

WHAT DO WOMEN ACTIVISTS TEACH US? - REPORTING ON A POLITICAL TRAINING EXPERIENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This report describes a university extension project based in the interior of the state of Paraná, whose objective was to understand the impasses, challenges, and risks faced by women activists involved in social and environmental causes in the defense of life. The action research used interdisciplinarity to build a place for dialogue with the activists. The results encompass the direct relation among activism and life stories, the political dimension based on the common good, the presence of risks, and expectations for inclusive relations. The conclusion points to the relevance of the struggle for the expansion of socially included and affectively strengthened lives.

Keywords: activism; women; society; nature; politics

¿Lo qué las mujeres activistas enseñan? - Relatando una experiencia de formación política en la universidad

RESUMEN

El relato abarca un proyecto de extensión universitario ubicado en el interior del estado de Paraná, cuyo objetivo fue comprender los parálisis, desafíos y riesgo en defensa de la vida que son asumidos por mujeres activistas enlazadas a causas sociales y ambientales. La investigación-acción se utilizó de la interdisciplinariedad para construir un espacio de diálogo con activistas. Los resultados abarcan la relación directa entre activismo e historias de vida, la dimensión política pautada en el bien común, la presencia de riesgos y las expectativas por relaciones inclusivas. La conclusión apunta la relevancia de la lucha por la expansión de vidas socialmente incluidas y afectivamente fortalecidas.

Palabras clave: activismo; mujeres; sociedad; naturaleza; política

O que as mulheres ativistas ensinam? - relatando uma experiência de formação política na universidade

RESUMO

O relato envolve um projeto de extensão universitário sediado no interior do estado do Paraná, cujo objetivo foi compreender os impasses, desafios e risco em defesa da vida que são assumidos por mulheres ativistas ligadas às causas sociais e ambientais. A investigação-ação valeu-se da interdisciplinaridade para construir um espaço de diálogo com as ativistas. Os resultados abrangem a relação direta entre ativismo e histórias de vida, a dimensão política pautada no bem comum, a presença de riscos e as expectativas por relações inclusivas. A conclusão aponta a relevância da luta pela expansão de vidas socialmente incluídas e afetivamente fortalecidas.

Palavras-chave: ativismo; mulheres; sociedade; natureza; política

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INTRODUCTION

Social and environmental problems have long been present in the Brazilian context, generating a series of difficulties for the population and its rulers. National and international conferences focused on the preservation of the environment and the well-being of the population, held since the mid-20th century, sought to create strategies to identify, give visibility to, and minimize such problems, resulting in a broad set of documents and letters of commitment signed by the rulers of different nations around the globe. However, these initiatives have not always found governmental and business support to be put into practice, opening a serious gap that culminated in the expansion of social inequality as well as the intensification of environmental problems (Piga & Mansano, 2016). In this scenario, women activists who undertake activities aimed at defending life and the common good stand out in our country. In these actions, women face serious adversities ranging from personal disqualification to death threats. Aware of this, the present extension project aimed to understand the impasses, challenges, and risks in defending life that are assumed by women activists linked to social and environmental causes.

Adopting a qualitative methodological perspective, the study and intervention were carried out in two phases: In the first part, with an emphasis on theoretical research, an interdisciplinary overview of the theme of women's activism was conducted, using Social Psychology, Sociology, and the Philosophy of Difference as reference areas. Subsequently, the project opened a space for dialogue with women activists working in the social and environmental fields in the state of Paraná, mapping their practices and affective developments in daily life. The dialogues enabled the development of a situated and critical analysis of the challenges faced, highlighting the expansion of a qualified, socially inclusive relational life that strengthens affective bonds combined with the empowerment of nature and society. This report is justified by analyzing the link among education, psychology, and politics, showing the importance of discussing, during the training process in psychology, how the micropolitical action of activist agents committed to building an inclusive society occurs, attentive to social problems and sensitive to emerging socio-environmental issues. In the end, the relevance of knowing and strengthening the activism practices of women in this historical moment, still strongly marked by insecurity, persecution, and, in a more radical aspect, by violence and crime, became explicit.

DRAWING A SCENARIO OF STRUGGLES FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Studies from different areas of knowledge (Rolnik, 2015, 2020; Stengers, 2015) show that serious environmental and social problems are advancing rapidly

throughout the globe, jeopardizing the possibility of an expansive existence for humans and non-humans. Paying attention to this scenario is both urgent and challenging, since it demands involvement in effectively confronting the problem. In this direction, leaders from different countries across five continents, along with scientists, leaders of social movements, representatives of civil society, and part of the population, express their concern and, above all, their limitations in intervening in this global crisis whose devastating effects are already noticeable. It was by adopting this perspective of confrontation that, since the mid-20th century, national and international conferences began to be held with the aim of understanding, analyzing, and measuring the real situation of human and environmental relations (Piga & Mansano, 2016) on the globe. On these occasions, international agreements were drawn up and signed aiming to define actions focused on improving living conditions on the planet at macro and micropolitical scales.

Regarding macro-political practices of socio-environmental defense, it is noteworthy that they have permeated Brazilian history for a long time. The population's relation with the environment, however, takes place in a tense field that encompasses divergent interests. This is a relation marked by the intervention of biopolitics, which alludes to specific ways of governing the population, controlling spaces, legislating on bodies, and intervening in natural resources. Biopolitics, according to Foucault (1975/1999, p. 294), implies a series of "global mechanisms" that seek to "act in such a way as to obtain global states of equilibrium, of regularity; in short, to take into account life, the biological processes of the human species, and to ensure over them not a discipline, but a regulation" (p. 294). Its interventions involve the regulation of existence in its most varied dimensions so that a rationality in governmental management can be traced, legalized, and implemented. In practice, nature and humanity are part of the same living whole, whose entities maintain a complex connection of interdependence, and both have become targets of biopolitics that legislate and control the mechanisms of socio-environmental protection and exploitation. Thus, it is in the interest of biopower to consider human beings "as living beings, and their environment, their means of existence – be it the raw effects of the geographical, climatic, or hydrographic environment" (Foucault, 1975/1999, p. 292).

It turns out that we are embedded in a socioeconomic system that also interferes with government actions, dictating, to some extent, how its interventions should be carried out with a view to accumulating wealth. It can thus be considered that this critical moment in our history, marked by inequalities of different types, oscillates between a biopolitics that regulates modes of existence (Foucault, 1975/1999) and a necropolitics that defines who should be marginalized or even die

(Mbembe, 2018). It is worth highlighting that the COVID-19 pandemic has made this discrepancy between biopolitical and necropolitical powers directed at humans and non-humans even more evident (Sawaia, Albuquerque, & Busarello, 2020).

The micropolitical sphere, according to Hardt and Negri (2016), suggests paying attention to “the capacities that people already exercise in their daily lives and, specifically, in the process of biopolitical production” (p. 398). This condition seeks to highlight “the technical composition of the productive multitude in order to discover its potential political composition” (p. 398). Furthermore, according to the authors, the combination of different capacities leads to the “autonomous production of the common” (p. 399), since it gains political strength by aggregating a diversity of subjective elements circulating in everyday life such as “ideas, images, codes, languages, knowledge, affects and the like” (p. 399).

In this micropolitical process, each element connects to the others “through horizontal networks of communication and cooperation” (p. 399). If, as argued, attacks against activists are common practices in our country, it is worth considering what possibilities exist for expanding the struggles while preserving their lives. Guattari (1997) argues that these movements necessarily involve the possibility of “catalyzing an irreversible process of questioning the power formations to which current society is chained” (p. 68). How do we operate this catalysis in the face of disparate forces that confront each other? This is what the activists teach us next.

SOME INDICATIONS ABOUT THE RESEARCH AND INTERVENTION PATH

The qualitative perspective was adopted in this intervention study through an extension event called “Ciclo de Diálogos: ativismo e liderança de mulheres”, held in two editions in 2023 and 2024, hosted at the State University of Londrina, in the interior of the state of Paraná. Each edition of the event consisted of seven sessions, each lasting two hours, with an audience of students, teachers, and professionals in the field of Psychology linked to the aforementioned University, totaling 12 participants in each edition. The selection and invitation of the activists were carried out by the students of the project, who used as a criterion the experience of micropolitical action of women in social or environmental causes in the region. At each meeting, the guest shared her micro and macropolitical practices, followed by a space for dialogue. The causes addressed by the activists were: feminism, blackness, human rights, art, combating violence, the right to the city, ethnicity and nature, disability, and political participation. The analysis was guided by the concepts of politics (Foucault, 1975/1999; Rolnik, 2020), the common good (Hardt & Negri, 2016), and social transformation (Guattari, 1997; Sawaia, Albuquerque & Busarello, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: WOMEN ACTIVISTS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The dialogues highlighted how activist practices occur amidst the difficulties that plague life in society and the demand to act in the face of them. For this exhibition, we selected the main lessons learned from the activists:

1. In both editions of the Cycle, it was notable that women’s political practices are carried out in different spaces, taking on an individual configuration, but also gaining group or institutional contours, with special attention to the social inclusion of minorities and the pursuit of rights. Carvalho and Mansano (2019) draw attention to how much involvement with political practices requires not only awareness of their importance but also the desiring construction of effective bonds that can culminate in institutional actions and the generation of effective public policies.
2. The life stories shared by the women act as triggers for concern for solidarity, cooperation, and the common good, as defined by Hardt and Negri (2016). Such actions mobilize the “senses and capacities” (p. 54) of social agents to establish new connections with the world, entering into micropolitical spheres of existence such as “seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, contemplating, perceiving, acting, loving” (p. 54). When we listen to women’s micropolitical experiences, a range of actions comes to the forefront, revealing how personal history served as a trigger for engagement with the cause.
3. The women also taught that activism actions occur in an organized manner, and can take place in neighborhoods or social movements. In small connections, groups ally themselves to identify and analyze their problems, make decisions, and plan strategies to access the community. Guattari (1997) draws attention to the “need for an opening of the problems of everyday life in institutions towards a whole micropolitics, a whole militarism of a new type” (p. 66). This new type of action reveals the constant movement of production, revision, and transformation of initiatives depending on the moment and the emerging situation.
4. Another lesson learned from the dialogues was that activist actions are permeated by controversies, which suggests that a political exercise of discussion and debate can be put into practice with a focus on strengthening arguments, criticisms, and revisions. Arcary (2022) draws attention to the fact that, in political practice, “every controversy has its time. Some are resolved more quickly, others require years and patience” (p. 40). The openness and difficulties generated in accommodating controversies were a hallmark of all the dialogue sessions with women, who emphasized the value of debates and even confrontations among ideas.
5. We also learned the importance of maintaining selective attention to the encounters and affections expressed in actions aimed at the collective. Collective encounters are not always empowering and welcoming. Thus, it is necessary to maintain a critical sensitivity towards those that favor the collective, as well as special attention to those that lead to wear and tear and frustration, which

demands more consideration. There are, therefore, no guarantees for establishing alliances, since the encounters and affections experienced are multiple, mobile and transitory, requiring at each moment a sensitive analysis of alliances and ruptures.

6. Another point emphasized by some women was the fact that borderline events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can shake practices that were already well-defined and known. The pandemic, specifically, highlighted difficult challenges to face, analyze, and overcome, especially with social isolation and distancing as biosecurity measures. This fact required new strategies for contacting the population, placing the so-called Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the spotlight in the organization of social movements. For Giaretta (2018), ICTs are already a reality in social movements, and their use is growing in the organization of activist practices. Women expressed great concern about the new generations of activists, due to the difficulty of expanding engagement with the causes they defend, which generates fatigue and frustration.

7. As a consequence of this fatigue, we observed in the dialogues the discomfort with loneliness and failure that hinder connections with the causes defended. In times of harsher collective confrontations, political polarization, and aggressive attitudes, understanding the affective scenario has become a fundamental condition for maintaining mental health. Arcary (2022) warns that recently “a neo-fascist current has emerged in Brazil, influencing tens of millions of people, defending absurd, cruel, and grotesque ideas” (p. 80). The hostile way in which this current was disseminated by a computerized technological industry has had serious repercussions on political actions, culminating even in violent reactions.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The learning processes precipitated in the dialogues with the activists show that confronting borderline situations that afflict humans and non-humans is the challenge placed on those who value collective life. The intervention with activists showed that we are facing the task of identifying, understanding, and disseminating women’s initiatives aimed at social transformation through desire and micropolitics. Knowing such practices helped to highlight actions that, because they are situated, do not gain wide visibility, a fact that hinders their social recognition and opens spaces for judgments and even disqualifications. The reported experience showed how much activism practices are marked by expectations and evaluations that hinder their spread in society, following two directions: either it is widely glamorized or it is disqualified. Thus, we agree with Guattari and Rolnik’s (1996) considerations that it is not possible to respond to the serious social and ecological problems that exist “without promoting a new art of living in society” (p. 33). The concepts, when integrated

into life protection practices, can promote educational processes during professional training in Psychology, contributing to the generation of precise interventions with government support.

In the end, we believe we have taken a step towards expanding knowledge about the political training of psychologists by focusing on activists who fight for the expansion of qualified life for humans and non-humans. The dialogues showed the relevance to involve the population in a sensitive and engaged way with the common good, opening new perspectives to confront this problem that still maintains a close relation with ignorance, prejudice, violence, and public neglect.

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