation and of facing external reality.*

(Vasconcelos, 2011, p. 35)
Frei Betto and Leonardo Boff (1994, p. 15) express the same conception of mystery and mysticism in relation to thought: Mystery concerns “the dimension of the depth inscribed in each person, each human being and in reality as a whole, of an absolutely indecipherable nature.” Recognising mystery and mysticism does not mean renouncing to look for answers, but recognising the strengths which produce the dynamism of life and the mirror of freedom and knowledge, and being more. The biblical myth of the creation of man and woman casts doubt on recognising good and evil as a punishment to creatures for eating the fruit which would allow them to know their creator. From a secular perspective, it is the recognition of the limits of human intelligence. In the myth of the creation of the Maya-K’iche’ (Popol Vuh), the gods also put a veil over the eyes of creatures so they do not compete against each other for the knowledge of the things of the world. This poses the constant challenge of the act of thinking, knowing that the result of this effort will never be final.

Mysticism awakens other senses: This statement contains an extreme richness, as it points at several possibilities of understanding:
1. In school we learn from being small that we have five senses. For me it was a surprise to hear a Colombian native say that they have more senses to be connected with the world. Among them, they included dreams, the ability to predict the future. The reason for saying this is that there are many ways of “feeling” the world and giving meaning to the things that surround us.
2. Awakening the senses can be a way of “opening the mind” to the unusual, the different. The mystic’s starting point is the metaphor: water is not just H2O anymore, but also a source of life; a hoe represents work on the land, etc. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2004, p. 782) criticises technical-scientific reason for its metonymical nature, that is, reductionist for taking the part as everything. Instead of a reasoning that closes (such as the academic discourse), we prefer a logic that opens (probably nearer to the essay).
3. Reference to the other senses can be related to Mário Peresson (1994) and the so-called “other rationalities”. Alongside technical-scientific modern rationality, our popular groups should recognise at least two other rationalities: the symbolic one (the symbol as an element with the capacity to evoke, carry out, provoke and convoke and the wise one (wisdom as a radical knowledge concerning the final meaning of things). Therefore, according to Peresson, we could talk from a popular perspective of a real epistemological break which overcomes modern, scientific and rational logic.
4. Mysticism cannot be separated from art. Music, floral ornaments, poetry, children, the mandalas in the centre of the street. It is not a coincidence that the pedagogy of Paulo Freire is developed in the context of the Popular Culture Movement of Recife, where artists and intellectuals are also involved.

- Mysticism is the exchange of values: A Venezuelan thinker, Alejandro Moreno Olmedo (1993), argues that in popular cultures we can find the homo convivialis (not the modern homo economicus, or the postmodern homo ludens, or even the newest homo zapiens). Now it is easy, from a naive point of view, to idealise popular cultures.
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The development and extension of values which help survival and resistance in an environment full of difficulties could be sufficient, without an a priori value judgment, for this idealisation. But mysticism is more than that; it contains important teachings for society as a whole.

In the present crisis, identified by some as a crisis of civilization and not only of the model of development, some values (or counter values) practiced by popular mysticism are being considered as signs of hope and not lack of development. Undoubtedly, one of them is solidarity, a value which nowadays is materialised in thousands of Solidarity Economy companies which are struggling between integration in the hegemonic capitalist logic or building alternative ways to produce and consume.

- Mysticism cannot be missing: This is what groups and movements which live mysticism say about it. For us, the academic world, there are still some questions which arise from the reflection previously mentioned: Is this mysticism just a study object? What kind of mysticism feeds us in the academic world? Do we seek or discard contagion with the popular mysticism of our diversified Latin American face? What I call the legacy of Edgar Morin (2000, p.61) argues that having popular mysticism as your main support can be an indispensable condition for the production of transforming knowledge:

  *The search, the discoveries go ahead in the emptiness, in the void of uncertainty, in the incapacity of deciding. Genius arises in the breach of what cannot be controlled, in that place where madness prowls. Creation arises in the unity between the obscure psycho-emotional depths and the bright flame of conscience.*

As educating elements, mystery and mysticism are essential elements in recognising where what we have learnt develops. The objective is a critical mysticism, that is, one that does not reject intellect and reflection, where certainties step aside to possibilities, where the individual recognises his/her limitations and prefers dialogue with the other, and where teachers and pupils are linked in body and mind to teach and learn.

**Notes**

1. The following grant holders for scientific initiation have collaborated in the research for this text: Leticia da Silva (FAPERGS), Jonas Hendler da Paz (CNPq) and Vinicius Masseroni (UNIBIC).
2. The treatment of the issue in modern sociology tends to be limited to the religious field, which according to Sell and Brüseke (2006 p. 151), entails a thematic specialisation, but ‘eliminates the ‘critical’ dimension of mysticism as a privileged locus for thinking, from ‘the other’, from the reason, ‘condition´ and ‘contradictions’ of the rationalized modernity of modern times”.
3. The Corredor de Ideas del Cono Sur is a space of encounter and reflection for humanists and specialists of Latin American thinking and cultures, attended by the
countries of the Southern Cone and celebrated every year in a different university of the region. The XII Encounter was carried out in September 2011, in the Universidad del Valle de Rio dos Sinos- UNISINOS (Brazil).

4. Medieval mysticism, of which Meister Eckart was a great exponent, can be seen as a rebellion against the theological rationalization of scholasticism. On the relationship between theology, mysticism and magic, see Sell and Brüseke (2006, p. 169-181).

5. Leticia da Silva, graduate in History from UNISINOS and secretary of CLJ Montenegro.

Bibliographical notes
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