

“Crisis as a method of knowledge”, “accumulation within the class” and “democracy as self-determination of the masses”. René Zavaleta's contributions to critical pedagogies

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Abstract

The Bolivian Marxist René Zavaleta (1937-1984) is considered Bolivia's most notable political thinker of the 20th century, an eminent figure in Latin American Marxism, since he produced critical thought anchored in the concrete history of our societies, and developed a set of theoretical and conceptual approaches relevant to understanding the specificity of Bolivia and Latin America. Within his theoretical and conceptual construction, Zavaleta coined three categories that contain enormous potential for the field of critical pedagogy: "crisis as a method of knowledge", "accumulation within the class" and "democracy as self-determination of the masses". This article will present in a general way the work and the legacy of the Bolivian Marxist, carrying out a detailed analysis of the above three categories, to then project a range of informed challenges for critical pedagogies today. It is argued that the category of "crisis as a method of knowledge" opens up a set of relevant and current epistemological problems for the development of the critical consciousness for the new generations. The "accumulation within the class" emphasizes the processes of self-constitution and self-organization of the working class, which ultimately refers to cumulative processes of learning (and unlearning), organization and struggle, all of which is relevant to educational processes linked to popular movements. And the category of “democracy as self-determination of the masses” is important

because it makes it possible to articulate socialism and democracy without restricting their understanding relegated to the margins of liberal or social democratic discourses, claiming their radical and revolutionary dimension.

Keywords: *Critical Pedagogy, Marxism, Class, Democracy, Bolivia, Revolution*

I. Introduction. René Zavaleta as a notable key thinker and exponent of Latin American Marxism

The life and work of René Zavaleta Mercado (1937–1984) are marked by the close interplay between his intellectual production and his political activism. As numerous scholars have noted, his historiographical, political, theoretical, and conceptual contributions stem from a coherent articulation of his commitment to a historical project of class, popular, and emancipatory nature. In this sense, René Zavaleta Mercado has been recognized as an organic intellectual, a militant intellectual, a theorist of praxis, and/or a partisan intellectual by the Bolivian and Latin American left and intellectual communities (García Linera, 2005; Tapia, 2016).

Zavaleta was born in 1937 in the city of Oruro, one of Bolivia's main mining centers, where he completed his primary education and part of his secondary education. Inspired by the significant events of the 1952 Revolution, he moved in 1954, at the age of 17, to the city of La Paz, where he completed his secondary studies at an evening school. During this time, he supported himself through various jobs and began his political and intellectual activities, joining the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR) and publishing articles in local newspapers.

Between 1955 and 1960, Zavaleta lived in Montevideo, Uruguay, where he began studying law at the University of the Republic. He worked as a journalist and, from 1958 to 1960, served as the cultural attaché at the Bolivian Embassy. His journalistic and political activities led him to publish numerous articles in the Bolivian newspaper *La Nación*, the MNR's official publication, from which he debated with certain sectors of the Bolivian left, particularly the Revolutionary Workers' Party (POR), the Bolivian Communist Party, and the Christian Social Party, accusing them at various times of adopting alienated positions regarding Bolivia's reality (Tapia, 2009; Rodas, 2016).

From 1960 to 1962, Zavaleta resided in Santiago, Chile, where he served as the first secretary of the Bolivian Embassy. However, his stay in Chile was brief, as between 1962 and 1964, he fully dedicated himself to political life in Bolivia. From within the revolutionary nationalist movement, Zavaleta was elected as a national deputy representing Oruro in 1962, and in 1964 he was appointed Minister of Mines and Petroleum under the second government of Víctor Paz Estenssoro. It is worth noting that Zavaleta's positions within the MNR aligned with its left wing, as evidenced in two key aspects. First, he adopted anti-imperialist stances without abandoning the importance of socialism and class struggle in constructing a revolutionary project. Second, as Minister of Mines and Petroleum, he represented sectors closely linked to the Bolivian miners' labor movement, advocating for a development model centered on industrialization (Zavaleta, 1967; Tapia, 2016).

Following the coup d'état of November 1964, Zavaleta went into exile in Montevideo, Uruguay, where he lived until 1967. From this initial exile, the Bolivian intellectual published numerous articles in newspapers in Uruguay, Bolivia, and Mexico. He criticized the Bolivian Socialist Falange for promoting the coup and advancing a rightward shift in the country; called on the

revolutionary nationalist movement to support and engage with the 1967 guerrilla experience of Ñancahuazú, led by Ernesto Che Guevara; and conducted political analyses of various governments across the region. These included the administrations of Jorge Alessandri and Eduardo Frei Montalva in Chile, Onganía and Illia in Argentina, Barrientos and Ovando in Bolivia, and Alfredo Stroessner in Paraguay. He also provided early analyses of the Cuban revolutionary process, denounced military dictatorships, highlighted repression, and criticized the Alliance for Progress, denationalization processes, and U.S. imperialist interventions in Latin America.

In 1967, Zavaleta returned to Bolivia, completing his degree in Legal, Political, and Social Sciences at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés (UMSA).

However, after delivering a lecture defending oil and hydrocarbons, he was arrested and imprisoned. Upon his release, he traveled to England, where he lived between 1968 and 1970, participating in the establishment of the Latin American Studies Institute at St. Antony's College, Oxford, and working as a professor at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. In 1971, he returned to Bolivia and joined UMSA as a sociology professor. During this period, he permanently left the MNR and joined the Committee for the Unity of the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR). However, following Hugo Banzer's coup in 1971, Zavaleta went into exile again, this time in Chile.

Between 1971 and 1973, he lived in Santiago, Chile, working for the Planning Office (ODEPLAN) of Salvador Allende's government and the Center for the Study of National Reality (CEREN) at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile. During his exile, Zavaleta remained active in the MIR, particularly within the Marxist-Leninist faction. It is worth mentioning that the MIR was one of the parties that supported and defended the 1971 People's Assembly during the government of Juan José Torres. In 1972, Zavaleta served as the national

director of the Bolivian MIR. However, after the 1973 coup, he left Chile, seeking refuge in Mexico, where he would live until his death.

From late 1973 to 1984, René Zavaleta lived in Mexico, which became a refuge for many Bolivian leftists exiled by Banzer's dictatorship. Academically and professionally, he worked as a professor and researcher at the Center for Latin American Studies (CELA) at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and as a professor at the Institute of Social Research at the same university. Between 1976 and 1980, he was the director of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO), and from 1979 to 1984, he served as a professor at the Faculty of Economics at UNAM and the Metropolitan Autonomous University-Xochimilco (UAM-X). Politically, Zavaleta distanced himself from the MIR upon arriving in Mexico and joined the Bolivian Communist Party. He remained politically active, collaborating with the Committee of Bolivian Exiles and the Committee for the Defense of Democracy (CONADE), which supported resistance efforts against the Banzer dictatorship in Bolivia. His activities included international campaigns for the release of political prisoners, assisting in the repatriation of former President Juan José Torres's remains, and supporting university students persecuted by the dictatorship, among other efforts (Andujar, 2013, 2015).

As this concise biographical synthesis demonstrates, Zavaleta's work is characterized by intense political activity and a steadfast commitment to the social, cultural, and political forces seeking to forge an emancipatory historical project. For the purposes of this article, it is important to highlight that from the 1970s onward, Zavaleta's explicit affiliation with Marxism became evident. His Marxism was not confined to academia but was rather a political and epistemological stance, developed as a militant intellectual actively and

organically linked to the workers' and popular movements of Bolivia and Latin America (García Linera, 2005).

René Zavaleta has been conceived as a prominent theorist within Latin American Marxism,ⁱ which can be explained by several factors. One of them is that this Bolivian intellectual has been considered an anti-dogmatist, since he understood Marxism as an open and dynamic system with respect to reality, which made it possible to build an innovative and creative conceptual architecture that can be understood as a nationalization of critical theory or an epistemological option based on the logic of the location in space and time (Ouviaña, 2016; Tapia, 2016; Ortega Reyna, 2022).

For Giller and Ouviaña (2016), the theoretical and conceptual production of René Zavaleta is currently configured as a nucleus of good Marxist meaningful sense for the development of Latin American critical social thought. The categorical universe, comprised of concepts inter alia such as "motley society", "social equation", "primordial form", "constitutive moment", "self-determination of the masses", "apparent state", "accumulation within the class", allow us to argue that Zavaleta's work and legacy promotes an intellectual project that seeks to continue, deepen, reopen and problematize some nuclei of reasoning opened up by Karl Marx and Marxist theory. In the view of the Bolivian sociologist Luis Tapia (2016), Zavaleta's intellectual project was translated into a theoretical strategy and a research program that ended up building a rigorous and creative theoretical matrix – one that serves to develop historical, political, and cultural analysis of social formations such as Latin America and the Latin American's.

Another relevant factor for conceiving René Zavaleta Mercado as a key figure within Latin American Marxism consists in his superb ability to translate the categories of Marx and Marxism based on the specific realities of Bolivia and

Latin America. According to Luis Tapia (2016), the Bolivian intellectual elaborated a selective recovery of Marx's theoretical production viewed in accord with the great problems besetting Bolivia and Latin America.

“What we have, then, is a process of theoretical appropriation of Marxist ideas, of the central categories to think about the configuration of the social world and of the modern world in particular, which is carried out to work and develop explanations of national realities, of specific social configurations” (Tapia, 2013, p. 92).

According to his interpreters, the ability to translate theoretical approaches and categories of analysis based on the complexity and historical specificity of Latin America is one of the elements that allows the work of Zavaleta Mercado to be twinned with the work of José Carlos Mariátegui. Both authors, from a creative and original Marxism, are able to shed colonial matrices and stress the limits of Marxism as viewed in accordance with the local and national realities of this continent (Ouviña, 2010; 2016). Based on what has been stated, it has been argued that Zavaleta's theoretical and conceptual work unfolded in analysis of processes of nationalization of Marxist critical theory, permanently concerned about the concrete historical realities and the specificity of the local. The emphasis is on the logic of place, over the logic of the world, i.e., on the production of local and situated knowledge. Put in other terms, the Mexican sociologist Elvira Concheiro (2016) has pointed out that René Zavaleta was inspired by and developed a methodological and political contribution stemming from Lenin: "The construction of a far-reaching theoretical-political proposal based on the concrete analysis of situations concrete or specific" (p. 29). Therefore, Zavaleta's starting point is thus always grounded on historical reality.

In addition, the works of José Carlos Mariátegui and René Zavaleta Mercado are intertwined by analyzing the peasant and indigenous question in the Andean countries through the lens of a heterodox Marxism, which advances in an exercise of understanding the struggles for land and the cycles of indigenous rebellions, crossing class and ethnic variables. The critical and heterodox Marxism of both authors is expressed in creative reflections that attempt to understand and explain indigenous struggles articulated within and through class struggle (Lagos, 2019).

In addition, we can stress that René Zavaleta's critical Marxism was characterized by two additional elements. In first place, a commitment to delve into reflections on the superstructural dimension (particularly politics, the state and culture); and secondly for polemicizing with Althusserian structuralism. We comment briefly below on each of these elements.

Since the 1970s, we can find writings where René Zavaleta argues against the economistic and deterministic conceptions of Marxism, since for the Bolivian, real life could not be reduced or fragmented according to what was proposed in the metaphor of economic base and superstructure by Marx (1859, p.20). For Zavaleta, the base and the superstructure were simultaneous and integrated; they had to be read as an organic whole. These approaches are relevant to be able to develop a political theory of the State grounded in Marxism and numerous reflections on the superstructural dimension (Zavaleta, 1978a; 1983b).

The texts in which Zavaleta Mercado delved theoretically into the state based on Marxist conceptions were produced between 1971 and 1980. From his condition of exile (in Chile and Mexico), he argued against general theories to address state problems, emphasizing a historical perspective. He developed the notions of the “apparent state”, which highlights its inorganic character, the state's

inability to unify and articulate social complexity; the state as a synthesis, pointing out that the state structure contains social contradictions and tries to convert the interests of the ruling class into general interests; and the notion of the state as class domination. In all these notions, the idea of the state as a reflection or result of the economic base is rejected. Moreover, it is important to note that the Zavaletian approaches to the state encountered dialogue and debate with writings by Nicos Poulantzas , Ralph Miliband, Claus Offe and John Holloway (Tapia, 2016).

In addition to the numerous texts on the specificity of the state in Latin America, and the analysis of dictatorial processes and democracy, René Zavaleta devoted several pages of his work to the analysis of experiences of political construction with counter-hegemonic roots, such as the revolution of 1952, the Ñancahuazú guerrilla movement of 1967, the experience of the Popular Assembly in 1971, the political situation of 1978-1980 in Bolivia and the experience of popular power in the Chile of Popular Unity (1970-1973). He understood this work as a way to contribute to the process of accumulation of political knowledge by the oppressed and dominated classes of Bolivia and Latin America.

Finally, the critical Marxism of René Zavaleta has also been associated with his attempts to polemicize with the structuralism of Louis Althusser. An example of this is his criticism of the notion of ideological state apparatuses, since for the Bolivian such apparatuses did not produce or build ideology. In this regard, he pointed out: "Althusser (...) confuses in his enumeration what is 'real mediation' and what are the subjects or supports of mediation" (Zavaleta, 1978a, pp. 452-453). For the Bolivian, the church, the party, the union, the school, are moments, places, supports or organs of mediation, but they are not strictly part

of the state. For Zavaleta, Althusser's conceptualization dilutes the specificity of the state form in society, which is clearly pinpointed in the following quote:

“We have all taken this long journey (...) to reach this point, in our view forgotten by Louis Althusser: That the state is a special apparatus. That the party or the family or the church or the union are at the moment extensions or arms of the will of the state which can happen, both in its repressive aspect and (more frequently) in its ideological aspect. But they can also be moments of denial of state ideology. It is the most barbarous folly to think that Lenin's party was an ideological apparatus of the tsarist state” (Zavaleta, 1978a, p. 453).

The foregoing is deepened in his essay "El Estado en América Latina", a text in which he argues that unions in Mexico in the 1980s or in Peronist Argentina can be considered as "mediation" between civil society and the state, that is to say: they can be read as co-opted, loyal institutions submerged in state logic.

However, in Bolivia this is not the case, since unionism has expressed itself throughout the 20th century as anti-state, moving in a counter-hegemonic scenario. The same analysis applies in the case of political parties, universities, churches, etc. Based on what has been stated, Zavaleta (1983b) finds it inappropriate to freeze these institutions under the concept of ideological state apparatuses.

To finish the approaches of Zavaleta Mercado as a key exponent of Latin American Marxism, consider this interesting quote:

“That is why, comrades, those who believed that a kind of philosopher's stone had been found with Marxism, or that each revolution means the end of history, its happy summa, and those who judge that with both things we had reached a conclusion. Marx, it must be said, had not wanted this kind of messianism practiced in his name.

Marx demonstrated that the world could be known within certain conditions and that man could appropriate the world. But to do so, it is necessary to reduce each reality to its material-rational significance and its historical sense. Marx, with the fire of his powerful thought, has illuminated all the revolutions after him. But Marxism as such has never produced a revolution. This has occurred, on the other hand, when Marxism has read the underground formation of the revolution in national history” (Zavaleta, 1983d, p. 609).

As indicated here, the Marxism that René Zavaleta Mercado envisions is a Marxism that breaks with dogmatic perspectives and positions, which opposes the construction of false myths, false formulas, false heroes; a Marxism that claims a research program open to the complex understanding of human history and that feeds the fire of revolutionary struggles in rational, material, cultural and educational terms.

Next, we will examine three categories coined by Zavaleta Mercado that have great potential for Latin American critical pedagogies: "crisis as knowledge", "accumulation within the class" and "democracy as self-determination of the masses".

II. "Crisis as a method of knowledge"

In numerous texts produced and published during the 1970s and 1980s, René Zavaleta supports the relevance of understanding the crisis as a pertinent method of knowledge for the historical analysis of variegated social formations. For Zavaleta, the crisis is a recurring situation in societies such as Bolivia, where there is disarticulation between the state and civil society and where the forms of community organization, associated with nations and indigenous peoples, have not managed to be subsumed to the political forms of the modern state (Zavaleta, 1980; Antezana, 2009b; Tapia, 2016).

In turn, in "variegated social formations", the crisis is a junction in time common to the heterogeneous times of society, in this sense, it is a time that alters all times, it is a time that intersects heterogeneity. The eruption of the crisis grants unity to Bolivia, in this sense it is a nationalizing act, which is explained in the following quote about the crisis associated with the Chaco war (1932-1935): "You belong to a mode of production and I to another, but neither you nor I are the same after the battle of Nanawa. Nanawa is what is in common between you and me" (Zavaleta, 1983c, p. 107).

In variegated highly complex and heterogeneous social formations, crisis contexts make visible components, layers and folds of society that are hidden in other contexts. That is why the crisis is a method of production of relevant social knowledge in societies such as in Bolivia and Latin American. In moments of crisis, social subjects, power structures, organizational forms and expressions of force of different groups and social classes are revealed or stripped bare.ⁱⁱ In the crisis "the nakedness of the classes appears" (Zavaleta, 1974a, p. 693). For all that has been stated, the complexity of the crisis would allow deepening reflections on the real dimensions of the power of each class; it would help in recognizing the possibilities of action that are mobilized in each conflict; it serves to make visible the behavior of the different social subjects and to recognize inter alia contradictions and power relations (Antezana, 2009b; Zavaleta, 2008).

The following summarizes what was said:

“From all this we can deduce the importance of a scrupulous study of the social crises that occur in the area for the construction of an efficient Latin American political science (...). It is in the crisis where all the forces of a society come into operation, all its aspects and fundamental springs” (Zavaleta, 1973, p. 516).

In addition to what has been stated, the crisis allows us to recognize the components and folds of a heterogeneous society, and in this direction, its exhaustive analysis would allow progress in processes of self-knowledge. Based on this approach, Zavaleta argued that for the working class and the labor movement, it was relevant to advance in the analysis of social crises, since from this, they could deepen their self-knowledge.ⁱⁱⁱ Based on the analysis of the crisis, the labor movement could deepen its knowledge of its history, its ability to mobilize with autonomy, the realization of its political project and the materiality of its power. In other words, the systematic reflection on the crisis at hand made it possible for the working class to recognize the possibilities of breaking normality and calm, the status quo, and becoming aware of its real power. In the crisis it is possible to observe exactly what the social classes fundamentally are. Zavaleta formulated this in the following terms:

“The classes then learn the dimensions of their power and the efficiency of their power not from previous analyzes that are all incomplete or presumptive or totally non-existent (...), but from their practice: what they can and what they cannot do is what they are” (Zavaleta, 1974b, p. 748).

For Zavaleta (1974a), the "variegated social formations", marked by dependency and colonialism, are characterized by having a low capacity for self-knowledge, therefore, their intellectuals or those who made up the "popular intelligence" should be concerned with developing social self-knowledge, which necessarily implied stressing servile Eurocentrism. The production of social knowledge and self-knowledge should focus on the analysis of social crises, since in experience and in crisis scenarios, subjects learn to deny their former points of reference, they learn to restructure the historical background, to recognize their strengths and weaknesses, and learn to reread reality (Antezana, 2009a; Souza, 2013).

Finally, it is relevant to maintain that René Zavaleta emphasized that the crisis, understood as a method of social knowledge, should be understood as a relevant space for the production of knowledge and learning. Posed in this way, the crisis is a tool for reading reality, which allows us to reveal the state of things in daily life. Put in other terms, the crisis allows a process of opening up and galvanizing knowledge, which begins by questioning what has been learned, to later open up a new cycle of knowledge, thus resembling a cyclical movement of learning, un-learning and relearning. In this displacement, the crisis generates the available option to adopt and develop new ideas and beliefs, that is, it allows progress in processes of ideological substitution, demystification of the existing order, and in turn, allows the construction of a new intellectual and moral horizon (Antezana, 2009b; Tapia, 2016).

René Zavaleta (1974a; 1974b) thus maintained that the crisis can be understood as a school for the working class and the popular movement, insofar as it allows them to approach the understanding of social complexity; it enables the development of learning and knowledge nuclei; it permits the production of social knowledge and self-knowledge; it facilitates the recognition of disruptions in the social fabric, conflicts and social contradictions; and it recognizes *inter alia* repertoires and forms of action of social subjects; among other understandings.

The centrality of the crisis in Zavaleta's work was not only expressed in his notes on crisis as a method of social knowledge, but also in his reiterative, permanent and systematic concern to analyze contexts and historical crisis scenarios in Bolivia and Latin America. Viewed in terms of this logic, we contend that the extensive work dealing with the rebellions of Tupac Katari and Willka Zárate, the 1952 revolution, the experience of the 1971 Popular Assembly, the political situation of the 1978-1980 period, the coups d'état and

inter alia the civic-military dictatorships in the region, can be best analyzed and understood in this light.

III. “Accumulation within the class”

The category of “accumulation within the class” was developed by Zavaleta in the 1970s, and it is a relevant category to understand the approach that he developed regarding the processes of self-constitution, self-development, and self-organization of the working class. For Zavaleta, the analysis and understanding of the social conflict and the historical initiative of the dominated classes centered around a liberation project had to start by recognizing the cumulative processes of learning, organization and struggle. The category is productive and relevant seen from this perspective.

The category of accumulation within the class refers to processes of internalization and/or collective learning, which is essential for the self-development of the dominated classes. The internalization and learning from experiences, knowledge and projects, is - without a doubt - a cornerstone of the constitution and development of the classes that organize, commit and fight for national and popular liberation projects in Bolivia and Latin America.

In addition to what has been stated, the Zavaletian category of accumulation within the class, i.e., collective unlearning and relearning, allows the levels of consciousness of the working class to become more complex. This in turn enriches its political and ideological praxis and enables greater degrees of empirical concrete incidence in social and historical transformations. Consistently, and drawing on the approaches of Horst Grebe (1987), the processes of accumulation within the class are those that allow us to understand, for example, *“the evolution of the working class in its transition from anti-state*

spontaneism to the conscious construction of the vocation of national-state power of the Bolivian proletariat” (p. 14).

In trying to characterize the notion of accumulation within the class, one of the first elements we must point out consists of a displacement of the focus proposed by Gramscian Marxism on the figure of the organic intellectual, shifting to a new emphasis on processes of production and collective appropriation of knowledge, experiences and memories. If liberation refers to social and collective processes, the concern to analyze forms and devices of internalization and learning that are of a collective and horizontal nature is entirely coherent. For Zavaleta (1982), it is accumulation within the class that makes possible the transformation of the common sense of the working class and this contributes (based on cultural and educational processes), to the self-constitution and strengthening of the working class.

Zavaleta (1978c) stated it clearly that: “accumulation within the class is not done only on the basis of books; it is the collective knowledge of a collective class, the combination between its movement and its memory” (p. 73). And in a previous text, he emphasized the collective nature of the process:

“The labor movement can be decapitated in theory, but not in practice; the leaders are all replaced and are nourished by the very body of the class. This is what we call accumulation within the class. The experiences are already in the people, someone does not need to manage the conscience, but it is distributed through their experience, their participation within the class” (Zavaleta, 1975c, p. 59).

For Zavaleta, the working class is a historical configuration, "the class itself is something that can happen or not " (Zavaleta, 1983a, p. 128); that is to say, in order to exist, establish itself and develop, it must be able to produce, spread

and integrate political, ideological, cultural and organizational elements to its heritage. Put another way, to establish itself as a historical force and engine of a project of liberation, the working class must be able to produce and appropriate ideas, values, representations, experiences, memories, etc.

Zavaleta (1982) formulated this in the following terms:

“In the analysis of the Bolivian labor movement, within our modest sociological tradition, the concept of 'accumulation within the class' has been used to describe the relationship between collective memory, suppression-consecration and active enunciation, that is, it is a metaphor referring to the mechanisms of positive or negative selection in the movements of collective knowledge” (p. 584).

What is stated in the quote emphasizes the educational and cultural process of appropriation or (selective) acquisition that unfolds within the working class. Knowledge and collective memory, selection of knowledge and experiences, learning processes of the masses and popular learning, are key nodes to understand the complex process of self-constitution of the working class (Antezana, 2009a; Tapia, 2016).

Accumulation within the class then refers to collective learning processes based on their historical, practical and concrete experience. Zavaleta (1974b) maintained:

“The classes then learn the dimensions of their power and the efficiency of their power not from previous analyzes that are all incomplete or presumptive or totally non-existent (...), but from their practice: what they can and what they cannot do is what they are” (Zavaleta, 1974b, p. 748).

The learning process grounded in and drawing from the historical experience, from social practice, must advance in configuring itself in collective memory^{iv} and it was essential to strengthen the organizational processes. In this connection, Zavaleta noted:

“Practice, in fact, is a producer of knowledge but it cannot know itself and, on the other hand, the fact that something is born from the nature of things, such as the strike by the worker concentration in capitalism, does not mean that it can be tried as mere practice. The accumulation of practice, to be coherent, needs to be transformed into class memory and this into class organization” (Zavaleta, 1976c, p. 774).

Accumulation within the class supposes knowledge and learning, produced and appropriated collectively, and which can eventually contribute to organizational and struggling processes of the oppressed sectors. In this regard, Zavaleta (1975a) stated:

“The lesson that is derived consists of knowing that the most difficult aspect of learning for a people is learning their own victory, and just as knowing how to rebel does not yet mean knowing how to win, even this second does not yet imply knowing how to command. Centuries full of submission and defeat, centuries of servitude and hopelessness cannot be buried in a single magical act of liberation” (p. 695).

In the quote, Zavaleta adds the complexity of collective learning based on a liberating horizon. For the author, liberation cannot be restricted to a simple situation, but rather, it refers us to processes of enormous historical density.

However, we seek to point out and underscore that the notion of accumulation within the class refers to the integration of political, ideological and cultural elements into its heritage, all of which enables the self-constitution and self-

development of the class. In the case of the Bolivian working class, Zavaleta specifically referred to three elements:

III. (1)

A first accumulated element, learned and disseminated by the Bolivian working class, refers to its organizational forms and repertoires of action. With respect to the organizational forms, Zavaleta (1982) reflected particularly on the form and matrix of the labor union, arguing that: "the union was always without a doubt the school of democracy, that is, a school of citizenship" (p. 588). In the union workers learned the exercise of self-organization; they learned to exercise collective action; they learned to argue and convince; they learned to fight, and in all these elements they learned to live with dignity. And with regard to the repertoire of action, Zavaleta endorsed the deployment of different methods of struggle, which used forms of direct action such as strikes, protests and roadblocks; the practice of stalking and besieging oligarchic power; the logic of permanent organization, overcoming political messianism and individual leadership^v; the practice of permanent control over the leader, which was understood as an anti-bureaucratic practice; and the construction of organizational experiences associated with the exercise of workers' power or popular power, which were considered true schools of socialism, since in them they learned, through the path of prefiguration, to exercise forms of self-government and class self-determination (Zavaleta, 1973; 1979; 1982; 1983c).

III. (2)

A second relevant element for accumulation within the working class is related to learning the country's political history. In this direction, and just to name a few relevant processes, in Zavaleta's view it was essential to know the history of indigenous rebellions promoted by Tupac Katari and Willka Zárate, in which forms of action and projects that constitute the core of the national-popular in

Bolivia are visualized. It was relevant to analyze political programs such as the “Tesis de Pulacayo” of 1947, elaborated by the Bolivian Mining Workers Union Federation, which constituted the most lucid sectors of the working class and Bolivian Trotskyism. It was key to understanding the radical nature of the 1952 revolution and the processes of nationalization of mining, the distribution of arable land, the creation of worker and peasant militias, the appointment of worker ministers, the creation of workers’ control allowing the right to veto, the promotion of the unionization of the country and the establishment of the universal vote. In turn, it was strategic to critically understand the distance of the MNR from the working class and particularly the power of the miners, the gradual control of the state by the middle classes, the systematic concessions to imperialism. Moreover, it was urgent to analyze the coups, the counterrevolutionary cycles and the establishment of military dictatorships on the continent (Zavaleta, 1970; 1974a; 2008). With all these elements, which are transversal to his work, Zavaleta emphasized the importance of critically understanding the political history of his country and the continent for the self-constitution and development of the working class.

III. (3)

Finally, a third element is what Zavaleta (1974a; 1978a) called the acquisition of Marxism as a theoretical strategy and as a method of knowledge that allows the working class to analyze and understand the social totality. For Zavaleta, Marxism contributes centrally to broadening the horizon of visibility of the working class, since it allows them to approach the understanding of capitalism as a whole. In turn, Marxism allows workers and analysts to confront the ideology of the ruling classes that build appearances which mask and hide reality. Marxism, as a theoretical strategy and method of knowledge, allows the development of knowledge that is not aseptic, neutral or apolitical;’ it is militant knowledge, committed to the struggles of the working classes.

IV. “Democracy as self-determination of the masses”

Written since the 1970s, we can find numerous texts in Zavaleta’s opus where he addresses the problem of democracy in Bolivia and Latin America.

Obviously, this work is located in a Latin American debate that tries to analyze the cycle of coups d'état and the *de facto establishment* of civil-military dictatorships and authoritarian governments; to denounce states of emergency, the doctrine of national security, repressive practices, and the systematic violation of human rights; and to critically reflect on the "reflux" or "defeat" of different leftist projects in the region.

It is important to add that this debate mobilized numerous intellectuals who lived in exile in Mexico, a country that allowed for deep and systematic reflection on the problem of democracy. In the Mexican exile, propitious and favorable conditions for academic and university^{vi} work were generated for some Latin American intellectuals, and in turn, reflection and discussion were made possible in a democratic setting, about dictatorships and fascism in the region, and about the crisis of Marxism and real socialisms (Álvarez, 2005; Caso, 2008).

In addition to what has been stated, the debates around "the democratic question" deployed by the leftist intelligentsia in the context of the Mexican exile were crossed by substantial theoretical and political discussions. An influential discussion in the Latin American intelligentsia was the European debate focused on the proposals of Eurocommunism, which emphasized the relevance of the popular fronts and the Chilean experience of Popular Unity, and criticized the bureaucratization of real socialism, the experience of Stalinism and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, all of which allowed them to justify the abandonment of the revolutionary paradigm to maintain that the

only possible way to advance towards socialism was by consolidating and deepening representative and liberal democracy.

Based on the above, we can point up the existence of a kind of displacement of the revolutionary socialist positions and of those who ascribed to the armed struggle, shifted towards positions of a social democratic nature. This is explained by an interpretation that emphasized political, military and intellectual defeat, all of which led to a process of disaffiliation among certain intellectuals and militants of the left from revolutionary ideas. This was clearly described and analyzed by Norbert Lechner (1985) when he showed that between 1973 and 1983, a shift in the Latin American intellectual field took place, gravitating from the notion of "revolution" to the notion of "democracy" (Álvarez, 2005; Camón and González, 2017).

Another influential discussion within the left intelligentsia revolved around the relationship between socialism and democracy. In this debate, the reading of Antonio Gramsci's work within Latin America and particularly the debates around the category of hegemony were relevant. The Argentine Gramscians (José Aricó, Emilio de Ipola, José Carlos Portantiero, Oscar del Barco, Oscar Terán, etc.) discussed formal democracy with a capitalist stamp and real democracy associated with socialism; a difference between democratic forms was made, associated with participation and democratic contents, linked to social justice. In turn, it was reflected on democracy as a means and end for socialism, which allowed the problematization of authoritarianism and the bureaucratization of "real socialisms".

Finally, it is necessary to point out that the Latin American left, and in the context of brutal civil-military dictatorships, developed a political exercise of reevaluation of representative liberal democracy, arguing that it generated the

conditions of possibility for the political organization of the working class, allowing for the achievement of social and political rights for the oppressed sectors of society and guaranteeing minimum individual liberties (Devés, 2008).

Thus posed the debate, it is also necessary to point out that the work of René Zavaleta Mercado advanced in a different direction towards several of these ideas, rather than developing a perspective that bet on radicalizing democracy. His reflections on the problem of democracy, the critique of representative democracy and the relationship between socialism and democracy were always approached from a left and radical perspective.

Since the 1970s, Zavaleta produced numerous texts in which he reflected on the democratic question in Latin America. Initially we can find some approaches in which he critically valued representative democracy, since it allowed the development of the working class. Within this framework, Zavaleta (1976b) maintained:

“It was Lenin who wrote, at a decisive moment in Russian history, that 'whoever wants to go to socialism by any other path than that of political democracy will infallibly arrive at absurd and reactionary conclusions.' It would be enough for us, in effect, to think about where all the conquests of the working class, of the peasantry, all the authentic popular and national demands that have been obtained in our countries came from. On the contrary, restoring the importance of political democracy for the adequate development of popular and national movements is a fundamental task in our historical moment, precisely because it is an aspect that tends to be omitted for the most diverse reasons" (p. 236).

In Zavaleta's eyes, representative democracy was essential for the political organization of the working class. In this context he stressed:

“And that is why those who believe that the development of democracy is not in the interest of socialism are very mistaken, as are those who believe that a class can be organized, which is at the same time part of bourgeois society and at one its greatest antagonist, placing itself outside the way in which politics occurs in that society, that is, placing itself outside of bourgeois democracy ” (Zavaleta, 1976a, p. 414).

With these approaches formulated in the middle of the dictatorial cycle in Latin America, Zavaleta maintained that the liberation struggles cannot omit the struggles for democracy. Representative democracy, for a historical project with socialist roots, should not be denied, but rather should be radicalized for the sake of processes of popular self-determination.

In advancing the criticism of representative^{vii} and bourgeois democracy, it can be added that Zavaleta clearly denounced the fact that the processes of de-peasantization, decommunalization , original accumulation, formal and legal equalization of "free" human beings and the political form of subjects atomized and individuals alien to social life are constitutive processes of representative democracy in capitalist societies. Critically positioned with respect to representative democracy in capitalist societies, Zavaleta emphasized that it contained within itself a fundamental contradiction as expressed in the following fragment:

“The freedom of social democratization contains at the same time the greatness of capitalism, capable of generating masses of national and identified individuals; and the downfall of capitalism, because the socialization of production is the preparation for the socialization of power” (Zavaleta, 1981, p. 69).

Advancing on the overcoming representative democracy, conceived as the requirement for the existence of bourgeois society and capitalism, Zavaleta

proposes the affiliation to a conception of democracy understood as “self-determination of the masses”.

Zavaleta understood self-determination as a revolutionary act - and not necessarily as a legal act - that emanates from a will to power, generally expressed in a creative and spontaneous way. Democracy as self-determination is the overflow and/or overcoming of the representative form, which implies that civil society or the oppressed classes are the ones who exercise power by themselves and for themselves. Therefore, it is a conception that goes beyond the liberal scheme and that is committed to radicalizing democratization processes, reconstituting social and community life in the opposite direction of processes of individuation and atomization (Zavaleta, 1981; 1984; Tapia, 2016).

Thus stated, self-determination is conceived as actions of rebellion, as relevant moments where decisions are made and relations of freedom are exercised. It is the exercise of sovereignty by the oppressed classes, subjects and communities. It is the materialization of democracy as *working-class freedom* or as democracy of the class itself.^{viii} Thus understood, self-determination "*educates the masses in a sense of crowd democracy, self-determination and contempt*" (Zavaleta, 2008, p. 69).

Self-determination refers to a yearning and a horizon of freedom. Zavaleta (2008) put it as follows:

“Self-determination is the collective or national prolongation of personal dignity, that is, of the extent to which the free individual exists, because if the collectivity has the strength it has in capitalism it is because it is the result of interpenetration or interdiscursivity between free men. It is true that it is a false personal dignity that is based on the erosion of the dignity of others, because that exclusivizes or isolates instead of generalizing its meaning. This means that the free man tends in himself to

extend his freedom towards politics and from this certain deep tendencies towards political democracy and self-determination are derived” (p. 157).

Zavaleta's approaches establish a direct relationship between individual liberties and collective liberties, that is, political democracy understood as self-determination is a process associated with the radicalization of the freedom of the human being.

It is necessary to add that the Zavaletian notion of democracy as self-determination emphasizes the organizational, associative and struggle practices that civil society has deployed in Bolivia, which historically demonstrates an anti-authoritarian sense and dense democratic roots. For Zavaleta (1978b):

"Democracy is not a state form but a way of being of the masses (which translates into a state form) that is, not something that is received but the conquest of a space by the masses, by themselves and before themselves " (p. 795).

The foregoing is clearly evidenced in a television interview with Zavaleta in 1983 when he espoused relevant reflections on democracy and self-determination in Bolivia. I quote at length:

“In the facts, what is important is to realize that, although representative democracy in the strict sense has hardly a reference or scant reference in our history, instead, the democratic traditions in Bolivia are important. Although the party form is a form that is not organizationally embodied in Bolivia; however, there are important organizational traditions. Bolivia is not a country that can be classified as a country of crowds ossified and crystallized in their backwardness. There is a sense of historical concurrence and of the historical initiative in the people that is continuous and is the history of Bolivia. This is: from Katari to the federal revolution of ‘52, they are not acts of omission of the people. The normal form of participation is the eruption of the

crowd, that is the Bolivian form of participation. So, in this sense, there are traditions of self-determination that are powerful in this country” (Zavaleta, 1983e, p. 113).

And he adds at the end of the same interview: "*I believe that the democratic process is a conquest of the masses, it is an act of self-transformation of the masses*" (p.118).

Finally, it is necessary to add that René Zavaleta's approaches to self-determination must be understood as the other side of the dependency that affects Latin American countries. Self-determination cannot be abstracted from or unlinked from problems associated with colonialism, imperialism, global monopoly capital, etc. "*But it is true that it is one thing to print one's own character in line with the dependency and another to erect a structure of self-determination*" (Zavaleta, 1983a, p. 140). The construction of specific patterns of self-determination can engender specific modalities of dependency. The tension between self-determination and dependency allowed Zavaleta to place the complex problem of the limits of self-determination at the national level.

Now, we must add that the notion of "masses" as perceived by René Zavaleta, refers to the idea of civil society in action, mobilizing through practices of resistance and rebellion with respect to the oligarchy and the state. The masses refer to an intersubjectivity that participates in political struggles, that confronts state power, and that has the power to constitute a national-popular block that manages in crisis to articulate scenarios, organizational forms, mobilization and struggle that strengthen a project of liberation.

Considering the above, the notion of democracy as self-determination of the masses is associated with processes of "*reabsorption of the state within civil society*" (Tapia, 2016a, p. 249). The self-determination of the masses implies, according to these terms, structures of deliberation, collective participation,

action, struggle and popular sovereignty. René Zavaleta thus developed a revolutionary conception of democracy.

Democracy, understood as “self-determination of the masses”, allowed Zavaleta to advance relevant political projections, while managing to articulate democracy and revolution, which languished as lost and divorced categories for many leftist intellectuals during the second half of the 20th century. For the Bolivian Marxist Zavaleta,

“Democracy understood as self-determination of the masses becomes the desideratum of this discourse. The history of the masses is always a history that is made against the state, so that here we are talking about structures of rebellion and not forms of belonging”.

He continues

"It can be said that here democracy for the ruling class is replaced by democracy for itself " (Zavaleta, 1981, p. 82).

Democracy as self-determination of the masses emphasized material equality (not democracy as a legal abstraction), as a social and daily exercise. In this sense, democracy could only be born and sprout from plebeian action; there is no democracy possible without struggle, without land, without agrarian reform, without housing, etc. Accordingly, democracy as self-determination of the masses refers to processes endowed with political content and material radicalization of social justice.

However, Zavaleta (1981) ends his reflections on democracy as self-determination of the masses, warning us that the masses can be bearers of democratic traditions (progressive, revolutionary) and non-democratic traditions

(conservative, authoritarian, fascist). They can be rational or irrational, they can reproduce and strengthen slavery and colonialism, or they can promote egalitarian and emancipatory processes. Its political horizon is open to the correlations of force and the expressions of social struggles, which alerts us to the relevance of the political, social, cultural, educational and economic arena, as spaces of dispute, as arenas of conflict.

V. Contributions to critical pedagogies

René Zavaleta's approaches can be considered as relevant inputs for Latin American critical pedagogies, to the extent that their categorical productions are projected to engage with educational problems. As previously stated, for the Bolivian intellectual, the crisis makes it possible to more clearly visualize the folds and layers of the complex and heterogeneous Latin American societies and makes it possible to distinguish social subjects, power structures, organizational forms, expressions of force, available resources, among other components. Zavaleta's contributions around the "crisis as a method of knowledge" are relevant for Latin American critical pedagogies, since they position the exercise of analyzing crises in a strategic place, systematically and rigorously, to advance from there in the understanding of the social complexity, recognizing strengths and weaknesses of the different social and political forces, evaluating the possibilities of breaking normality and transforming the existing status quo. The crisis, understood as a tool for reading concrete reality, which allows revealing what is hidden in daily life, is configured as a relevant moment for critical pedagogies, as it collaborates with the development of the self-knowledge capacity of the classes and dominated groups; it facilitates the recognition of social contradictions; it makes it possible to identify repertoires of action and power resources of the different social subjects. And considering all of the above, it enables decision-making, the definition of positions and lines

of action for social and political organizations committed to the transformation of reality.^{ix}

As for the Zavaletian concept of "accumulation within the class", it refers to processes of internalization and collective learning of experiences, memories, representations, knowledge, etc., which are essential for the constitution and self-development of classes and oppressed and exploited human groups. In the notion of "accumulation within the class", Zavaleta emphasized the contingent and circumstantial nature of the selection of knowledge by the oppressed classes, which installs a relevant nuance to critical pedagogies, since it implies assuming that the cultural and educational battle to build and socialize coherent knowledge with liberating projects must be understood as a permanent open struggle that requires mechanisms or devices that are part of the daily life of the people. On the other hand, his concern for the learning of the oppressed classes of the organizational forms, the repertoires of political action and the history of uprisings, rebellions and social revolutions, allows Latin American critical pedagogies to incorporate a set of themes that, without further ado, can be associated as learning content in different educational spaces with children, youth and adults. Moreover, the Zavaletian approaches, referring to the importance of the working classes and the oppressed subjects appropriating Marxism and historical materialism as tools for political education, constitute an important contribution for Latin American critical pedagogies, which, anchored to projects Latin American revolutionaries, have the challenge of collaborating with the appropriation of the theoretical-political, epistemological, methodical, conceptual legacy of Marxism and a whole set of currents with emancipatory roots.

Finally, if we carefully review the approaches elaborated by Zavaleta as a Bolivian Marxist around the dense problem of democracy, we can deepen

various elements that can be productive for the development of Latin American critical pedagogies. In this direction, we consider it relevant to advance in problematizing the organizational forms and political participation existing in school educational spaces, which, on numerous occasions, reproduce on a micro-scale the limitations of representative liberal democracy: logics of representation marked by individualism and messianic leadership, forms of formal and low-intensity participation, devoid of deliberative and binding instances. This is not a minor matter, since the demand for processes of democratization of educational spaces should not be limited to the formats and channels of an absolutely restricted and weak democracy. In further envisioning Latin American critical pedagogies, we cannot forget that the forms of participation associated with representative liberal democracy are only a kind of minimum standard for the construction of emancipatory political-pedagogical projects.

From our perspective, another aspect that requires further development and that is relevant for Latin American critical pedagogies is related to the challenges of radicalizing democracy in educational spaces. This implies three major aspects: first, it implies going beyond or overcoming the forms of representative liberal democracy, based on the promotion and concrete exercise of the sovereign deliberation of the subjects, communities and oppressed classes, and the defense of their organizational forms, participation and mobilization. In this sense, actors within the educational spaces entangled with emancipatory processes have the political responsibility of committing themselves to the strengthening of popular self-determination, with the defense and promotion of their practices of resistance and rebellion.

Second, it entitles an understanding that democracy cannot be restricted to the political field and that it must permeate the multiple planes of social life. That is

democracy must be linked to material issues associated with social justice, the distribution of surpluses, and the participation of workers in economic planning, to popular participation in design and urban planning, and to the multiple decisions that we make in our gender-sex relations, among many others.

And third, based on engaging with Latin American critical pedagogies, we must delve into the potential of articulating forms of representative democracy with forms of direct or community democracy in educational spaces, an articulation that can be completely virtuous for student and teacher organizations committed to the struggles for democratizing school spaces. For this, it is of key importance to prefigure organizational forms that allow, for example, intertwining the work of spaces for formal participation within schools, such as student unions, parents and/or caretakers organization, or school councils, with spaces in which direct and community participation is exercised, such as inter alia student and territorial assemblies, neighborhood and community organizations, community councils, struggle coordinators, and other structures.

Notes

ⁱ The work of René Zavaleta has strongly re-emerged in the Bolivian social sciences, which refers to the influence of his work on those who gave life, since the late 1990s, to the Comuna collective. Among them, Álvaro García Linera, Luis Tapia, Raúl Prada and Raquel Gutiérrez (García Linera, 2015) stand out. The publication since 2010 of his complete works by Plural Editores has also been relevant, a work directed by Mauricio Souza; and the work carried out from the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés, UMSA, by researchers such as Luis Tapia and Mauricio Gil.

At the Latin American level, the anthology of René Zavaleta made by Luis Tapia and published by CLACSO, in 2009, under the title *The Self-determination of the Masses* has been relevant. Additionally, we can call attention to a book published in 2021 by Instituto de Estudios de América Latina y El Caribe de la Universidad de Buenos Aires and the Editorial Quimantú of Chile, under the title *René Zavaleta Mercado. Pensamiento crítico latinoamericano y marxismo abigarrado*.

ⁱⁱ In one of his last texts published during his lifetime, Zavaleta (1983c) clearly reaffirmed this: "Crisis is the classic form of revelation or recognition of the reality of the social whole" (p. 105).

ⁱⁱⁱ The relationship between knowledge and crisis is relevant since when a society is torn apart, it shows its perplexed moment; therefore, it is favorable for self-knowledge processes. It is for this reason, according to Zavaleta (1979), that a large part of Marx's historical analyzes focused on moments of crisis. Zavaleta's work can clearly be understood as continuing this logic of historical-political analysis.

^{iv} In later texts, Zavaleta (1983d) emphasized that popular heritage and memory is a contradictory construction; it can be servile, authoritarian, critical, democratic, etc. In this framework, "the selection

of the popular heritage from a proletarian-anthropocentric point of view is necessarily something that must be carried out in each circumstance and in each scenario" (p. 608). Such selective work is political, cultural and educational, and must be carried out within the masses, in the ranks of the organized and active majorities, since it is constituted there as popular accumulation.

^v Regarding the permanent organization, Zavaleta maintained: "The permanent organization is something that cannot be separated from the class that assumes its collective character" (Zavaleta, 1979, p. 478).

^{vi} This improvement in the conditions of intellectual production, in many cases, translated into distancing from the militancy and the popular classes, and into a political shift from revolutionary to social democratic positions (Álvarez, 2005).

^{vii} Analyzing Bolivian society historically, René Zavaleta maintained that the masses historically rejected representative democracy, accusing it of "huayra-leva democracy", that is, restricted to white gentlemen and therefore deeply alien and functional to a historical project of colonial looting and dispossession. This approach was modified during the juncture of 1978-1980, in which civil society manifested itself systematically, critically appropriating the weapons provided by representative democracy and assuming it as a possibility of self-representation of social diversity in the state (Zavaleta, 1981d, 1983c; Tapia, 2016a).

^{viii} In a lucid text entitled "Allende y Pinochet: La democracia de clase en Chile", Zavaleta reflected on the Chilean historical process and made an important comment on the relationship between democracy and self-determination. "But the masses would have already learned that it is one thing to be hosted or admitted to the democracy of another class and quite another, the difficult work of building the democracy of one's own class" (Zavaleta, 1975b, p. 700).

^{ix} From our perspective, the closest thing that has been developed from the pedagogical field to the Zavaletian notion of crisis as a method of knowledge or to the idea of crisis as a school of political formation for the working class and popular movements refers us to the enormous theoretical, conceptual and methodological work accumulated around the "situational analysis". To delve into reflections on the "situational analysis" see: Portantiero, 1979; Gallardo, 1990.

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