

PAULO FREIRE 1921-1997

AN APPRECIATION

"... Paulo Freire constitutes a watershed. There is before and after Freire."

Daniel Schugurensky

"We can stay with Freire or against Freire, but not without Freire."

Carlos Alberto Torres

Paulo Freire has been one of the most significant educationists of the last thirty years. He is cited freely in the literature on education and social thought emerging not only from the 'Third World', which provided the context for most of his practice and ideas, but also from Western industrialized centres.

The greatest and most enduring aspect of Freire's work is his emphasis on the political nature of all educational activity. In Freire's view, there is no such thing as a 'neutral' education. Education can domesticate individuals, contributing to their acceptance of or passivity in relation to the status quo. Alternatively, education can liberate, providing the disposition to engage in a dialectical relationship with knowledge and society. This is part and parcel of a critical reading of the world.

One way teacher-student transmission is often a reflection of a wider, prescriptive process of communication and constitutes a domesticating education. Freire advocates a process that is characterized by a dialogical approach to knowledge. Although not on an equal footing, teacher and learner co-investigate dialectically the object of knowledge, learning from each other. In his adult education work among peasants, Freire generated a process whereby learners stand back from the familiar in order to perceive it in a more critical light. In this way, one can reflect critically on one's action with a view to transforming it. Freire called this process 'praxis', a key concept in his thinking and pedagogical work.

While acknowledging that educators need to exercise some authority in any teaching situation--an authority derived from their competence as pedagogues--Freire argues that this authority should never degenerate into authoritarianism. It is an authority that rests on the strength of two other important qualities: humility and love. In an e-mail message, Valerie Scatamburlo from York University drew my attention to the following comment made by Freire a few days before his death: "I could never think of education without love and that is why I think I am an educator, first of all because I feel love ..."

This space is not adequate to engage in an extensive discussion concerning the dynamics of the Freirean approach to learning. The emphasis on a dialectical mode of thinking, certainly reflected in Freire's own style of conceptualization, immediately recalls Hegel and Marx, the latter undoubtedly being the greatest influence on Freire's work. Marx's early writings are constantly referred to and provide the basis for Freire's social analysis in his most celebrated

work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He conceived of and wrote this book during the first six years of his long exile from Brazil which he spent in Bolivia, Chile, the US and Geneva. Freire often acknowledged the influence of his first wife, Elza (who died in 1986) and other close collaborators such as Marcela Gajardo of Chile.

The Marxist-humanist element is pervasive in Freire's work which is also eclectic in that it draws on a broad range of writings, including the work of Leszek Kolakowski, Karel Kosik, Eric Fromm, Antonio Gramsci, Karl Mannheim, Teilhard de Chardin, Franz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Lev Vygotsky, Amilcar Cabral and the Christian Personalism theory of Tristian de Atiade and Emanuel Mounier.

Freire was exiled following the Multinationals-backed military coup of 1964 which overthrew the 'populist' administration of Joao Goulart. At the time of the coup, Freire was about to coordinate a nation-wide literacy program. Because literacy would enfranchise those who had never exercised such power, and because Freire's approach involved "reading the word and the world", Freire's work was perceived as a threat to the status quo. Interestingly, he presents his experience of exile as a long process of 'praxis', of gaining critical distance from familiar surroundings (see *Learning to Question*, 1989).

Freire did not discuss pedagogical activity in a vacuum, but within an analysis of power and its structural manifestations. There are those who often miss this key point and, consequently, reduce his work to a 'method' or 'technique'. In his early work, Freire, who was born in Recife in the Brazilian North East state of Pernambuco, draws on his experiences as an adult educator, the vocation he pursued after having studied law and taught Philosophy of Education. The context of his adult education work is the Nord-este itself, one of the world's most impoverished areas.

worked in a situation of abject servitude. The rural land-owning class had an historical alliance with the national indigenous bourgeoisie located in the Sao Paulo area, in the South-East. Given the stark contrast in access to material goods and power, in a country whose fortunes have been guided by colonial and neo-colonial interests, it is not surprising that social class analysis provides the guiding thread for Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. As Freire himself admitted, this analysis is conspicuously missing from his first published work, *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (published in English as part of *Education for Critical Consciousness*).

Social class analysis, however, constitutes an important feature of the radical Brazilian religious movement with which Freire's work is strongly associated. Himself a "man of faith", Freire's ideas were certainly influenced by the radical religious organizations which made their presence felt in Brazil in the late 50s and early 60s. There are strong similarities between his emancipatory views on education and the education document produced by the Latin American bishops at the 1968 Episcopal Conference in Medellin, Columbia. This conference represents a landmark in the development of Liberation Theology. The strong relationship between Freire's views and that of Liberation Theology led the Church in Latin America to espouse many of Freire's pedagogical principles. In a series of writings on the 'Prophetic Church', as distinct from the 'Traditional' or 'Modernizing' Church, Freire writes at length on the concept of religious commitment, based on a lifelong struggle for social and economic justice (see *The Politics of Education*, 1985).

For the most part, his early work focused on class (there are 33 references to social class in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*). This focus led to some serious criticisms, primarily by North American feminists, who pointed to the invisibility of women and their experiences in his project of liberation. This criticism seems to have had a powerful effect on Freire's later work, most of which was born out of contact with the North American educational milieu. Issues concerning race and gender, and social movements in general, began to feature prominently in this work. In published dialogues, co-authors like Donald P. Macedo often pushed him hard on such issues.

Writers like Kathleen Weiler sought to fuse his ideas with those representing different strands of feminism. One feminist writer who openly embraces his ideas, not allowing his earlier silence on race and gender to stand in the way, is bell hooks. She incorporates Freire's pedagogical ideas within the best critical traditions of Afro-American writing. With its emphasis on liberatory pedagogy, Freire's work also appealed to other Afro-American activists and intellectuals, including Cornel West, who hailed him "as the exemplary organic intellectual of our time".

From the mid-80s onwards, Freire co-authored books, including 'talking books' (dialogical books), with a number of writers and educators, including radical adult educator, Myles Horton (founder of the Highlander Folk High School, Tennessee), the Brazilian theologian Frei Betto and American critical pedagogue, Ira Shor.

Despite his large output as a writer in Spanish, Portuguese and English, Freire did not forsake direct political activity. When in exile in Geneva, working for the World Council of Churches, he worked with trade unionists and other social activists in Spain and Italy (see *Pedagogy of Hope*, 1994) and as a consultant to governments in such former Portuguese colonies in Africa as Guinea Bissau (see *Pedagogy in Process*, 1978), Cape Verde and Sao Tome & Principe. After 16 years in exile, he returned to Brazil and served as consultant for the Nicaraguan and Grenadian literacy campaigns.

His lifelong commitment to social justice culminated in his serving as Secretary of Education in the Municipal Government of Sao Paulo, on behalf of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party). There he worked to reform the public schools sector and also developed a strong adult education program (Mova Sao Paulo), involving, in both cases, mass organisations and other stakeholders in the educational enterprise (see *Pedagogy of the City*, 1993).

His writing continued unabated and it was the year before his death when he published a series of reflections on his youth, childhood, exile and contemporary debate, as letters to his niece (*Letters to Cristina*, 1996). More volumes were published this year while other writings and interviews will no doubt surface in published form. Some will include English versions of works published previously in Portuguese. And other writings and interviews will resurface in the various conferences, symposia and conference sessions celebrating his work.

Paulo Reglus Neves Freire had been looking forward to a trip to Cuba in May to collect an award from Castro. He breathed his last at 5:30 a.m. on Friday, May 2, 1997. The power of his remarkable spirit was recognized many years ago by none other than General Augusto Pinochet. On seizing power through the 1973 coup in Chile, Pinochet declared Freire a 'persona non grata', perhaps paying him the supreme compliment. Freire's great spirit continues.

This tribute was written for the International Journal of Lifelong Education and is reprinted here with the permission of the editors.

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