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## The Long Road: Rural Youth, Farming and Agroecological *Formación* in Central America

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### ABSTRACT

Across the globe, the countryside faces the “generation problem”: Who will grow food when the current generation of aging small farmers and peasants disappears? A combination of objective and subjective factors effectively discourages young people from assuming the continuity of peasant and family farming, especially in countries that have experienced significant neoliberal dismantling of rural infrastructure and education. Rural social movements are increasingly building educational processes linked with small-scale, ecological farming in the hopes of reinforcing the development of identities and skills for peasant futures and cadre in the struggle for popular land reform, agroecology, and food sovereignty.

### Introduction

La Vía Campesina (LVC) is a transnational social movement made up of hundreds of agrarian organizations in 79 countries, with a combined membership of more than 200 million people, including peasant farmers, indigenous peoples, farm workers, migratory herders, traditional nomads, artisan fishers, landless rural workers, African diaspora farmers in the Americas, rural feminist groups, and youth collectives, among other sectors (Desmarais, 2007). Since its first international conference in Tlaxcala, Mexico, in 1996, LVC has created, proposed and expanded on *food sovereignty*, a framing concept used to oppose the agricultural development model dominated by corporate agribusiness and financial capital. Food sovereignty can be briefly defined as the right of peoples and nations to create and maintain their own food systems and has been at the heart of civil society protests against the free trade model imposed by international institutions such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund since the 1990s (Rosset, 2003; LVC, 2013).

Food sovereignty means a fundamental emphasis on local and domestic food production, based on land access for small farmers and ecological production practices (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014). As a political proposal, food sovereignty implies a radical democratization and decentralization of the agriculture-food system, including the dismantling of corporate power over food (Patel, 2010). On a more cultural level, it is an affirmation of rural community, local knowledge, and gender equality (Wittman, 2010). Rather than the better known concept of food security, which makes no mention of where food comes from or how it is produced, food sovereignty explicitly underscores local and national food routes, democratic processes of decision making, recuperation of cultural forms of production, distribution and consumption, and the relationship between food and the environment (Rosset, 2003). The frame of food sovereignty has proven to be a resilient and powerful mobilizer, guiding a growing coalition of rural and urban social movements, indigenous nations and

peoples, academics and civil society organizations across the globe to challenge capitalism, colonialism, environmental destruction, and patriarchy (Declaration of Nyéléni, 2015; LVC, 2013).

Recent scholarship has focused on the educational dimension of social movement activities, or education for food sovereignty (Barbosa, 2015; Meek, 2015; McCune, Rosset, Cruz, Sandízval, & Morales, 2016). Particularly in Latin America, rural social movements have developed highly sophisticated educational processes for their membership, ranging from primary schools to technical institutes, adult itinerant courses to university and engineering degrees, with the purpose of “forming cadre” who combine technical knowledge with a social-political commitment to building food sovereignty (Caldart, 2002; McCune, Reardon, and Rosset, 2014). Increasingly, the educational efforts of social movements have focused on the teaching-learning process surrounding agroecology (McCune et al., 2014). The Spanish word *formación* can be translated as “training” or “education,” but Latin American social movements use it as inspired by Che Guevara’s notion of “molding” the values of the new woman and new man for egalitarian, cooperative social relations in the construction of a “new society” (McCune et al., 2016). Here, in studying pedagogical mediators used by social movements, we situate learning theory and practice in the reproduction and *relevo* (literally, “replacement” or “relay”) of a collective historical subject capable of challenging capitalism’s social and ecological injustice.

Rural social movements have increasingly embraced ecological agriculture, or *agroecology*, as the “praxis” (Freire, 1970) of food sovereignty (Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012). Simultaneously a scientific discipline, a set of farm practices, and a global movement (Francis et al., 2013; Wezel et al., 2007), agroecology has emerged since the 1980s as critical thought and action that challenge the logic of conventional, chemical agriculture by understanding farms as ecosystems and working with natural processes to produce food (Gliessman, 2007). The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food concluded in 2010 that agroecological production could double food production in many parts of the world using fewer external inputs (De Schutter, 2010), and proponents point to evidence that agroecological production has the potential to slow, stop, or even reverse global climate change (Grain, 2009).

General agroecological principles include crop and biological diversification of agroecosystems, encouragement of complex and cyclical nutrient flows among soil, plant, and animal components, as well as efficient use of water and energy; however, the transition toward agroecology is context specific, avoiding the cookie-cutter solutions of Green Revolution, technology-heavy agriculture (Altieri, 2009; Gliessman, 2013). Agroecology emphasizes place-based solutions and scaled approaches that integrate complex social, economic, cultural, and political criteria into sustainable food systems, challenging the predominance of short-term productivity as the overarching goal of agricultural science. Even more heretical to conventional agronomy<sup>1</sup>, agroecological thought tends to insist on an equal footing for non-Western ecology, including the knowledge rooted in peasant and indigenous agricultural systems that sustainably fed populations during centuries until Western colonialism instituted monoculture plantation crops and forced labor (Hecht, 1999). Just as food sovereignty offers an alternative to corporate agribusiness and the financializing of food, social movements see agroecology as the necessary historical replacement to the exploitative, energy- and water-intensive, chemical monoculture model of food production (Rosset and Martínez-Torres, 2012).

To promote agroecological farming as a legitimate option for family and peasant farmers, social movements and member organizations of LVC have begun to create agroecological schools across the globe, currently operating some 65 such schools (Rosset, 2015; Khadse et al., 2017). These schools are founded, run, and organized by social movements and can often be considered “sovereign” spaces in which movements develop a microcosm of the world they wish to see. The LVC’s autonomous agroecology schools, as well as the territorial learning processes that surround them, are enmeshed in highly politicized disputes over the future of the countryside (McCune et al., 2016). The highly documented “global land grab,” taking place since the financial crisis of 2008, is understood by social movements as a response by global capitalism to its ongoing structural crisis and core

financial instability (Borras, Edelman, & Kay, 2008). However, land grabbing is experienced differently in each social context where “places” become “property,” and the responses “from below” to land grabbing have been mixed: Some popular actors have become more organized to resist, whereas others have been divided irreparably (Hall et al., 2015). The effects of land grabbing on rural youth, and particularly on their understanding of themselves and their relationship to land and agriculture, remains underreported and largely unknown, with valuable exceptions (White, 2012).

The relationship between the *formación* processes in agroecology schools and the gradual transformation of the rural landscape by producer families using agroecology has been subject of previous research (McCune et al., 2016). In this contribution, we focus on one LVC school, the “Francisco Morazán” International Worker–Peasant School (*Escuela Obrera Campesina Internacional “Francisco Morazán”*—hereafter referred to as Escuela Morazán) to explore the social situations in which young people begin to participate peripherally in agrarian social movements, with particular attention to the role of educational or *formación* processes in legitimizing this participation. Using the sociology of generations (Mannheim, 1952) and situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), we have found a diversity of pedagogical mediators employed by individual subjects who become movement cadre. Just as an apprentice gradually joins the world of crafts-person—both in terms of identity and knowledgeable skill—so young subjects of *formación* gradually transform themselves into political-organizational cadre of social movements and, sometimes, into agroecological farmers. This is by no means a linear or simple process, especially because, in becoming social movement cadre, young people change the historical sense and meaning of the movement to which they belong. Engaging their historical moment, LVC’s agroecology schools seek to produce movement cadre capable of challenging a social reality in which recent and ongoing processes of land reconcentration are dramatically limiting the potential for peasant family agriculture to continue providing a majority of the food consumed in the world (IICA, 2016).

Our work is based on situated, socially committed research methods, in which researchers are active coparticipants in social movement processes that they also reflect upon individually and collectively. In becoming educational subjects, we ourselves enter into the process of legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice, by which we are exposed to the possibility of qualitative transformation. Critical study of ongoing processes of which we form a part is never easy but is all the more important in order to resolve problems as they arise whenever possible and alert ourselves and movements to more significant contradictions when necessary. Ethnographic tools as well as biographical interviews and first-hand document revision were the primary techniques employed for gathering data, complemented by occasional “systematization workshops,” which provided opportunities for the collective construction of ideas and senses related to agroecological *formación* and generational *relevo*.

To give a sense of the inductive research process, we begin with an ethnographic vignette from the LVC *formación* held in Escampi in June 2016. We selected a short module on Marxism, within a longer course on Agroecology and Food Sovereignty, to draw out some guiding principles of LVC’s class-conscious, place-based “peasant pedagogy.” Employing sociocultural-historical analysis, we identify pedagogical mediators of social movement *formación* at the individual, group, and socio-historical levels of subjectivity. In the ensuing discussion, we integrate the sociology of generations (Mannheim, 1952) and situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to better understand the dialectical relationship between qualitative transformations in individuals and in the social movements to which they belong.

## The international worker peasant school

The oldest school of *formación* of La Vía Campesina in Central America is the “Francisco Morazán” International Worker Peasant School, in Ticuantepe, Nicaragua. The school was founded by the Rural Workers’ Association (*Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo* [ATC]) in the 1980s on land that, prior to the Sandinista Revolution, had been the ranch of a colonel in the feared National

Guard, the semiprivate army of the Somoza family. Now surrounded by sleepy suburban neighborhoods, the school grounds are distinguished by a large archway at the entrance and murals on the buildings that stand between large trees and gardens. Rows of coconut trees lead to a rounded central area where ornamental flowering trees are surrounded by a large kitchen and dining area on one side and the main school building on the other. As a Nicaraguan farm labor union, the ATC chose the name of Francisco Morazán, the Honduran leader whose bid to create a Central American republic lasted a decade in the early 1800s, in order to emphasize the internationalist character of the educational space.

The most ambitious *formación* carried out at the Escuela Morazán took place in the chaotic early 1990s. After the Sandinista Front lost a reelection bid in 1990, the Nicaraguan Revolution was quickly being dismantled by neoliberal politicians. With respect to the Nicaraguan land and property redistributed by the Revolution—approximately half the arable land in the country—the neoliberal government passed a law specifying that all land belonging to U.S. citizens should be returned to them or paid for in full. Immediately, the land-based oligarchy of Nicaragua returned from its self-imposed exile in the United States with newly received U.S. citizenship and used legal and illegal tactics to force peasant farmers and farm workers from land that they had received as part of the agrarian reform process. As a social movement representing a mix of farm worker unions with collective rights to produce on reformed land, as well as cooperatives of ex-farm workers with individual land parcels, the ATC needed to be able to defend the tens of thousands of members who had won a certain degree of land access (see Wilson, 2013). To do so, it created a law school at the Escuela Morazán, and today many of the ATC's cadre are attorneys.

In June 2016, tropical summer rains are just beginning to soak the parched land at the school. A group of 28 Central American LVC subjects or “*educandos*” are in their 5th day of living together and participating in long days of classes and activities. On their 1st day, they created small groups called *núcleos de base* for dividing chores at the school during the entire 15-day session. These *núcleos de base* have names created by the students, such as Ernesto Guevara, Cornhusks of the Countryside, Berta Caceres, and Strugglers for Peace. Each creates its own chant, such as “The People, united, can never be defeated!” and “We walk, we are Vía Campesina, we are the seeds of *América Latina!*” that are used to engage the entire class in call-and-response and bring together everyone's attention at distinct moments every day. After learning the rules of the school and the methodological proposal for popular education, *educandos* spend 1 day reviewing the history of La Vía Campesina and CLOC, the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations. Next, students spend 2 days studying the last century of Latin American social struggle—the Mexican Revolution, Mariategui, Mella and the Flores Magon brothers, Cárdenas, Peron and Import-Substitution Industrialization, the Cuban Revolution, the death of Che in Bolivia, Salvador Allende and the bloody arrival of neoliberalism to Chile on September 11, 1973, on to the Sandinista Revolution and Reagan's funding for the Contras, the civil wars of Central America, Zapatismo in Chiapas, and the string of electoral victories of leftist parties in Latin America.<sup>2</sup>

During this time, many students have participated with educators in voluntary gardening activities during the breakfast period, between 6 and 8 a.m., filling wooden trays with prepared soil, planting squash and cucumber seeds in trays, transplanting watermelon to a nearby field, and preparing a new garden bed. Some plant a stick next to the watermelon they transplant so that they will recognize it and can visit it later. Every other night features a cultural exposition from one of the six Central American countries present—Panamá, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. In between these *noches culturales*, there are documentary showings and lots of time for socializing. Meals are served at an open-air dining hall, where three female workers plus a rotating group of two students serve plates of traditional Nicaraguan food and sweet drinks. Since about the second day, students no longer stick with those from their same country at meals; rather, now it is time for lots of friendly association and getting silly with people from other countries. Only the three young Guatemalan women—dressed in traditional Mayan garb—seem to move everywhere as a unit.

Day 5, a 1-day module on Marxist Critical Thought, begins at 8 a.m. with a *mística* ceremony in the classroom, which has been prepared the night before with floral arrangements, coconuts, organization flags, and *sombreros*. It is a tribute to Panamanian poet and patriot Victoriano Lorenzo. The main facilitator, an agroecologist, begins by reinforcing the central questions of popular *formación*: Who am I? What do I feel? What do I think? What can I do? She invites students to interrupt, to provide examples, to pay attention to what one another say, to show solidarity and critical capacity in every moment of the day. In new groups of four or five, subjects head outside to the various shaded meeting places at the school, surrounded by colorful plants and songbirds, to take on three questions: “What is capitalist society?” “How does capitalist society work?” and “For whom does capitalist society work?” After groups debate and develop their ideas for about 20 min, the facilitator drops a surprise on each: They will need to think of a creative way to present their ideas to the full class.

No bland answers, no lists, no slideshow presentations; each group must decide on creating a poem, a song, a drawing, a play, or some other means of showing the full group what they have debated. After some back-and-forth, each group decides what to do. One decides to make a drawing; the rest create plays, using the dining hall’s mural as backdrop. All of the plays are pretty funny; most are about capitalist export agriculture. The last one is captivating: After the class spends several minutes watching a young girl who is dealing with her sobbing baby brother (presumably due to a loaded diaper), looking for help and being rebuffed by her television-watching father and ignored by her sleeping siblings, a young Honduran woman narrator steps out to deliver the devastating moral. We (the peasants and indigenous) are alone: The State (the father) is complicit, the workers (siblings) are asleep, and the future (baby brother) is “eating shit.”

The next hour and a half is spent outside, in a freewheeling discussion of commodities, wages, surplus value, profit, capital, alienation, overproduction, consumerism, and fetishism. The group is energized, with several elders and youth speaking up, reflecting on free trade zones, wealth inequality, women as private property, advertising, racism. One of the young Guatemalan *educandos* works in a popular market. “All people want are the brand names,” he says. “Even if they are fakes, all the youth want the shirt to say Adidas, Nike. I think it is incredibly stupid, but I work in the market and they get a higher price...” The group erupts in laughter and finishes the sentence for him: “. . . so you’re gonna keep on selling them brands!” Later, a Nicaraguan woman begins, “My God, I am a consumer. . . . I don’t believe this. My hair is dyed blond. I buy brand names. I am the perfect consumer capitalism made me. I am trembling. . . . Who am I?” This is her first major experience participating in an activity of her social movement, despite knowing about her mom’s participation the movement for years. In the months after the course, she will become a very active, very dependable participant in activities of her movement and at the level of LVC Nicaragua: a cadre-in-becoming.

Before breaking for lunch, in new groups, the class takes on four readings about socialism, class differences in the countryside, cooperativism, and the dialectical method. This was a bit of a risky activity: Only on Day 2—the module on the history of LVC—has the group spent time reading, and facilitators are unsure of each student’s level of comfort with reading. Nonetheless, the groups agreed to help anyone who wants it, and most groups spend most of an hour debating one or another paragraph in the dense readings. It turns out that at least three of the older subjects were participants in the armed struggle in their countries as guerrilla fighters, complete with aliases; they have experience with this kind of reading and help the younger members of their small groups. Each group gives a short report to the class about what they read: no surprises, although the dialectical method, with its emphasis on practice as the source and testing ground of theory, is warmly received by the larger group.

In the late afternoon, around 6 p.m., a representative of one small group announces to the class that dinner is postponed until 9 p.m.; he hopes everyone understands. This group has already advised the facilitators that in presenting its final debate about the “qualities of a cadre inspired by Marxist thought,” it would try an experiment with the class. Immediately the news about no food

causes turmoil in the classroom; one woman says this is nonsense, the *educandos* have respected the class hours and the facilitators need to respect the dinner hour. Others urge the group to be disciplined; if there is no food, we will wait. The facilitator tosses a little salt in the wound, mentioning that only the *núcleo de base* that will prepare tomorrow's *mística* ceremony will have dinner at the normal time. This sets a couple people into motion, and the original protestor declares that she will walk to the kitchen and ask for food, because "If anyone is eating, we all are." She freezes, seeing that no one else has left their seat. The facilitator tries again to provoke the group, saying that only the three facilitators and the one *núcleo de base* will have the right to eat dinner at the normal time. The students are clearly uncomfortable with this situation, but they are starting to complain to their nearest neighbors instead of as one group. Finally, the representative of the small group asks the class, "So, again, what qualities should a *cadre* have?" The classroom unloads its tension in laughter and groans as it realizes that it has been fooled and, worse, tested. This moment is powerful; several students later confide that they found their own weaknesses, that the "dinner trick" showed them that they need to trust their instinct, or that they need to put their beliefs into practice, in every moment. The facilitators take note; they have learned a new technique for teaching critical thinking.

Days later, the same group is in a 3-day module on Agroecological Popular Education with the same facilitator as the Marxist Critical Thinking module, back after 4 days working away from the school. She has spent part of the morning on the whiteboard, trying to derive and distinguish between agroecological principles and practices. Now she has divided the class into groups; each group has the task of imagining that its participants are members of a cooperative. In each imaginary cooperative, subjects are to identify the agroecological practices carried out by each member and create a table that has members' names on one axis and agroecological practices on another. Once marked with practices and names, the chart shows where peasant exchanges within a cooperative can significantly propel forward the overall adoption of agroecological techniques by the cooperative, and where interventions with other cooperatives would be needed. This is the *Método de Banes*, a well-known innovation that emerged from Banes, Holguin in the peasant-to-peasant agroecology movement of the Cuban LVC organization, ANAP (Machín et al. 2010; McCune et al. 2011). The facilitator herself learned the method from a 2013 LVC training course in the peasant-to-peasant method at the ANAP's national school (McCune, Reardon and Rosset, 2014; McCune et al. 2016).

Eventually all the groups come back to the classroom and present their work, describing each practice in detail and its connection to agroecological principles, as though they were carrying out the exercise in a cooperative assembly. Just suggesting that they "act" as if they were in a cooperative assembly dramatically changes the dynamic for the students; rather than presenting their *real* group work in a *real* classroom, they are now *performing* roles, imagining themselves in the countryside of their countries, promoting agroecology in their communities or other communities. The exercise, then, is made less school-like and more theater-like, helping create a more conducive setting for creativity and self-exploration. This eases tension and helps hold the attention of the class, as each group has been warned "not to be boring" and the "audience" (the class) has been asked to act like a rowdy peasant cooperative, with permission to interrupt or stop the presentation if it stops being believable. Thus both actors and audience are performing; the only difficulty in terms of content of the exercise is that each group had to come up with agroecological practices not mentioned so far in the module. When they were given this "rule," the students energetically protested that they didn't know of any agroecological practices other than those from the example of the *Método de Banes* on the whiteboard. By the time each group has presented, however, the facilitators have noted down 35 distinct agroecological practices, all of them stemming from students' real, previous knowledge.

### **Pedagogical principles and mediators**

This description of basic grassroots organizing work in agroecology reflects the Freirian concepts of popular education (Freire, 1970, 1973) that are ingrained in the agroecological movement: dialogue

**Table 1.** Pedagogical principles of *Formación* in La Vía Campesina of Central America

Principle	Definition
Sharing <i>mística</i>	Recognizing the unity and diversity in the “sacred,” the “now,” the “here,” and the “we.”
Learning by doing	Resisting the gap between theory and practice, mental and manual labor, by finding points of encounter between the process of development of each
Unlearning in order to learn	Discovering the willingness to part with prejudices, listening and developing a capacity for dialogue without falling back on preconceived ‘truths’
Dialogue among wisdoms	Collectively constructing of new and revived senses of struggle out of historical experiences, knowledges, wisdoms, ideologies, truths and (cosmo)visions of diverse peoples, possible only when no one way of knowing dominates another
Problematize power relations	Developing a process for questioning each moment within and outside the formative space, making implicit power relations explicit and proposing creative, fair solutions for daily manifestations of oppression
Starting from and returning to experience	Incorporating the premise that everyone has experience and as such, wisdom; the need to make learning content set out from contexts and problems found in real life
Valuing diversity	Learning to live with contradictions rather than forcing syntheses or dismissing alternative interpretations; understanding that the validity of processes and results depends on the broadest possible set of social subjects representing themselves
Relearn, reteach	Recognizing the unfinished character of human beings and of knowledge; incorporating humility and humanity into practice

among peers, historical praxis, contextualization, sharing of knowledge. Using the historical socio-cultural approach, as pioneered by Vygotsky (1978), we can further contextualize the learning process within the development of individual subjects, as well as in the self-construction of the social movement as historical subject. As shown in Table 1, the *mística* celebrated in opening and closing moments of LVC *formación* and meeting processes is linked to the creation of a common platform for sharing not only information but also feelings and spiritual content. By sharing unique parts of a shared history, as in the preceding example when the Panamanians tell the history of Victoriano Lorenzo to other students, all are able to feel unity in struggle. Capitalism uses cultural symbols and meanings to turn people into consumers. Movements create spaces without corporate food, social cliques, or televisions so that *educandos* can focus on other interactions and contents. The creation of permanent small groups with a name, a chant, and tasks at the school is part of helping students develop meaningful relationships with one another and take responsibility for the functioning of the school. *Mística* ceremonies produce meaningful moments to begin and end encounters between and among *educandos* and educators. Creating a qualitatively distinct “daily life” at school spaces allows subjects to create an alternative to superficial relationships and consumer society.

Learning by doing is another principle of *formación*, which is best epitomized in the gardening that takes place outside of classroom hours, as well as the practice-based nature of itinerant courses that youth participate in over the course of years, as they become cadre. This approach passes more useful technical knowledge than other, less interactive approaches to teaching agroecology, helping learners acquire skills in a short period. Even off-farm lessons, such as discussion of facilitation methods or indicator systems, are best carried out as activities with as real an application as possible (Lieblein et al., 2004). Working together to clean the center, serve food, and wash dishes in an organized fashion adds a pedagogical component to the entirety of the experience, including moments of mental and manual labor, with a nod to the “pedagogy of work” developed by Pistrak (2011) in the early Soviet Union.

The idea of knowledge found in movement schools differs from that of conventional education. For example, in keeping with the Vygotskian framework of internalization, social movements speak of the need to “unlearn in order to learn.” Unlearning refers to questioning and shedding some of the “truths” that people internalize in colonized, patriarchal consumer society, such as beauty standards, belief in mass media narratives, and greater respect for institutions of Western Europe and North America, as in the case of the student who dyed her hair blond. By creating qualitatively distinct social contexts for learning, movements help people unlearn alienated prejudice and come to

learn about their own roots, history, and conditions. In toppling the pedestal of largely corporate-funded, monoculture-focused agricultural research, agroecological learning also creates conditions for a dialogue among wisdoms from many sources, including cultural practices of indigenous peoples whose agriculture has proven sustainable for thousands of years (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014). This principle is reflected, in the earlier ethnographic description, in the discovery by students of dozens of agroecological practices that they never knew they knew.

The principle of challenging power relations is fundamental in movement schools, where students are expected to ask difficult questions, assume the role of teacher for fellow students, and participate in a fluid process without set right answers (Freire, 1970). Working from concrete, living experiences is the process by which subjects construct knowledge, as in the earlier case of the Guatemalan street vendor who is able to understand commodities and fetishism by reflecting on fashion trends he witnesses. Mixed, participatory techniques such as group work, mixed media, generative questions, base groups and other groups, theater, reading, and discussion all contribute to an active situated learning process and contribute to autonomy in students (Goulet, Linds, Espiskenew, & Schmidt, 2011).

The sequence of modules in 15-day Escampi courses is as follows: rules of the center, methodological program, history of CLOC-LVC, Latin American revolutionary history, Marxist philosophy and social practice, Indigenous cosmovisions, gender, agroecology, organizational methods, course evaluation. Popular education is present in each module—in one place more explicitly, in another implicit in the empirical process. The sequence of the modules also helps subjects organize their own process, first inward by discussing expectations, behavior, and the historical context; next the ideological crux of *formación*—materialist and indigenous philosophy; and finally the outward parts, toward application in social movement practice—gender, agroecology, organizational methods. Crafting identity in practice becomes the fundamental project of learning subjects (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The vast richness of life experience makes inevitable a diversity of responses and interpretations; movement schools look to cultivate this diversity of perspectives and opinions while pushing for greater levels of self-criticism and deeper reflection. Politicized, militant agroecological education develops subjectivity, senses, and life projects in learners as individual and collective subjects and makes broad-based movements toward peasant agroecological farming a more likely future (Kapcia, 2005). In talking about this aspect, *educandos* often mention the sense of “not being alone” and knowing that they have sisters and brothers in struggle. Political consciousness is a way for young people to overcome immature, self-obsessed attitudes; it reminds them of the situations that others face, and the need to struggle for collective solutions. The possible contradictions between different viewpoints of facilitators, students, and school workers are seen as a sign of creative vitality rather than a problem to be solved. The “dinner trick,” the didactical instrument described earlier and developed by a small group of students to provoke a reaction from the rest, was incorporated into facilitators’ repertoire for teaching critical thinking. Humility and the willingness to continue learning are fundamental traits within the *formación* of movement cadre.

In La Vía Campesina’s schools of *formación*, young people develop their skill set as movement people as they build their identity as a movement person and as they produce and reproduce the social movement. Newcomers become cadre through a social process that begins with *legitimate peripheral participation*—say, as an *educando* in a course of political and agroecological education—before moving toward increasingly central participation, in a trajectory that depends on legitimate access to ongoing movement practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These young people develop a changing understanding of their movement over time, from the improvised opportunities to participate peripherally in ongoing activities. Knowledgeable skill is encompassed in assuming an identity as an agroecological farmer, of becoming a full participant, a cadre. The development of an identity in practice is even more substantial in the young person’s life path than the specific knowledge and skills associated with that identity.

Integrating the historical cultural approach (Leontiev, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978) to learning into the analysis, we can point to specific sociocultural instruments or mediators that allow for the internalization of identity and senses in young people during their transformation into cadre of social movements (McCune et al., 2016). The transitions experienced by these young people are like moments of qualitative leaps, interrupting other possible trajectories and setting them on a new course in life. The pedagogical mediators that reach people's consciousness and motivate their transition to a new trajectory can include moments (e.g., a land occupation, their 1st week at a training course, or the moment in life when they decide to follow a parent's path into social struggle) or people (e.g., a teacher, a friend who decides to "live the struggle") with great influence on a learner's future path. Individual trajectories are given context and substance by ongoing social relations, in which people and practices change, re-produce, and transform each other.

The centrality of the subject in the formative process underlines the importance of the appropriation of lived experience, the relationship between subjectivity and narration as principles, in giving subjects the role of author and actor of their own histories. Guided by others, guided by our environment, we form ourselves. The generational and age diversity in LVC courses contributes substantially to meaningful dialogue, an atmosphere of respect, and the construction of a community of practice. Activities requiring creativity provide settings for collaboration across generations and cause impressive changes in attitudes and motivations of *educandos*. In the process of inventing, planning, and rehearsing a theater piece, for example, both young and old students become visibly more relaxed and share ideas, humor, and suggestions. Table 2 shows some of the activities carried out by *educandos* during agroecological courses, along with the kinds of learning each implies at the individual, interpersonal, and sociohistorical level.

The simultaneous action at these three levels of subjectivity is a central aspect of the coherence of the LVC's *formación*. From the cultural historical perspective, we can point to the process of internalization in individual subjects of senses, ideas, and concepts that first occur at the social and cultural level. As a situated social process, in which the social movement is a community of practice which the newcomer *formación* subjects approach through peripheral participation—such as a LVC course—the process of initiation and transformation can be seen dialectically, in terms of the simultaneous production of identity and a set of knowledgeable skills. Here, it is not only the identity of the newcomer that is being reconstructed but also that of the community of practice to which she gives new life by becoming a member, a full participant, a cadre. In this sense, the individual subject participates actively and centripetally (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in the social historical subjectivity of the movement as a whole. Her self-construction as cadre is posited upon the continuous self-construction of the movement as historical subject.

### From pedagogical mediators to generational renewal

The sociology of generations has its roots in the theories about social construction of knowledge and consciousness that began to prosper in Western Europe in the early decades of the 20th century, especially after Russia's socialist revolution in 1917. Indeed, much of what would later come to form the assumptions of diverse sociological theories and methods related to social generations can be traced back to the work of German sociologist Karl Mannheim in the early 1920s. Mannheim (1952) argued that a social group of a similar age shares a "common location in the historical dimension of the social process" and thus tends to internalize certain forms of thought, experience and behavior. Every social generation's "fresh contact" with its historical context produces the possibility of similar reactions and senses among contemporary social subjects, especially those who live out their formative years in the midst of rapid social change.

**Table 2.** Three levels of learning and knowledge mediated by distinct pedagogical activities.

Level Activity	Individual Subjects	Interpersonal: Small Groups and Classroom	Social Historical Subjectivity
<i>Mística</i>	Sensitizing and motivating learner	Realization of diversity potential, rescue of historical memory	Re-production of traditional culture, revaluing disrespected forms of knowing
Permanent small groups with names and slogans for dividing chores at school	Learning to work with different types of people	Achieving fuller participation	Generates more diverse "answers" or representations within unity of collective subject
Gardening: double-digging, seed selection, soil preparation, composting, thinning, transplanting, watering, mulching, combining crops, weeding, rooting, harvesting, tasting	Connecting practice with new information, building on previous knowledge, discovering new interests, questions, and qualities in oneself	Produces bonds among "coworkers," pride, recognition of previous knowledge	Gaining ability to be food self-reliant, and teach production methods for generating food sovereignty
Readings and analysis of texts	Strengthening reading and synthesis skills	Fomenting debate, stimulating zone of proximal development	Reinforcing historical memory, employing relevant categories of analysis
Physical-emotive games	Motivations, stimulating creativity	Stimulating self-esteem, collective bonds, interpersonal trust	Creating new categories of meaningful fun, bonding
Exchanges with local peasant farmers and communities	Developing protocol and methods for working in communities	Breaks out of the classroom dynamic, improves reflection	Legitimizes course in eyes of the community; broadest contextualization of LVC courses
Theater created by <i>educandos</i> in small groups and performed for class and guests	Creative thinking, transforming course itself into "performance" to observe critically	Gaining fuller participation, trust within group, bringing "electricity" to group	Gaining a simple, flexible "tool" for critical reflection in communities
Interpretation of poetry and songs	Use of figurative language, cultural codes	Chance to share and compare taste in music and art	Connection between historical moment and the art it produces
Intergenerational and intercultural dialogue	Gratifying experience, listening skills	More complete collective constructions and senses	Continuity, <i>relevo</i>
Oral and written self-, co-, and hetero-evaluation and synthesis of course	Critical writing and thinking skills	Distribution of responsibility for collectives processes	Historical record

Note. LVC = La Via Campesina.

Jean Pilcher (1994) highlighted the importance of youths' historical moment in influencing their thinking throughout their lives:

Mannheim assumes that a person's location in the socio-historical structure sets the parameters of their experience and that the significant period in this respect is the exposure to events and experiences in the formative years, the years of youth. Clearly, this assumption is heavily reliant on the validity of the relationship between stages of the ageing process and key periods of socialization: people are 'fixed' within a socio-historical world that predominated in their youth and carry this with them throughout their lives. In this manner, each social generation, although contemporaneous with other social generations, has a distinctive historical consciousness which leads them to experience and approach the same social and cultural phenomena differently. (p. 489)

An important implication of this understanding of generations is that one generation may have an entirely different "common sense" than the preceding generation, in direct relation to the

historical moment in which both generations experience the socially formative years of life—generally understood as youth. Carried into our applied analysis, discovering the social events that permanently formed the older adult generation within social movements—and the principal traits of the historical moment currently forming the young people entering into agrarian movements—becomes an imperative for unpacking the relationship between *formación*, generational renewal of the movement and agroecological farming as social movement practice.

Agroecological *formación* encourages young people to become active participants in farming and, simultaneously, to challenge such rooted injustices as traditional gender roles in the countryside, conventional technological dependence on purchased seeds and agrochemicals, and the neoliberal policies that pull wealth and value from the countryside to concentrate them in financial and banking sectors. The increasing emphasis on agroecological *formación* is a sign that rural social movements are hoping to mold future members who combine characteristics of movement cadre, such as a critical stance toward capitalism, with the traits of peasant farmers, such as relative autonomy from labor markets. LVC organizations in Central America increasingly work with young couples, foregrounding their synergies, rather than continuing the traditional organizational culture of strict separation of work and home life. “Stability,” one older LVC leader emphasized in an interview. “We want stable cadre, who make their home in the countryside, live from their farms, and can take on political tasks in their community, in their territory.” This definition of cadre is far from that of Carlos Fonseca or other Central American Marxists of generations past, who demanded young people with no qualms about leaving their homes and families, sometimes permanently, in pursuit of strategic victories for the working classes (Koral, 2007).

In another interview, a 56-year-old Nicaraguan movement cadre referred to someone who had gained land through the *piñata*<sup>3</sup>:

Maybe if I could go back I would have accepted a piece of land, too. I grew up in the countryside and I have always liked raising animals, looking after a place. But you have to understand the feeling, we were so utterly committed to the Revolution, to get a piece of land was completely beside the point. We thought it was weird when somebody wanted a house.

It may seem odd that, in a revolutionary process in large part premised on land reform to individual peasants, collectives, and farm workers, a participant in the revolutionary struggle would find accessing land himself to be “beside the point.” But the sociohistorical context of Central America in the 1970s and 1980s was dramatically different from the mid-2010s, to the extent that the category of revolutionary cadre was considered, in the sociocultural norms of the times, to be fairly exempt from the benefits of class struggle, regardless of their class background. Indeed, across Latin America, the founding members of the member movements of La Vía Campesina have similarly marked concepts, stemming from their participation as youths in the leftist revolutionary urban and rural guerrilla activities of the era. Armed struggle, the skills it required, and the meaning that it gave a generation weigh heavily on the movements and organizations that today defend food sovereignty and agroecology as political projects.

In a postcourse evaluation, virtually all participants in a 2016 course of Central American LVC subjects indicated that they would like continued and broader practical training in agroecological farming. Many of them are looking for jobs, and the educational opportunities they seek are those that relate to eventual employment. The majority of participants are experiencing serious difficulties accessing water in their home; drinking water is less accessible than even a few years ago, let alone a generation ago. Compared to the wars that marked a generation in the 1970s and 1980s, survival is a different process for today’s rural youth, but it remains a major objective within young people’s realities. Diversified, agroecological farming offers relative autonomy from input markets and unequal commodity exchanges and puts firsthand experiences onto the front stage of agriculture. These are compelling traits of becoming smallholder producers for many young people, along with the more direct relationship with land and Mother Earth (Declaration of Nyéléni, 2015).

In recent decades, what were regarded as “normal” pathways to adulthood have come under increased strain, as neoliberal policies put a squeeze on social reproduction (Marin, 2009; White, 2012). The diversification of routes to maturity is linked to two concurrent processes: the extension of schooling and advanced training in pursuit of employment security, as well as the diffusion and variety of forms of youth culture and consumerism. Career insecurity and diversified forms of consumerism, in turn, are linked to the evolving crises related to perpetual growth of production and consumption, respectively, in neoliberal capitalism. As mobile capitalist “development” shows a vastly diminished commitment to creating lasting social or material infrastructure, patterns of social reproduction have become more dispersed, both geographically through migration and socially through boom-and-bust cycles of (un[der])employment.

When the transition to adult life deviates from known pathways, young people are obliged to make personal decisions that might have major repercussions for their future, without being able to clearly foresee all the implications of their options. Many stay busy finding odd jobs, helping family members in paid and unpaid labor, looking for opportunities for formal employment or education: Many form the new category of the “working unemployed” (White, 2012). The uncertainty—and risks—that surround these decisions has become a new characteristic of the transition to adulthood. This has been compounded by the prolonged nature of the uncertainty: Young people often spend years without knowing what kind of work, home life, or relationships will bring them stability.

In Central America, the creation of industrial havens or “free trade zones” has effectively swallowed a significant part of the youth population, as hundreds of thousands enter day and night into 24-hr *maquiladora* clothing factories, where workers face militarized working conditions, frequent abuse by foreign shop managers, very low wages, and zero opportunities for advancement. Often built on the outskirts of cities, free trade zones fill up with workers from urban and rural backgrounds, homogenizing the youth population through alienated production and mass consumption of commodities sold in informal markets just outside the shop gates. Various studies have identified the role of education in deskilling and alienating rural youth (Fraymer, 2005; Giroux, 1981; White, 2012). In formal education, farming skills are not included in the curriculum, whereas farming itself is presented as a predicament to be transcended, rather than a legitimate occupation or way of life. White (2012) noted that “those children who had gone to school found themselves both ill-prepared for the kinds of work available locally, and inadequately educated for other kinds of employment.”

The Escuela Morazán has no entrance exams, state-mandated curriculum, or standardized tests. Courses are offered to all movement members, including many who have never finished primary school. The relevancy of the education is predicated upon the coherence of the organizations and their ability to integrate *educandos* into social movement practice, including accessing land. However, meeting these criteria is made difficult when the community of practice itself is highly vulnerable—to losing key people, to bad economic times, to the national political environment—leading to tentative, decentered, and often invisible practice. In addition, the culture of social movement practice may at times also actively resist *relevo*, especially as long as historical leaders are living, making the newcomer’s process of developing skills and identity more of a labyrinth than an apprenticeship.

After one or two highly encouraging interactions with the movement, a subject may feel “left out in the cold” for months or years as the more central parts of the movement look for funds, methods, or opportunities to involve him. Legitimate old-timers are accustomed to the decentered, compartmentalized style of practice, even if it means that they spend periods in uncertainty. Communicated information from legitimate cadre to the newcomer may be spotty, due to the circumstantial, pending nature of social movement practice. Individual, improvised participation by a newcomer in ongoing activities may be alternately encouraged, ignored, or frowned upon, meanwhile legitimate cadre debate their eventual role—something similar to the “waithood” and working unemployment faced more broadly by rural youth. All of this takes place as the subject is part of other ongoing communities of practice among peers (outside of the movement), in which they take on knowledgeable skills and identity as they make meaning of themselves and the world around them.

The situated learners who arrive to LVC courses as wholly underprepared “green” young people sent by a social movement, but with limited identification with their movement, often combine characteristics such as extreme shyness and obvious vulnerability, with stubbornness and indiscipline in courses. Despite often bringing symbols of indifference into classroom spaces—such as headphones—these young people tend to be highly sensitive to the words, looks, tone, and body language of their peers and the course facilitator (Castillo, 2012). Just as in public schools, there is a complex interconnection of school life and home life—*educandos* are often in constant communication with family through cellular phones—which leads to the elaboration of working-class rural family, farm, and *maquiladora* shop floor culture in the school setting (Lave, 1996). LVC educators recognize that subjects are situated in the formation of non-LVC communities of practice, and in fact several Nicaraguan LVC youth leaders (including Escuela Morazán educators) have previously worked in *maquiladora* factories. The complex and contingent range of possibilities available to young people has a mutable nature, as do the transformations of understanding, identity, and knowledgeable skill that occur through legitimate peripheral participation in peasant agriculture and popular movements.

## Conclusions

We have identified some of the principles of LVC agroecological training, in terms of a learning process and in terms of a historical process of renewal. The creation and resignification of culture is how subjects, in dialogue with others, create meaning and historical senses. As such, all moments at the school—including time of leisure and socializing—are formative. The relations of near peers: role of young facilitators, assistant facilitators, articulate *educandos*, farmers frequently visited, school workers such as cooks and administrators, and teachers not participating in the current course play a major role in motivating subjects to continue the road of becoming a cadre and reproducing the social movement. In courses, the social situation is at least as important as the content of curriculum. Practical activity is the essence of the learning process. In these practice lessons, theory cannot be abandoned in favor of activism; on the contrary, theory and technical knowledge are best utilized and understood as close as possible to practical activities.

Learning needs to be situated in the concrete social and cultural situations that subjects deal with in their home communities and neighborhoods. The linkages to sociocultural realities in peasant and indigenous territories is what ultimately legitimizes the *formación* process. In the case of cadres who carry out concrete tasks of the social movement—say, organizing a workshop on seed saving for a women’s cooperative—as well as in the case of situated peasant farmers, young people transform themselves as they take on a territorial responsibility. The territorial sense may have more or less ideological content, just as it may have more or less to do with income and economic livelihood, but it does tend to become more explicit through greater interactions and more solid relationships within the social movement (McCune et al., 2016).

Within the social situations of development (Vygotsky, 1978) created in “sovereign” movement spaces, concurrent subjective processes take place at three levels: individuals’ affective and cognitive learning, groups who in dialogue “pronounce the world” (Freire, 1970), and sociohistorical construction of an agroecological movement. The agroecological historical subject is intimately connected not only to peasant realities, senses, and know-how but also to the ideological imprint of a generation coming of age among concomitant global crises, profound uncertainty, and a relative absence of optimistic, revolutionary political projects. The confluence of class, generational, and territorial identities in the agrarian social process plays out as a subjective factor in the absence or presence of young peasant farmers across a landscape, a factor linked to the dialectical challenge of young people to “become movement” and the agrarian movement to “become young.” This suggests that efforts to scale out agroecology should take a closer look at the “generation question” within peasant movements, both in terms of forming leadership and in territorial grassroots structures.

In becoming peasant farmers, in becoming social movement cadre, the presence and placement of mediators is fundamental to the production of identities within ongoing social practice. This is not an

argument for universal mechanisms; mediators are substantive, situated, and historically specific. Rather, we think the question resides in how to make pedagogical situations in schools and in territories. Proper exposure to ongoing practice, by cadre and by peasant farmers, is vital to include in *formación* efforts. Participation in peripheral ongoing activities helps newcomers understand the goals of their process learning to assume an identity. In this sense, linking *formación* subjects with ongoing projects, challenges, and tasks of the movement is the best contextualization available, breaking down distinctions between learning and doing. In producing complementary, richly structured processes of learning among generations, social movements may effectively be building food sovereignty.

## Note

1. An anonymous reviewer noted that ‘in the current political climate, it’s dangerous to suggest that science is somehow wrong.’ Agroecological social movements criticize Western reductionist science as it now exists, that is to say, in the context of publically funded research becoming private property through copyrights and patents, and in as much as reductionism prevents holistic, long-term solutions. By no means do social movements loan themselves to the arguments used by neo-Right political currents that advocate, for example, ignoring environmental science.
2. The module on Latin American history also included debate about the causes and consequences of the ongoing return of hardline neoliberal governments in South American countries like Argentina and Brazil, although this was not part of the material prepared for the class.
3. The *piñata* refers to a notorious episode in Nicaraguan history when, after losing the elections of 1990, many Sandinista officials with administrative power over state and collective assets, mostly farms and houses, quickly privatized those assets in the name of close allies rather than handing them over to the newly elected neoliberal government. Much of what *was* properly handed over was also subsequently privatized during the ensuing neoliberal administrations (see Núñez-Soto, 1995).

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