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This university must be built: the praxis of the Latin American Institute of Agroecology "Paulo Freire"

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ABSTRACT

For Latin American and Caribbean social movements, agroecology is a starting point for fundamentally different social and economic relations. As a feminist, anti-imperialist, decolonial, and care practice, agroecology creates a value system at odds with today's imperial capitalist order, which has proven to be impervious to social, cultural and ecological controls. During the mid 2000s, a unique arrangement led a major bloc of social movements to commit vast efforts to building a first-ever peasant university in the countryside of Venezuela, which would offer an engineering degree in agroecology. This article analyzes the construction of this experimental university and the productive tension between the agrarian social movements, who participated as students, educators, and pedagogical coordinators, and the Venezuelan state. Sovereign knowledge production – within and for movements – took place during the development of the peasant university. This article contributes to educational theory and the politics of knowledge by drawing out the lessons from this emblematic example of agroecology education, highlighting the roles of internationalism, peasant identity, self-determination, and organizational leadership.

KEYWORDS

Social movement learning; Latin American Institutes of Agroecology; Bolivarian Revolution; popular education; agroecological pedagogies; internationalism

Introduction

In this article, we analyze the creation of the first Latin American Institute of Agroecology, named after Brazilian popular educator and theorist Paulo Freire and built in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela between 2006 and 2012. The Latin American Institute of Agroecology "Paulo Freire" (herein abbreviated as "IALA-PF") was the first peasant university of its kind, created by and for grassroots rural organizations with the vision of forming peasant, Indigenous, and Afro-descendent youth into cadres capable of critical thinking and creative action within

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their respective organizations. Students and staff together engaged in permanent collective action and reflection, as they reconfigured the power and geography of their situation. The IALA-PF transformed university training into a self-aware political process, ripe with contradictions, praxis, and personal growth.

The fact that this experiment in autonomous, social movement education occurred in one of the few spaces of socialist governance in Latin America is not a coincidence. In this article, we explore the cohabitation of ascendent, deliberative, participatory democracy in the peasant university, and the transformations known as the "Bolivarian Revolution" that were taking place in Venezuela at the time (Gott 2011). A rapidly urbanized nation whose vast oil and mineral wealth had been used to enrich the United States and a tiny local elite since the 1920s, Venezuela underwent a radical transformation at the turn of the century after it ratified a new national constitution in 1999 written by traditionally underrepresented social sectors.

Between the time of the short-lived, Bush administration-supported *coup d'état* against Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez in 2002 and the Obama administration's 2015 declaration of a national emergency in the United States to "deal with" the "extraordinary threat to the national security" posed by Venezuela (Obama 2015), the South American country experienced a period of intense class struggle, during which time the national government took significant steps to progressively transform the power relations between the impoverished majority and the wealthy elite. As the cultural, political, and economic norms of bourgeois society were interrupted, a stunning agreement between President Chávez and La Vía Campesina (LVC), the world's largest international social movement, set the stage for the world's first peasant university, which would offer students an engineering degree in agroecology.

To analyze the politics and pedagogies of this educational process, we were guided by the following research questions: How have agrarian social movements reimagined education, and how does agroecology fit into this rethinking? How did socialist governance in Latin America allow for the creation of a peasant university and what were the tensions that emerged in movement-state co-governance? How and what did students learn at the IALA-PF and how did this learning inform their subsequent activism?

To answer these questions, we tell a shortened story of the IALA's first graduating class, with four principal arguments. First, we argue that while agroecology is enacted locally, the agroecology movement is part and parcel of the politics of internationalism in the twenty-first century. Second, we contend that agroecology education requires recognizing the peasantry as their own social class, with their own theories and praxis, a pedagogy *of* the peasantry. Third, we posit that self-determination is the central pillar and ultimate goal of agroecology pedagogy and praxis. And fourth and finally, we argue that

movement-led agroecology education is dialectically related to the development of organizational action and leadership.

To support these arguments, we first overview our methods and the theory that informs our research. Then, we organize the sections of this article based on the chronology of historical events and our account of the principles that guided the continental institute. The first section of the paper uses the prism of *peasant internationalism* to tell the story of IALA's birth as declared by a Venezuelan of peasant origin, standing on Brazilian land that had been recovered from absentee landlord estates. The second section tells the story of the agrarian social movements' nuanced relationship with Venezuelan institutions, highlighting the *formation of the peasantry as a historical subject* with its own collective identities, senses and forms of knowledge as central to the IALA-PF educational process. The third section illustrates the role of *self-determination* in agroecology education by describing the daring approach of students and educators in pushing forward the IALA-PF despite institutional roadblocks. The fourth section shows how the principle of *organizational action and leadership*—of permanently solving problems by becoming more organized and advancing organizational goals – informed the unique pedagogical model of grassroots peasant students' and teachers' learning process.

Methods

Our methods for this article are deeply rooted in what is often termed in the academy as "research-practice partnerships" (Coburn et al. 2013) or "participatory action research" (Fals 1973; Fine and Torre 2025). Similar to these approaches, our research evolved through a partnership between university academics and the on-the-ground practitioners who work in the Latin American Institutes of Agroecology (IALA) that are the focus of this study. Two of the coauthors of this article are graduates from the first IALA Paulo Freire (IALA-PF) cohort in Venezuela and currently work in IALAs in other parts of Latin America, while a third coauthor was an institutional coordinator during the foundational stage of the IALA-PF. The typical boundaries between "researcher" and "practitioner," however, are blurred in our methodological approach, as the coauthor who was an institutional coordinator in Venezuela is now an academic at a university in Mexico, while another coauthor who was a student in the first IALA-PF cohort is currently pursuing a PhD program in Brazil. While three of us are based in U.S. academic institutions, we are all deeply rooted in the praxis of agrarian social movements, two of us having written extensively on Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST) and another on agroecology education of social movements in Central America. Furthermore, we all believe in the importance of movement-led agroecological education and food sovereignty; consequently, none of us are "neutral." However, we have also all grappled with the challenges and contradictions of

agroecology educational programs, movement-state partnerships, and pedagogical processes. Thus, while not professing neutrality, we do believe in the value of highlighting the tensions in the process of building the first peasant university, as movement-relevant knowledge (Chaudry 2013; Bevington and Dixon 2005) that we hope will contribute to scaling up agroecology and agroecology education programs in Latin America and globally.

This specific research on the IALA-PF is part of a larger project that we began in January 2024, examining the impact of the IALAs in Colombia, Chile, and in Central America on social and material transformations of land. In total, we have visited these IALAs fifteen times over the past two years and interviewed sixty-five people who are involved as students, educators, or organizational coordinators. Many of the people we interviewed attended or were influenced by the construction of the IALA-PF in Venezuela, which is how the IALA-PF became a focus of our research. For this work, we have interviewed 10 people who are former students, educators, administrators, and workers in the IALA-PF, including the three coauthors who were directly involved in this educational process. We transcribed all of these interviews in Notta and then used MaxQDA to code through both process tracing (Collier 2011) of the major events and decisions that led to the construction of the IALA-PF and thematic coding (Saldaña 2021) of the tensions and learnings that were mentioned by IALA-PF participants. We anonymized all interviews so that interviewees could talk more freely about challenges and tensions. We also had access to many original documents developed in preparation for the creation of the IALA-PF as well as e-mails and organizational updates published between 2006 and 2012, during the first program cohort. Finally, we triangulated (Mathison 1988) all of this primary data with secondary data and contextualized these findings within the ongoing political and economic shifts in Venezuela and Latin America during this period, to highlight how macro-processes affect pedagogy. Although no story is complete, we hope that our attempts to recount the birth of the IALA-PF and the evolution of its first cohort can contribute to our collective understanding of the politics and pedagogy of the movement for agroecology in Latin America.

Critical pedagogy, social movement learning, and popular education in Latin America

This research is part of a longer intellectual and organizing tradition that centers the role of education within social movements (Niesz et al. 2018). Foundational to this field and praxis has been Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and the long-standing traditions of popular education in Latin America. In the academy, Freirean-inspired scholars founded the field of critical pedagogy, both critiquing the ideological structures shaping teaching and schools (McLaren 2003; Apple 2004) and also developing theories of

resistance in education (Giroux 2001). Often, however, there is a disconnect between the liberatory educational theories developed by critical pedagogues and the actual social movements pushing forward popular education (Tarlau 2014). In response, other scholars have pushed forward the idea of social movement learning (Kuk and Tarlau 2020), highlighting the learning that emerges through activism and the rich intellectual life of social movements (Choudry 2015).

In Latin America, the educational emphasis within social movements predates Paulo Freire, taking form through the distribution of newspapers in factories in Buenos Aires, Santiago, and São Paulo at the turn of the century (Dulles 1973; Rueda 2021), the deployment of teachers to the rural countryside in post-revolutionary Mexico (Vaughan 1982), and the Cuban literacy campaign of 1961. Freire's educational philosophy itself took hold through the adult education campaigns organized by progressive governments in Brazil and Chile (Holst 2006) and the grassroots educational work of liberation theology clergy (Berryman 1987). Popular education also became central to the struggle of the guerrilla army in El Salvador (Hammond 1998) and the revolutionary government in Nicaragua (Barndt 1990), as well as social movements as diverse as Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (MST) and Mexico's indigenous Zapatista movement. A central tension in all of these educational processes is the relationship between movement-led education and leftist state formations, with autonomy from the state a central principle of the Zapatista movement (Barbosa 2015; Dinerstein 2015) and other decolonial projects (Walsh 2009), and state-movement co-governance as principles of the MST and other socialist projects (Tarlau 2019).

Movement-led agroecology education emerged as social movements embracing popular education centered agroecology and food sovereignty as central goals (Meek and Tarlau 2016; McCune et al. 2017). The question of with or without the state and the possibilities and pitfalls of peasant self-determination in state-supported agroecology programs continues to be a huge question for movements and scholars, with peasant-to-peasant learning processes (Holt-Giménez 2006) representing a non-institutionalized form of agroecological learning and university-initiated agroecology programs falling on the other side of the spectrum.

The Latin American Institutes of Agroecology (IALAs) are important contemporary forms of movement-led agroecological education in Latin America. In the following sections, we analyze the IALA-PF, emphasizing the role of internationalism, which is frequently ignored in discussion of Latin American popular education, with a few exceptions (e.g., Muhr 2015). We also contribute to the debates on popular education and co-governance by illustrating that even within a revolutionary State there are tensions in movement-state collaboration because the goals of movement self-determination are in direct conflict with the logic of state governance (Stédile 2008). We also argue that

agroecology education in the twenty-first century requires the recognition of the peasantry as a historical subject with its own pedagogies, theories, and praxis, different than other popular education initiatives; and that the goal of movement-led agroecology education like the IALA-PF is not only the formation of individuals with agroecological capacities and skills, but even more that these individuals be organized leaders in the agroecology movement. Thus, we build on the scholarship on critical pedagogy, popular education, and social movement learning in Latin America by centering internationalism, self-determination, peasant identity, and organizational action as critical to the agroecology education and praxis.

Section 1. Peasant internationalism: the birth of IALA Paulo Freire

Hugo Chávez delivered the keynote closing speech at the 5th World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2005. Before traveling to the event, the Venezuelan president spent the morning of January 30 visiting an agrarian reform settlement of Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST). The MST is one of the world's largest social movements (Fernandes and Stédile 2002; Tarlau 2019) and an influential member organization of the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations (CLOC). CLOC, in turn, includes all the Latin American and Caribbean member organizations of La Vía Campesina (LVC), but has its own independent history and internal regional structures (Reardon and McCune 2025). Although the MST and CLOC had not always embraced agroecology as part of its struggle for agrarian reform, by the turn of the twenty-first century the call for agroecology had become a central demand of these movements (Barbosa et al. 2021; Dias et al. 2021).

According to MST activist Bruno, the relationship between the MST and Chavez had begun the year before, when Chavez's government was under threat of another international coup and the MST had called for a march to defend the Venezuelan revolutionary process. [1] The following year, Chavez agreed to come to the World Social Forum in Brazil. In the weeks prior to the World Social Forum, one of the MST's most visible national leaders, João Pedro Stédile, met with other CLOC leaders to strategize about the visit. The visiting president had gained enormous prestige among the Latin American left for articulating a vision of continental solidarity, guiding a process of regional integration that was already well established through such programs as PetroCaribe, which offered discounted fuel to small island nations (Cederlöf and Kingsbury 2019). In doing so, Chávez embraced the legacy of the Cuban Revolution, which had a long history of internationalism going back to Argentinian doctor and Cuban revolutionary leader Ché Guevara's concept of the Cuban Revolution as the first step in the liberation of the Americas (Guevara 1959). In 1999, Cuba created the Latin American School of Medicine in Havana for working class Caribbean, Latin American, African, Asian, and

even North American students to study medicine for free (Huish and Kirk 2007). In this tradition of internationalism, CLOC leaders agreed to ask Chávez to support the development of a continental school of agroecology, similar to the Latin American School of Medicine, but run by agrarian social movements. This school would be for young peasants, indigenous people, and Afro-descendant communities to study agroecology and build leadership skills that they could use to fortify their organizations.

On January 30, 2006, in the MST's Lagoa do Junco settlement in the municipality of Tapes, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Chávez participated in a tree-planting ceremony and took the microphone in front of assembled MST members and international visitors. The MST provided security, surrounding the settlement with dozens of young militants who were part of the MST's security team and also wanted to catch a glimpse of the Venezuelan leader. [2] Chávez carried a Brazilian child in his arms as he spoke of his peasant roots, historical memory, and the relationship between knowledge and Latin American consciousness. Following the speech, a group including Chávez, Stédile (on behalf of the MST), representatives of the Workers Party-led state government of Rio Grande do Sul, and two Brazilian universities signed what would become known as the "Tapes Agreement." The document committed to creating two Latin American Schools of Agroecology, one in Venezuela and one in Brazil, as well as an international network of peasant seed producers. [3]

For CLOC leaders, the arrangement was more than a financial commitment to fund these movement projects with Venezuelan state resources. Rather, it signified a higher-level of unity across the region. Just as Simón Bolívar had spent time in Jamaica and depended on Haitian solidarity to liberate much of South America from Spanish rule, there was a deep lineage of ties among nationalist, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist efforts, from Puerto Rico to Perú, that united the Caribbean and Latin America (Dalleo et al. 2013; Fischer 2013). More recently, the anti-globalization movement of the 1990s had also uplifted the importance of peasant internationalism and LVC had become a crucial actor resisting the neoliberal global order (Desmarais 2006). Furthermore, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Cuban peasantry had essentially saved the revolution by committing to an agroecology transition and food sovereignty, becoming a reference point for the global peasant movement. Within Cuba, the peasant movement was deeply integrated within the revolutionary process and consistently brought a food sovereignty perspective to national policy through its peasant-to-peasant agroecology movement, which supplies most of the country's food (Machín Sosa et al. 2010). The 2006 Tapes agreement pushed these agroecology and food sovereignty processes to the center stage of twenty-first century internationalism in Latin American and the Caribbean.

The 2006 Tapes agreement also initiated a new chapter in movement-state relations in the region. The Latin American peasant, landless and farm

worker movement, represented by CLOC/LVC, had long studied the question of how to dialectically engage with state power (Cockcroft 2006). These movements saw the crucial significance of the State in enacting national food sovereignty, but were also wary of the kinds of co-optation and clientelism that, for example, took place during the decades of PRI rule after the Mexican Revolution (Fox 1993). These movements expressed political sympathies for the vision of "taking the state" to redistribute land and power, but they also recognized how much more common it is to be "taken by the state," through some combination of consent and control (Barbosa and Rosset 2024). The 2006 Tapes Agreement was an opportunity to experiment once more in state-movement co-governance, grounded in the ideals of internationalism, and in doing so, to educate a "continental contingent" of young movement agroecologists and leaders.

Section 2. Formation of a historical subject: IALA-PF as a pedagogy of the peasantry

Eight months after the signing of the Tapes Agreement, Chávez signed a second agreement in another ceremony with international leaders of LVC, including Stédile of the MST and Henry Saragih, a well-known Indonesian peasant leader and the general coordinator of LVC International. This time, the signing took place in the town of Sabaneta, in Chávez's home state of Barinas, in the Venezuelan plains that also symbolize the continuity between Venezuelan and Colombian *llanera* culture. The agreement created an "agricultural technical cooperation program" between LVC and the Venezuelan state. It mentioned an 8,490-hectare *latifundio* landlord estate called Hacienda La Maqueseña that the government was attempting to expropriate from the powerful Azpúrua family.[4] Thus, an emblematic site of agrarian reform, only a few miles from where Chávez grew up, was being entrusted to CLOC/LVC for the construction of the first peasant university.

The Venezuelan state was undergoing transformations that enabled the country's poor and working-class majority to access free education and medicine, subsidized food, transport, and housing, and a vibrant national culture. The process of expanding and restituting these rights was complex: when existing bureaucracies dragged their feet, Chávez created new organs of popular power, bypassing obstacles and generating new sites of politics. As McKay et al. (2014) describe, the state-led path to food sovereignty in Venezuela involved the "radical re-envisioning of the locus of governance, creating and supporting community-level structures that put political power in the hands of the people in a new way" (1178). A series of executive branch "missions," often named for past revolutionary leaders, redistributed power and wealth and would eventually be combined with bottom-up organizational processes of neighborhood collectives to become the Communal State – a blueprint for

grassroots control over production and other aspects of social and economic life (Maher 2016; Gilbert 2023).

Nonetheless, the declaration of intent to build a peasant university, in a nation that by the turn of the century had a 95% urban population, was a radical departure from previous public policy in Venezuela and in Latin America in general. After decades of Green Revolution policies that treated peasants as entrepreneurial farmers and led to a rapid exodus of rural communities from the countryside, the founding of the IALA-PF in Venezuela was a gesture of recognition of the peasantry as a social subject that had been negated – setting the stage for such achievements as the legal recognition of the peasantry in Colombia a decade later (Melo 2015). Never before had an invitation existed for peasant movements of the continent to participate as students and educators in a space that was their own. Along with complementary public policies, the founding of the IALA-PF by the Bolivarian government was a part of a message that the countryside could be revitalized and again become a place of production (Domené-Painenao and Herrera 2019).

However, navigating the mundane details of institution-building in a country where institutions were rapidly transforming, being created, and becoming obsolete, was no easy task. A contentious encounter between the deliberative, horizontal politics of movements and the state bureaucracy was inevitable. In an e-mail written to CLOC organizations in July 2006, a peasant leader from Nicaragua insisted that the Institute of Agroecology would be under the "central coordination of the organizations of the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations [CLOC], Vía Campesina, indigenous and Afro-descendant representatives." In practice, however, there was no way that CLOC/LVC could force the People's Power Ministry of University Education or any other Venezuelan institution involved in creating and sustaining the IALA-PF to cede its coordination to popular movements. As such, creating the peasant university would require the coming together of vastly different political cultures. The popular movements in CLOC created an inter-movement space of IALA-PF decision-making called the Political-Pedagogical Coordination (CPP in its Spanish acronym), which included a couple seats for Venezuelan institutional actors. However, establishing and maintaining mutual respect and understanding between CLOC/LVC's ways of working and those of the Venezuelan institutions would be one of the most consistent challenges.

The IALA-PF Political-Pedagogical Coordination (CPP), which included leaders from Brazil, Nicaragua, Colombia, and Mexico, began working with the Venezuelan state institution Fundayacucho to manage student scholarships. Founded in 1974 as a public foundation that offered student loans, in May 2006 President Chávez decreed that Fundayacucho forgive all student debts and begin offering scholarships rather than loans. That summer,

Fundayachucho officials traveled to several countries to meet with and interview potential candidates for the first IALA-PF cohort. This process illustrated how quickly a transformed Venezuelan state infrastructure became central to the social movement-led education. Yet, at every moment, popular movements in CLOC accompanied this process, identifying potential candidates for the first IALA-PF cohort, preparing candidates for government interviews, and offering a political orientation in parallel to the government's own orientation process.

Simultaneously, the IALA-PF Political-Pedagogical Coordination (CPP) established contact with the Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV), created in 2003 as part of an effort to expand university access to working-class Venezuelans. The UBV already had an undergraduate degree in Agroecology (Domené-Painenao and Herrera 2019), and some institutional actors thought the UBV degree program could provide a model for the IALA-PF curriculum. The CPP, however, was not satisfied in simply adopting this already-developed university curriculum despite the popular roots of the university. Instead, they were looking for the space to produce, debate, and deepen peasant knowledge, in a peasant context and with a peasant-led methodological and pedagogical strategy. As such, the CPP wanted to negotiate an entirely new undergraduate degree, that would be based upon traditional ecological knowledge and peasant organizational practices while also providing graduates with an university-sanctioned engineering degree.

In an extended exchange with Venezuelan pedagogues that continued long into the IALA-PF's first cohort, a co-designed curricular proposal slowly took form, centered around the historical memory of Venezuelan, Caribbean and Latin American social struggle for the land. The main curriculum document that was eventually approved centers the proposal upon the indigenous *conuco* system.[5] *Conuco* is a Taino word which refers to a small-scale forest polyculture family garden of food and medicinal crops. Similar to the Mesoamerican *milpa*, the *conuco* is at the center of Caribbean indigenous lifeways, seed domestication and conservation, water management, health and food sovereignty. It was a core reference point in the systematic organization of peasant knowledge that IALA-PF aspired to carry out. The IALA-PF curriculum also covered the requirements of an academic agroecology engineering degree. These negotiations and co-design process revealed a deep Venezuela, full of peasant and indigenous knowledge, with which the IALA-PF CPP would need to dialogue (Herrera et al. 2017). The CPP also sought to incorporate elements of the MST's political education methodology (Caldart 2004; Tarlau 2019) into the engineering degree program, including centering the principles of collectivity, work, culture, history, and struggle. However, the MST's pedagogical proposal could not be applied in Venezuela without significant inputs and transformations from that nation's Caribbean, Andean, and Amazonian roots. The IALA-PF cauldron of critical thought, historical

memory, circles of reflection, and senses of struggle was being constructed, and in doing so, the Latin American peasantry as a historical subject with a pedagogy and praxis of their own.

Section 3: Self-determination: La Marqueseña or bust

Hacienda la Marqueseña, the designated location for the IALA-PF, had no infrastructure for a university and Venezuelan officials hesitated to bring students into premature conditions. In contrast, the IALA-PF Political Pedagogical Coordination (CPP) team – especially the Brazilians from the MST – worried that if they delayed any longer in bringing the students the process could cool off and never materialize. The MST's position was that as a general rule the State would slow down and try to avoid commitments and must be pushed to act by the movement. Despite the two agreements signed directly by the Venezuelan president, the MST didn't trust the process to create the peasant school – it wanted to apply force from outside the state.[6]

By fall 2006, the leadership of CLOC/LVC decided not to wait any longer and working with Fundayacucho, brought the first cohort of students to Venezuela. Students arrived from CLOC/LVC organizations and allied movements from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Chile, Argentina, the Dominican Republic, Paraguay, and Venezuela itself. When the arrivals from the 14 countries were complete, there were 183 students, including 62 women and 121 men (Domené-Painenao 2022).

In an interview, a Colombian student, Emiliano, described arriving at the Caracas airport and meeting the Fundayachucho representatives who were waiting to load him and the other students onto an overnight bus: "On that bus we were a mix, some spoke Portuguese, others Quechua."[7] Thinking they were being taken to the campus of an existing university, the students were instead delivered to the sports complex in the city of Barinas, the temporary location that the local government had found for them as a result of the unprepared hacienda and the rush of the CLOC/LVC to start the program. Although they arrived after 3 am, the lights of the stadiums and pools were lit and visible from inside the bus.

> We started saying 'this university is huge! We won't be bored here!' because we could see basketball courts, the velodrome, the Olympic pool, boxing rings, soccer fields. When we got down from the bus there were these huge muscular people we saw. Since on television you see that universities have sports, we asked ourselves what these people must be studying at the "Freire" university . . .
>
> We were youngsters from the countryside. We had never traveled out of the country or heard other accents. We were full of admiration and when we arrived to see these huge

> people, this tremendous university, with Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution, these immense things, all this investment. We arrived at our dorm rooms, there were some *compas* there and we started asking them, 'How long have you been studying here?' We were thinking they had been studying there for years. And they told us, 'We arrived this morning, and all we have seen is people training for sports.' And we started saying, 'I am going to sign up for this sport, or that one . . . I am going to start lifting weights.'
>
> And dawn arrived. We started seeing things more clearly, the whole world singing, the birds chirping, and we started to see these athletes. We asked them, 'what are you studying?' and they said 'we're weightlifters and we're preparing for the Olympics.' 'And where are the students?' 'There are no students, this is a sports complex.' 'And where is the university?' we started to ask, really ask, 'Where is the university?'
>
> When we figured it out, three days later, they told us: 'The thing is that the university doesn't exist.' The university doesn't exist, not in name or anything else, not in the Ministry of Education or anywhere else. This university must be built, built from scratch, registered and all, there is no program. There is nothing.

What was for movement leaders a strategic decision to send students to Venezuela before the IALA-PF was ready to launch was for the students a shocking start.

Three months after the students arrived, Carolina, an MST leader with deep experience leading political education processes in Brazil, arrived in Barinas to join the Political-Pedagogical Coordination (CPP) team accompanying the cohort. Carolina recounted her first impressions,

> I arrived in January 2007 and this is what I found: young people in a building in the center of the capital, in Barinas. I think it had about three floors, one of which had rooms, accommodation. Then, on another floor, there was a space for studying. And downstairs, the cafeteria. And then, in the courtyard of this building, there was another little house, where they washed clothes, hung laundry, and a sports box nearby. I got there and saw this situation. Then I thought, together with the students, my God, you're not going to leave here as an agronomist, or an agroecologist, or anything, not even as a peasant. You're going to lose your roots, because there's only concrete here.[8]

The CPP met repeatedly with the state government of Barinas, whose governor was Alan Chávez, Chávez's brother, and asked about the Hacienda la Marqueseña as the future location for the permanent IALA-PF campus. Reflecting on the meetings with these officials, Carolina concluded: "It's a rebellious government, a revolutionary government. But there's also a lot of bureaucracy, right? Time is almost infinite. And these young people had already been there for months."

Students discussed their options in the face of the stalled promise of land to found a peasant university. One option for the students was to transfer to the Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UVB) agroecology program, and indeed, over the first few months dozens of students from the cohort decided to leave the IALA-PF process and pursue this degree. The other option was to return

home, which a handful of other students decided to do. The third option was to force the process forward by refusing to continue their studies at the sports complex. One of the Paraguayan students, Juan, decided to pursue this latter option: "A group of Paraguayans and a group of Venezuelans and a minority of the Brazilians, we decided to force it. We held a student assembly and then pushed it through the CPP." The decision was to occupy the Hacienda la Marqueseña and force the government to recognize it at the rightful campus of the IALA-PF.

Carolina, the MST activist on the CPP, recalled:

> We had already identified on a map where the campus was going to be. We went [by bus] with a group of students to the area and then we went on foot.
>
> And then we saw it. There was a small river. It ran through the land, behind it, at the bottom. There were mountains . . . They were part of the Andean mountain range. Then we saw that there were some houses that were falling apart, but that we could occupy and turn into a dormitory. There was an old chicken coop, which we could adapt and turn into a place to study. And the good thing was that it was warm, not cold, so if we had a roof and something to protect us from the wind, we would be fine.

Over the course of several exploratory missions, a subgroup of the students with aligned members of the CPP, developed a risky plan. As the Paraguayan student, Juan, recalled,

> First a group of us moved to La Marqueseña. There weren't many of us to begin with. It was those with a level of formation, that were let's say more convinced on the topic of agroecology, who were part of it. We already understood that we had to force the issue, because within the process of the Venezuelan revolution there was an intact State that didn't recognize what we wanted to build was a university of agroecology. That is, an education within the dynamic of popular education.[9]

There were, concurrently, top-down attempts in process to change these conservative bureaucratic structures. In 2006, President Hugo Chávez established Communal Councils as "assembly-driven organizations focused on addressing specific community issues" (Rodríguez and Rojas 2025) providing an override function for local communities that avoided bureaucratic stagnation at municipal, state and ministerial levels. In 2009, Chávez proposed the concept of the Commune, an aggregate of several Communal Councils that would provide a means for direct popular democracy. Since that time, analysts have argued that Venezuela has been living the contestation for power between the outmoded bourgeois State and the communal State (Gilbert 2023). IALA-PF students were well aware of these contradictions and debates within the Venezuelan process. While some students and organizational leaders wanted to give the government time to create conditions for their rural campus, others like the Paraguayan student Juan did not wait: "We started to carry out what we could call the formal and diplomatic steps, but above all for us it was a head-on battle to build this university. It was a fight that lasted five years."

After several visits to bring basic materials to the new campus, a group of students and educators moved to the site one morning at dawn. Carolina described: "We arrived with the things and unloaded them. Like a landless encampment, you know? ... Then we notified the government and the LVC brigade that was in Caracas. We told them that the students were already at this address and that the next food shipment should not go to the capital, but to this address." One of the institutional coordinators of the program at the time, Angela, remembered the significant of this action: "On the one hand it was symbolic, it was the first area that Chávez had appropriated, linked to one of the colonial patriarchal families that dominated in Venezuela. And the IALA represented the attempt to create new types of institutionality ... to create a new type of university to resolve concrete issues in the territories ... but they did this without authority. They tried to push forward a slow process, and it was an act of rebellion."[10]

Through this direct action, the IALA-PF cohort took the future of their university into their own hands. Over the next few months, the students visited their neighbors and asked to borrow tools to start planting seeds; they fed themselves by foraging from the territory, which included mango trees and a river for fishing; they bathed in the river and organized their classes in the fields. Importantly, these students were not taking an entirely new action; the land that they occupied had been the site of many historical land disputes between landowners and peasant communities in the region. With supportive scaffolding by leaders from the MST and other movements, the students were making history, following in the footsteps of peasant struggles in the Venezuelan and Latin American countryside. More than anything, they were showing that self-determination was a central pillar of their pedagogy.

The students and the CPP waited to see what the government's reaction might be to their actions. MST activist Carolina recounted: "After a few months, the government sent us some building materials, a water dispenser, and tools. And then the Ministry of Education paid us a visit ... eleven different committees from cabinet ministries visited us and saw what we needed." Surprisingly, the gamble had paid off. The educational conditions quickly improved for the students, with a budget that included money for meals, building improvements, agricultural production, and maintenance workers. The conflicts between the agrarian social movements and the state, however, continued. Over the next five years the students would organize hunger strikes for better living conditions; protests to oust a professor they disliked; and countless disputes with the university ministry for more student self-governance. The contentious co-governance (Tarlau 2019) at the IALA-PF was ongoing, even within a self-declared revolutionary state; illustrating the limits of the logics of progressive state politics for pushing forward an agroecology movement with the ultimate goal of peasant self-determination.

Section 4. Organizational action and leadership in the IALA-Paulo Freire

One hundred and eighty-three students from fourteen countries were part of the first IALA-PF cohort. The group of students, however, who would move to the Hacienda Marqueseña and continue the IALA-PF engineering degree program included only sixty-two students from seven countries, with the majority that remained from Venezuela, Brazil, and Paraguay. Juan, one of the ten of eleven Paraguayan students who stayed in the program, explained this phenomenon in the case of Paraguay:

> Before we went to Venezuela, we went through a six-month political education process in Paraguay . . . We were told that it was not a matter of arriving in Venezuela and everything being ready – like walking into an established university. No, we were the ones who had to build the university . . . we were already fully committed. That's why the dropout rate among our group from Paraguay was minimal compared to other countries . . . you could say we arrived politically and even psychologically prepared.

In contrast, of the twelve Nicaraguan students that went, only one student, Laura, remained. Laura, a member of the Rural Workers Association (ATC), explained that the attrition was in part due to organizational affiliation. "Of 12 students, only four were from the ATC, the rest were from the Sandinista Youth [organization]." According to Laura, the youth representatives who did not belong to LVC/CLOC did not have the same commitment to an agroecology process led by agrarian social movements. Laura reflected, "they were happy to transfer to the regular university . . . Those of us trained by the ATC receive a bit more political and ideological training – you know? So, we understood what the project was all about. But in this case, I was the only one who stayed, because there were a lot of internal problems."

Laura attributed her decision to stay in the program to her organizational preparation and commitment. Unsurprisingly, Laura has continued to participate in the ATC since graduating.

These reflections about the first IALA-PF cohort speak to a central pillar of agroecology education: organizational action and leadership. The students who studied for five years at the IALA-PF were the ones who realized that agroecology technical education itself was not the goal, but rather, it was to gain the leadership skills necessary to participate in and build the organizations that would push forward the agroecology movement. The pedagogies at the IALA-PF were also oriented toward this goal of organizational leadership and action (Barbosa and Rosset 2017). We briefly highlight four of the core pedagogical approaches of the IALA-PF, and how they supported organizational action: base groups; farm work and chores; school time and community time; and the *conuco* as a central conceptual basis for the program.

Even before the land occupation, upon their arrival in the sports complex in Barinas, students were placed into *núcleos de base*, or base groups, through which they experienced the entire educational process, from daily chores to

group discussions, farm work to democratic spaces for proposing changes to the curriculum or other components of the educational process. These communal sites of learning, work, and decision making helped learners internalize a sense of *collective responsibility*, as well as values and techniques of dialogue and participatory democracy. This structure of decision making through base groups was also a central pillar of the agrarian social movements. Thus, the pedagogy at the IALA-PF was the organizational pedagogy of the movements.

Farm work and daily chores also formed an integral part of the learning. Work has long been theorized as a transformative practice, as its tools and methods are products of previous cycles of work (Pistrak 2000). Labor connects an individual's mind and body with a place and territory defined by its natural features, culture and history, in ways that support community and the common good. Labor-based education prefigures a form of society resonant with socially-minded people's intuitions, empathy and a sense of justice. The intention of integrating chores into the IALA's pedagogy was so that learners could find themselves able to feel solidarity with greater ease, develop new habits and relational autonomies, even senses of humor that are organically grounded in a land-based, collective, ethos (Stronzake 2013).

Its public funding also allowed the IALA-PF to employ local people as field and cafeteria workers, in livestock raising and in food transformation. The emphasis on work as an educational and collective process meant that the workers were considered full members of the school community and had not only their own collective through which to negotiate their rights as workers, but also formed part of the school assemblies, the broadest space for participation of IALA-PF learners, professors, CPP members, workers, and neighbors. For example, Ángel was a young man born in the town of San Nicolás, not far from the IALA-PF campus.[11] Ángel recalled that the initial impression in his community about the institute was that "the IALA was a space for people who were a little crazy." However, when he heard they were looking for workers to help maintain the school, he applied for a job and was one of five hired. Ángel recalled that from the first day they arrived the five workers "went through a process of integration . . . When assemblies were held to make decisions, we participated." When there was an opportunity for a delegation of IALA-PF students and educators to travel to Cuba, the five workers were allowed to choose one representative to join the delegation. Ángel noted, "We were treated as people who were contributing to the process." The emphasis on work as an educational and collective process meant that the workers themselves, who were not students but employees of the IALA, were considered full members of the school community.

The learning at the IALA-PF was divided into two primary "moments." The first was called school time, made up of the weeks that learners spent on campus. There, learners spent their days in classes, independent reading, group discussions, spontaneous soccer games, and agricultural work on

experimental plots where they could put new ideas about growing food into practice. The second "moment" was called community time. Learners were sent for extended periods to peasant and farm worker communities in all kinds of rural contexts, from land reform projects to traditional Andean communities. For example, for one community period Emiliano from Colombia was sent into the high Venezuelan Andes, to a remote sheep-herding and potato-growing community that was self-sufficient in food and fiber, while Juan from Paraguay was sent to a community in the Barinas foothills that produced tomatoes and processed *chimó* (an indigenous smokeless tobacco paste). The goal was for students to learn from diverse peasant communities about the agroecological practices they were developing, and to study and research these processes in order to help them overcome the challenges they faced. The preparation for community time–and the generative reflections learners brought back with them to the IALA–produced rich and original cycles of action, reflection, and improved action in line with traditions of Latin American participatory action research (Fals 1973).

These diverse and overlapping organic structures also provided a political orientation to the production of knowledge within the institute. In this sense, the peasant movement's position was that agroecology was a science that belongs to the peasantry, a systematization of ancestral knowledge and ongoing learning. The central concept of the *conuco* cropping system gave the institute an opportunity to deepen its agroecological analysis while maintaining agency and originality. Largely, it was the responsibility of the IALA protagonists to create their own curriculum based on the recovery of the *conuco* and the rural community as ecological and social units of organization. Gonzalo, one of the institutional coordinators and government co-directors of the IALA, said it this way: "The teaching and learning of agroecology derive directly from practice, not from the classroom. That is *not* to say, and we must be careful here, that academic knowledge is superfluous. Academic knowledge has a raison d'être, but only to the extent that it is integrated and deeply linked to social practice."[12]

Conclusions: praxis and pedagogy

In 2012, the first IALA-PF cohort participated in their graduation ceremony after spending five years completing a bachelor's degree in Agroecological Engineering. Notably, none of the graduates wore a gown and cap at the ceremony; they had decided in a contentious student assembly that gowns and caps represented a form of academic elitism that was not appropriate for the peasant university they had constructed. The sixty-two graduating students were asked to take an oath, which read in part:

> Do you swear, for the love of Mother Earth, Pacha Mama, the perennial source of life, for Afro-descendants, indigenous peoples, peasants, cultivators of struggles, dreams, and hopes, do you swear for the people of the Latin American homeland, for our ancestors who fought for freedom, for those who have fallen in the struggle, do you swear for all of them that you will never give rest to your souls or respite to your struggles?

The learners responded with a resounding yes to the oath, indicating in this final pedagogical moment their deep organizational commitments. The sixty-two students had endured the challenges of institutionalizing and co-creating an autonomous peasant university while navigating the bureaucracy and contradictions of a Latin American revolutionary state. They had also overcome countless other internal conflicts over five years of living and working together. A majority of students had left the program, perhaps for many outsiders a sign of its weakness. However, the students who stayed understood their experience as windows into the contradictions that arise through the processes of building popular power. The IALA-PF was the first peasant university of its kind, and this experience led to a new generation of IALAs that were founded in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Paraguay, as well as many other IALA-inspired agroecology schools (Muñoz et al. 2014; Moore, 2017; St Fleur et al. 2024). Thus, the IALA-PF was a central part of the consolidation of a "movement form" of agroecology across Latin American and the Caribbean (McCune et al. 2014). Consequently, the lessons that emerge from this experience are critical to understanding agroecology education and popular education in Latin America today.

We have argued that there are four ways that the IALA-PF experience pushes forward discussions of popular education and agroecology. First, we have highlighted how the creation of grassroots educational spaces of agroecology is closely linked to regional political processes and internationalism. The Venezuelan government's vision for creating the institute was closely tied to its conception of the Bolivarian revolution as an explicitly regional process of political mobilization. Modeled after Cuba's Latin American School of Medicine, the IALA-PF was designed to establish internationalist connections among young peasants, indigenous peoples, and Afro-descendants throughout Latin America, contributing to regional solidarity. The 2005 Tapes Agreement, as a regional policy signed between Venezuelan government and Brazilian political officials and activists, led to the creation of new spaces for agroecological education in both countries. This initiated a process of developing a network of interconnected agroecological educational spaces. The initial funding for this initiative came from the profits of Venezuela's nationalized extractive industries. It is essential to understand these funding circuits to comprehend how political-economic processes, including those related to oil extraction, can be leveraged to promote grassroots educational imaginaries within a politics of internationalism.

Second, we have highlighted how the tensions in state-movement co-governance are not a pitfall of agroecology education but rather a core pedagogical lesson in how to defend movement self-determination. Although there are many indigenous and autonomous movements that push forward popular education with their own resources or within sovereign territories, much of the agroecology education of the twenty-first century and initiatives for food sovereignty are organized with and through state support. The Venezuelan government supported the IALA Paulo Freire in many ways – it was the source of the scholarship for the students, salaries for the educators, and infrastructure. Nonetheless, it was the IALA-PF community itself, the students and the Political-Pedagogical Coordination, that ultimately drove this project forward on the ground. When the IALA Paulo Freire students arrived to find that there was literally no university, it was only through the social process led by CLOC/LVC peasant leaders that students helped identify a territory to build the university. Similar to the model of land occupation practiced throughout Latin America, including in Venezuela itself, the students occupied and maintained the space, pressuring the Venezuelan government to create the institute. These conflicts were not failings of the IALA-PF but rather a central learning of the students, who would go on to exercise self-determination in even more challenging state contexts. The students realized through praxis that: "Well, if the university isn't built, then it's up to us to build it." That lesson was the ultimate pedagogical success of the IALA-PF process.

Third, the IALA-PF illustrates the importance of recognizing peasants as their own social class with their own theories and praxis. This is of course one of the most important lessons from Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that oppressed communities must develop their own pedagogy. However, the fact that agroecology education is necessarily a pedagogy of peasant communities is often lost in contemporary agroecology education initiatives, which have been institutionalized in universities throughout the Global North and Global South. The proposal that emerged from CLOC/LVC to create the first continental peasant university was a rejection of simply demanding more access in universities for peasants; the goal was to draw on peasant knowledge and practice to produce a university *of* the peasantry. Furthermore, the peasantry as a social class leading the university was not isolated to the students and educators. The IALA-PF engaged members of the wider peasant community in a greater interdependence: borrowing tools, exchanging seeds, sharing food. Learners and educators developed relationships not only with neighboring local communities, but also with their struggles and with the land itself, as students spent time in diverse peasant contexts and learned from their knowledge and practice.

Fourth and finally, this story of the IALA-PF illustrates the role of organizational action and leadership in agroecology education. One of the central pedagogical approaches to the IALA-PF – and many other spaces of

political formation in CLOC/LVC – were the base groups that were formed among students, as nodes of both reflection and action within the school. Learning to participate in these collectives and making decisions with peers directly informed students' capacity to work collectively in their own organizations and lead collective processes in the face of challenges and conflicts. The incorporation of manual labor and chores as part of the pedagogical process was unnecessary if the students were going to become individual agronomists, but as agroecological leaders in working-class organizations, the unity of manual and intellectual labor and the importance of recognizing the subjectivity of every worker at the school – from students to day laborers – was critical to CLOC's organizational vision. Finally, the time that students spent studying agroecology at the school was intentionally paired with six month-long periods in peasant communities across the country, where the students were asked to identify real-life problems and support local organizational capacities to address those issues, from creating an agroecological solution to a plague that hit a set of crops to establishing process for addressing internal conflicts in an agricultural cooperative. This form of action research for the purpose of organizational development was central to the agroecology education that this first cohort of IALA-PF students, educators, and organizational representatives developed. They were not only building a university, they were building the peasant movement itself.

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Author contributions

CRediT: **Nils McCune:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Rebecca Tarlau:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Olga Domené:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **David Meek:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Fabián Pachón:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Marlen Sanchez:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Endnotes

1. All information from Bruno (*pseudonym*) comes from an interview in December 2025.
2. Information from interview with Bruno (*pseudonym*).
3. The Brazilian Escola LatinoAmericana de Agroecologia (ELAA) was founded in 2005 in Paraná, Brazil, and named for the famed Brazilian agronomist and soil scientist Ana

Maria Primavesi. The BioNatur Network for Agroecological Seeds is a strategic tool that the MST has used to promote agroecology.

4. The Marqueseña expropriation was an emblematic case of an accelerating land reform in Venezuela that caught national and international attention. In September 2025, after a year of contentious legal battle, Carlos Azpúrua, the estate owner, met with Hugo Chávez and both agreed to respect the court decisions about the legality of the private character of the property, which the government had declared to be unused and the landlord insisted was a cattle ranch. Nine years later, the Venezuelan Supreme Court dismissed Azpúrua's appeal to reverse the expropriation.
5. This document, Castellano et al. (2007), 32, translation by authors), states that, "The *conuco* is the cultural expression of peasant and indigenous resistance to the imposition of the Green Revolution – and now the genetically modified revolution – by Western civilization. The *conuco* embodies the principles of integration with nature, which, when applied to our reality, represent the most appropriate technological and political alternative for achieving the country's food sovereignty and realizing our constitutional values and principles."
6. Interview with MST leader Carolina (*pseudonym*).
7. All information from Emiliano (*pseudonym*) comes from an interview in June 2025.
8. All information from Carolina (*pseudonym*) comes from an interview in June 2025.
9. All information from Juan (*pseudonym*) comes from an interview in December 2025.
10. Interview with Angela (*pseudonym*) July 2026.
11. All information from Ángel (*pseudonym*) comes from an interview in August 2025.
12. Quoted from a video posted on the IALA Paulo Freire Blog, <http://ialavideos.blogspot.com/2011/>

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