

Victor Valla: a life of reflection and activism in popular education and health



Photography: Peter Illiciev

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Abstract *The article explores aspects of the academic and activist life of the teacher and popular educator Victor Valla, particularly his repeated critiques, in writings and debates, about how some researchers and some social workers, educators, medical providers, and others working with the popular classes failed to understand these groups and their discourse. Valla embraced the idea that knowledge can be produced outside the traditional walls of universities and research centers, especially by the popular classes, who embed knowledge production in their very practices. In this regard, he advocated a new theoretical and methodological posture in social, cultural, educational, and health projects among the poor, in total consonance with the presuppositions of a democratic, equitable healthcare system, as supported by those involved in the health sector.*

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Victor Valla's professional history can be told from three perspectives that distinguished his activities both as an academic and as a participant in social movements. While engaged as a theoretician and activist in popular education, a researcher of the popular classes, and a researcher and activist in the field of health, Valla recognized that knowledge can be produced outside the traditional walls of universities and research centers; for him, who was heavily influenced by Paulo Freire, knowledge production was embedded in the very practice of the popular classes. In the realm of popular education through mediation, he called critical attention to how researchers, social workers, educators, medical providers, and others misunderstood the poorer classes and their words.

Victor Valla would have turned eighty in August 2017. He was born in California but moved to Brazil at the age of 27, in 1964, the year of Brazil's military coup. He spent his life working at a number of institutions, always with his prime focus on issues related to popular education. In an interview given to Eymar Vasconcelos, in 2005, Valla described himself as "depoliticized and with ties to a religious congregation." He said he knew it would be impossible to change the lives of the poor, so his strategy was to "live alongside the poor, especially in favelas. This wouldn't solve the problem but at least [he] would be sharing it."¹ Over the course of his lifetime, Valla forged connections with followers of Liberation Theology, something reflected in his sensitivity toward the poor. This was true both in his life as an academic and as a social movement activist, where he conducted studies and projects in popular education, an epistemological line of thought he followed throughout his life.

Valla held an undergraduate degree in education from Saint Edward's University, in Texas, but he studied history in Brazil, at the University of São Paulo (USP). He defended his master's thesis in 1969, in which he analyzed the influence of the United States and other foreign nations on the Brazilian economy from 1904 to 1928. He further explored the topic in his doctoral dissertation in history, defended at USP in 1972.

Shortly after receiving his PhD, he began teaching at Fluminense Federal University (UFF). Elements of what would become his trademark scholarship were evident in the earliest classes he taught there, which were studies of popular education. According to his Lattes résumé (still available on the internet), he first published on the topic in 1971, before he had finished his doctorate.

While popular education was a central topic in all of Valla's epistemological production, it came entwined with other themes and issues, like the processes that produce inequality and hold large numbers of people hostage to poverty. In a related field, his thinking on education in health bore much in common with the theoretical and methodological approaches of researchers like Joaquim Alberto Cardoso de Mello, professor and researcher at Brazil's National Public Health School (ENSP), part of the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz).

In 1977, Valla held a position as a researcher with the Getúlio Vargas Foundation's Institute for Advanced Studies in Education (IESAE), where he taught classes as part of the master's degree in education. That same year, he did research on informal educational processes and outside-of-school educational environments, where he chose not to examine "the Brazilian population as a whole but the sector currently known as the popular classes."² Likewise in 1977, he began teaching at a high-school equivalency course as part of a project in a favela in the Rio de Janeiro neighborhood of Santa Teresa. The following year, he became involved with the Federation of Favela Associations of Rio de Janeiro (FAFERJ), and his growing awareness of the political issues faced by favela residents began to shape his views as an activist and researcher. In Valla's own words:

...it was around then that I awoke to the debate these residents were waging over "urbanization" and/or "land tenure" versus "eviction" (remoção) as possible solutions for favelas and [I became aware that] this debate had been waged in earlier eras².

While Valla was at the FGV and also working as an activist with FAFERJ, he led a research project entitled "Toward the development of a theory of outside-of-school education in Brazil: ideology, education, and Rio de Janeiro favelas, 1880-1980" (in Port.), with funding through the Brazilian Innovation Agency (FINEP). Findings from the two-year project (1979-1980) were published in the book *Educação e Favela*, a seminal research resource on favelas in the city of Rio de Janeiro in the twentieth century. In its pages, Valla tells how, from the 1940s through early 1980s, Brazilian government agents and agencies, often in conjunction with international bodies or religious institutions, used such terms as "apathetic," "idiotic," "dirty," "disorganized," "sick," "lazy," and so on to label favela residents. According to Valla:

...the proposal to make "marginalized" groups an integral part of society is grounded on the principle that most members of this population, thanks to poverty, live as outsiders. It's as if the fact that

these marginalized populations—or, to use a more current expression, these excluded groups—don't enjoy access to basic goods and services stems from their ignorance or passive nature. In other words, they are deemed outsiders, in one way or another, through their own fault, and therefore must be "stimulated," "incentivized," and "enlightened" so they can partake of the benefits of economic and cultural progress³.

Influenced by the struggle of favela residents while engaged as a FAFERJ activist, Valla⁴ emphasized that the book *Educação e Favela* was meant to "underscore 'activity' where 'passivity' and 'idleness' have traditionally been seen."

Popular education—the topic examined, problematized, and tied in with other issues by Valla—appeared as a field of practice and knowledge production in the late 1950s and early 1960s amidst debates over rural and urban social movements. He wrote:

Back then, there was a climate of debate about theory and practice in popular education and its role in social transformation: the theoretical and methodological frameworks proposed by Paulo Freire, the Popular Culture Movement [Movimento Popular de Cultura], the National Student Union's Popular Culture Centers [Centros Populares de Cultura, or CPCs], the Basic Education Movement [Movimento de Educação de Base, or MEB], and many other initiatives concerned with valorizing and strengthening popular culture⁴.

Valla, however, warned it would be vainglory to think that "popular education, in and of itself, [would] necessarily bring in its wake the seeds of social transformation²." He pointed out that popular education had emerged in Brazil at a time when education was acquiring tones of universality, in the context of adult literacy and professional training projects, based heavily on the notion of behavioral change. One branch of popular education was community development, a major issue for Valla, who wrote:

...during much of the twentieth century, Community Development formed the foundation of many community intervention projects in the fields of health, education, and social assistance in peripheral capitalist nations. Its theoretical and methodological thinking was aimed at changing the behavior of the individuals served⁵.

In Valla's view, community development had been a part of many public intervention projects in Rio de Janeiro's favelas from 1940 to 1980. He wrote that:

...these institutions' proposals seem to contain an underlying fear that they will gain an awareness of the real reasons behind the contradictions of ur-

ban life. Through control programs—such as development, self-help, self-effort, "cooperation"—they try to frame the problem as local, while projecting an image that there are no ruling groups or sectors and that the government is a separate entity in this discussion².

From an educational perspective, community development followed a top-down model and, in this case, given the challenges of establishing dialogue with learners, was analogous to Paulo Freire's banking concept in education.

Valla joined the staff at ENSP in 1984, at a moment when the country was undergoing democratization and the Unified Health System (SUS) was being devised. This was also when Valla's critique of projects aimed at popular groups began to encompass the health field as well. Sanitary education, education in health, education for health, and a number of other topics were being revisited, along with popular participation as an educational activity through mediation. The question of participation was in fact a pillar of the public health movement, especially in the creation of institutional mechanisms intended to guarantee the presence of collectivities (especially popular groups) in arenas where public policy decisions were made.

One question under discussion was the institutionalization of the mechanisms for democratic-based popular participation, where thinking often diverged. Some approaches drew from community development. Valla noted that "implementing activities aimed at making improvements in a democratic spirit of personal responsibility" in truth meant "keeping poor favela residents demobilized and outside of political participation." He also said this was the social space where "the struggle for the structural transformations needed to overcome the problem would become viable"². Other approaches were built on the experiences of social movements that were part of left-leaning Ecclesiastical Base Communities (CEBs) and political parties. Among these were a few projects aligned with the principles of the Public Health Reform Movement (Movimento pela Reforma Sanitária)—for example, the Montes Claros Project in northern Minas Gerais.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Valla had a critical view of the public health reform policy that eventually gave birth to the SUS. In an interview, Valla mentioned the influence of the Italian Public Health Reform and went on to point out that:

...those behind the creation of the Public Health Reform were more the classroom type, the politi-

cal back office type, university intellectuals, people who didn't want to take the same path, that is, to seek out the popular movement when building the SUS. They were more interested in building the SUS as a proposal and then calling in popular movements to discuss it¹.

Valla was not alone in this thinking, which was shared by some researchers at ENSP, most of whom came from the Social Science Department (DCS). In the late 1980s, they founded the Study Group on Education, Health, and Citizenship (NEESC). In her doctoral dissertation, Rosely Magalhães de Oliveira⁶ wrote that researchers from the fledgling NEESC “were critical of the limits of the Public Health Reform proposal.” Oliveira argued that “any good intentions on the part of the movement’s coordinators notwithstanding, their practice was quite centralizing.” She went on to say:

...represented by the leaders of social, popular, community, and union movements, people were being called to take part in the movement solely to lend legitimacy and support to a proposal that had already come into existence in practice⁶.

From its inception, NEESC researched the living conditions of residents in the area of Leopoldina, paying special attention to the matter of daily life as part of the process of coming to understand the health-disease phenomenon⁶.

A product of organized civil society, the Leopoldina Center for Studies and Research (CEPEL) was an outgrowth of the dialogical and dialectic principles espoused by NEESC and the DCS and likewise of the contact between their researchers and community leaders and social activists. Valla was one of the NGO’s key enthusiasts and advocates.

In June 1990, the periodical *Se Liga no SINAL*, published by CEPEL, stated that the center had come into being in response to

...the need to open a study and research center among people with ties to the experience of struggles for health and education in the neighborhood of Penha and researchers from the DCS/ENSP/Fiocruz, who had their first contacts in early 1986⁷.

At the same time that *Se Liga no SINAL* came to life, the Local Health Studies Group (ELOS) was founded at ENSP, and a number of NEESC and CEPEL members became involved. Figures such as Victor Valla, Eduardo Stotz, Homero de Carvalho, Rosely Magalhães de Oliveira, and José Wellington Araújo were active in these spaces. It should be noted that CEPEL researchers worked primarily with social leaders from the region of the Maré and Penha favelas. In a related development, the Cooperative of Contractor Workers

at Manguinhos (COOTRAM), which came to have a marked presence in many public arenas, was founded at Fiocruz, with the support of the Committee of Entities in the Fight against Hunger and for Life (COEP)—an initiative of the sociologist Herbert de Souza in the realm of public companies—and of Professor Szachna Cynamom’s Open University Project. Although these initiatives had links to Fiocruz and popular groups living in the vicinity of its Manguinhos campus, these relations and interactions did not prove longstanding⁷.

After CEPEL was founded, Valla served as a Health Councilor with the District Health Board for Planning Area 3.1 (CDS AP 3.1), among representatives of the population. This can be felt in his scholarship: almost all of his papers, book chapters, and books with a greater emphasis on the topic of participation were published after 1993, that is, the year he gained direct familiarity with State policy.

Based on this experience, Valla wrote that the apparent depoliticization and apathy exhibited by the poor merely reflected miscomprehension on the part of mediators:

The reason mediators have trouble understanding what members of the popular classes are saying has more to do with their posture, of how hard it is for them to accept that “the modest poor who live on the urban periphery” are capable of producing knowledge and organizing and systematizing their thoughts about society, than with any technical issue per se, like linguistic issues, for example³.

Regarding this epistemological postulate, Valla pointed to the sociologist José de Souza Martins, who wrote that “the problem of interpretation is ours.”⁸ Martins problematized the question of whether the poor show initiative, a discourse developed by mediators who alleged that the poor were apathetic and unable to mobilize out of ignorance or laziness. Valla also claimed there was a tendency for mediators to think that the ideas and proposals put forward by popular groups mirrored codes and analyses received from academia; in his view, this was tantamount to analytical nearsightedness.

Mediators often ask the population to express themselves during a meeting as proof of their commitment to “middle-class democracy.” But once the popular voices have spoken, [the mediators] try to go back to “the item on the agenda,” viewing the interruption as necessary, albeit lacking in content or value³.

If the value of the popular classes should be identified and recognized, Valla⁹ added another

layer of complexity by asking whether “it is a matter of facilitating, of simplifying, the message, or of enabling the construction of another type of knowledge.” Valla’s answer was certainly “no” to the former notion, since he believed in working toward the shared construction of knowledge, a theoretical postulate coherent with his advocacy of emancipatory popular education.

Valla’s epistemological posture approaches that of activist research, as recognized in a text paying honor to Valla, published in the prestigious *Revista Brasileira de Educação*¹⁰ and authored by renowned education researchers Maria Tereza Goudard Tavares, Reinaldo Matias Fleuri, Eymard Mourão Vasconcelos, and Eveline Bertino Algebaile.

Victor Valla suffered a stroke in 2001; when interviewed four years later, he said he was still recovering. “There are minor advances that are huge victories, like learning to tie my shoes, for instance,” Valla stated¹. He went on to associate this with the “strength” shown by the popular classes:

I’m still afraid of some things, like falling when I’m out. I’ve fallen three times. I’m experiencing within myself what it is to be marked by strong weaknesses, like what happens so often in the popular world. I’m also experiencing the drive and incredible will power that feeds people from the popular classes¹.

After his stroke, Valla developed a relationship with Pastor Edson Fernando de Almeida, of the Ipanema Christian Church, and he began taking a closer look at neo-Pentecostal Christian churches. During his decades-long contact with residents of the favelas in the area of Leopoldi-

na, he witnessed the dramatic growth of these religious organizations, which began occupying prime time on the media and became directly involved in electoral politics. Valla’s last published articles reflected his considerations of the relations between social support for the poor and religiosity.

Victor Valla left us physically in 2009, but his ideas about the education process, especially involving less privileged groups, live on through his words and writings. Posthumous tributes, such as the Victor Valla Prize in Popular Education, awarded annually by the Ministry of Health; the article featured in *Revista Brasileira de Educação*, mentioned earlier; and honorable mentions in theses, dissertations, books, and videos stand as evidence of this researcher and activist’s contributions to reflections on and meaning production about human experience. This remarkable theoretician and activist displayed intellectual generosity toward his peers and engaged with many of them in the exercise of collective, collaborative, and dialogical thinking¹¹. Community leaders; health agents; faculty at ENSP, FGV, and UFF; healthcare providers; health councilors on CDS AP 3.1; and many others make up this network, which continues to problematize relations between public power and favela populations, both in regards to healthcare practices and to analyses and postures on health councils.

The fulcrum of Valla’s thinking was his political and epistemological recognition that the heterogeneous contingent of citizens known as the “popular classes” are capable of developing robust knowledge, requiring new methods to be developed and old ones adjusted to allow for the shared construction of knowledge.

Collaborations

In writing the article, research procedures regarding Valla's academic history and production were suggested by ALS Lima and developed by both authors. TMD Fernandes developed the argument, which was refined by ALS Lima. The topic of social participation, so dear to Victor Valla, was central to the recent defense of Dr. Lima's doctoral dissertation.

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