

OCCASIONAL THOUGHTS

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## Rethinking Education as the Practice of Freedom: Paulo Freire and the promise of critical pedagogy

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Paulo Freire is one of the most important critical educators of the twentieth century.[1] Not only is he considered one of the founders of critical pedagogy, but he also played a crucial role in developing a highly successful literacy campaign in Brazil before the onslaught of the junta in 1964. Once the military took over the government, Freire was imprisoned for a short time for his efforts. He eventually was released and went into exile, primarily in Chile and later in Geneva, Switzerland for a number of years. Once a semblance of democracy returned to Brazil, he went back to his country in 1980 and played a significant role in shaping its educational policies until his untimely death in 1997. His book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is considered one of the classic texts of critical pedagogy and has sold over a million copies, influencing generations of teachers and intellectuals both in the United States and abroad. Since the 1980s there has been no intellectual on the North American educational scene who has matched either his theoretical rigor or his moral courage. Most colleges are now dominated by conservative ideologies, hooked on methods, slavishly wedded to instrumentalized accountability measures, and run by administrators who lack either a broader vision or critical understanding of education as a force for strengthening the imagination and expanding democratic public life.

As the market-driven logic of neoliberal capitalism continues to devalue all aspects of the public interest, one consequence is that the educational concern with excellence has been removed from matters of equity while higher education, once conceptualized as a public good, has been reduced to a private good. Universities are now largely defined through the corporate demand that they provide the skills, knowledge, and credentials to build a workforce that will enable the United States to compete and maintain its role as the major global economic and military power. Consequently, there is little interest in understanding the pedagogical foundation of higher education as a deeply civic, political, and moral practice – that is, pedagogy as a practice for freedom. As schooling is increasingly subordinated to a corporate order, any vestige of critical education is replaced by training and the promise of economic security. Similarly, pedagogy is now subordinated to the narrow regime of teaching to the test coupled with an often harsh system of disciplinary control, both of which mutually reinforce each other. In addition, teachers are increasingly reduced to the status of technicians, removed from having any control over their classrooms or school governance structures. Teaching to the test and the corporatization of education become a way of ‘taming’ students and invoking modes of corporate governance in which public school teachers become deskilled and an increasing number of higher education faculty are reduced to part-time positions, constituting the new subaltern class of academic labor.

But there is more at stake here than a crisis of authority, the exploitation of faculty labor, and the repression of critical thought. Too many classrooms at all levels of schooling now resemble a ‘dead zone’ where any vestige of critical thinking, self-reflection, and imagination quickly migrates to sites outside of the school only to be mediated and corrupted by a corporate-driven media

culture. The major issue now driving public schooling is how to teach for the test while disciplining those students who because of their class and race undermine a school district's ranking in the ethically sterile and bloodless world of high-stakes testing and empirical score cards.[2] Higher education mimics this logic by reducing its public vision to the interests of capital and redefining itself largely as a credentializing factory for students and a Petri dish for downsizing academic labor. Under such circumstances rarely do educators ask questions about how schools can prepare students to be informed citizens, nurture a civic imagination, or teach them to be self-reflective about public issues and the world in which they live. As Stanley Aronowitz (2008) puts it,

Few of even the so-called educators ask the question: What matters beyond the reading, writing, and numeracy that are presumably taught in the elementary and secondary grades? The old question of what a kid needs to become an informed 'citizen' capable of participating in making the large and small public decisions that affect the larger world as well as everyday life receives honorable mention but not serious consideration. These unasked questions are symptoms of a new regime of educational expectations that privileges job readiness above any other educational values. (Aronowitz, 2008, p. xii)

Against this regime of 'scientific' idiocy and 'bare pedagogy' stripped of all critical elements of teaching and learning, Freire believed that all education in the broadest sense was part of a project of freedom, and eminently political because it offered students the conditions for self-reflection, a self-managed life, and particular notions of critical agency. As Aronowitz (2009) puts it in his analysis of Freire's work on literacy and critical pedagogy:

Thus, for Freire literacy was not a means to prepare students for the world of subordinated labor or 'careers', but a preparation for a self-managed life. And self-management could only occur when people have fulfilled three goals of education: self-reflection, that is, realizing the famous poetic phrase, 'know thyself', which is an understanding of the world in which they live, in its economic, political and, equally important, its psychological dimensions. Specifically 'critical' pedagogy helps the learner become aware of the forces that have hitherto ruled their lives and especially shaped their consciousness. The third goal is to help set the conditions for producing a new life, a new set of arrangements where power has been, at least in tendency, transferred to those who literally make the social world by transforming nature and themselves. (Aronowitz, 2009, p. ix)

What Paulo made clear in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, his most influential work, is that pedagogy at its best is about neither training, teaching methods, nor political indoctrination. For Freire, pedagogy is not a method or an *a priori* technique to be imposed on all students but a political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to explore the possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of a substantive democracy. Critical thinking for Freire was not an object lesson in test-taking, but a tool for self-determination and civic engagement. According to Freire, critical thinking was not about the task of simply reproducing the past and understanding the present. To the contrary, it was about offering a way of thinking beyond the present, soaring beyond the immediate confines of one's experiences, entering into a critical dialogue with history, and imagining a future that would not merely reproduce the present. Theodor Adorno (1998) captures the spirit of Freire's notion of critical thinking by insisting that

Thinking is not the intellectual reproduction of what already exists anyway. As long as it doesn't break off, thinking has a secure hold on possibility. Its insatiable aspect, its aversion to being quickly and easily satisfied, refuses the foolish wisdom of resignation. ... Open thinking points beyond itself. (Adorno, 1998, pp. 291-292)

Freire rejected those regimes of educational degradation organized around the demands of the market, instrumentalized knowledge, and the priority of training over the pursuit of the imagination, critical thinking, and the teaching of freedom and social responsibility. Rather than assume the mantle of a false impartiality, Freire believed that critical pedagogy involves both the recognition that human life is conditioned, not determined, and the crucial necessity of not only reading the world critically but also intervening in the larger social order as part of the responsibility of an informed citizenry. According to Freire, the political and moral demands of

pedagogy amount to more than the school and classroom being merely the instrument of official power or assuming the role of an apologist for the existing order, as the Obama administration seems to believe – given its willingness to give Bush’s reactionary educational policies a new name and a new lease on life. Freire rejected those modes of pedagogy that supported economic models and modes of agency in which freedom is reduced to consumerism and economic activity is freed from any criterion except profitability and the reproduction of a rapidly expanding mass of wasted humans. Critical pedagogy attempts to understand how power works through the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge within particular institutional contexts and seeks to constitute students as informed subjects and social agents. In this instance, the issues of how identities, values, and desires are shaped in the classroom are the grounds of politics. Critical pedagogy is thus invested in both the practice of self-criticism about the values that inform teaching and a critical self-consciousness regarding what it means to equip students with analytical skills to be self-reflective about the knowledge and values they confront in classrooms. Moreover, such a pedagogy attempts not only to provide the conditions for students to understand texts and different modes of intelligibility, but also opens up new avenues for them to make better moral judgments that will enable them to assume some sense of responsibility to the other in light of those judgments.

Freire was acutely aware that what makes critical pedagogy so dangerous to ideological fundamentalists, the ruling elites, religious extremists, and right-wing nationalists all over the world is that central to its very definition is the task of educating students to become critical agents who actively question and negotiate the relationships between theory and practice, critical analysis and common sense, and learning and social change. Critical pedagogy opens up a space where students should be able to come to terms with their own power as critically engaged citizens; it provides a sphere where the unconditional freedom to question and assert is central to the purpose of public schooling and higher education, if not democracy itself. And as a political and moral practice, way of knowing, and literate engagement, pedagogy attempts to ‘make evident the multiplicity and complexity of history’ (Said, 2001, p. 141). History in this sense is engaged as a narrative open to critical dialogue rather than predefined text to be memorized and accepted unquestioningly. Pedagogy in this instance provides the conditions to cultivate in students a healthy skepticism about power, a ‘willingness to temper any reverence for authority with a sense of critical awareness’ (Said, 2001, p. 501). As a performative practice, pedagogy takes as one of its goals the opportunity for students to be able to reflectively frame their own relationship to the ongoing project of an unfinished democracy. It is precisely this relationship between democracy and pedagogy that is so threatening to so many of our educational leaders and spokespersons today and it is also the reason why Freire’s work on critical pedagogy and literacy are more relevant today than when they were first published.

According to Freire, all forms of pedagogy represent a particular way of understanding society and a specific commitment to the future. Critical pedagogy, unlike dominant modes of teaching, insists that one of the fundamental tasks of educators is to make sure that the future points the way to a more socially just world, a world in which the discourses of critique and possibility in conjunction with the values of reason, freedom, and equality function to alter, as part of a broader democratic project, the grounds upon which life is lived. This is hardly a prescription for political indoctrination, but it is a project that gives critical education its most valued purpose and meaning, which in part is ‘to encourage human agency, not mould it in the manner of Pygmalion’ (Aronowitz, 1998, pp. 10-11). It is also a position that threatens right-wing private advocacy groups, neoconservative politicians, and conservative extremists. Such individuals and groups are keenly aware that critical pedagogy with its emphasis on the hard work of critical analysis, moral judgments, and social responsibility goes to the very heart of what it means to address real inequalities of power at the social level and to conceive of education as a project for freedom while at the same time foregrounding a series of important and often ignored questions such as: What is the role of teachers and academics as public intellectuals? Whose interests does public and higher education serve? How might it be possible to understand and engage the diverse contexts in which education takes place? What is the role of education as a public good? How do we make knowledge meaningful in order to make it critical and transformative? How do we democratize governance? Against the right-wing view that equates any suggestion of politics with indoctrination, critical

pedagogy is concerned with offering students new ways to think critically and act with authority as independent political agents in the classroom and in larger society; in other words, it is concerned with providing students with the skills and knowledge necessary for them to expand their capacities first to question the deep-seated assumptions and myths that legitimate the archaic and disempowering social practices structuring every aspect of society and then to take responsibility for intervening in the world they inhabit.

Education cannot be neutral. It is always directive in its attempt to teach students to inhabit a particular mode of agency, enable them to understand the larger world and one's role in it in a specific way, define their relationship, if not responsibility, to diverse others, and experience in the classroom some sort of understanding of a more just, imaginative, and democratic life. Pedagogy is by definition directive, but that does not mean it is merely a form of indoctrination. On the contrary, as Freire argued, education as a practice for freedom must expand the capacities necessary for human agency, and hence the possibilities for how academic labor should be configured to ensure such a project that is integral to democracy itself. Surely, this suggests that even within the privileged precincts of higher education, educators should nourish those pedagogical practices that promote

a concern with keeping the forever unexhausted and unfulfilled human potential open, fighting back all attempts to foreclose and pre-empt the further unravelling of human possibilities, prodding human society to go on questioning itself and preventing that questioning from ever stalling or being declared finished. (Bauman & Tester, 2001, p. 4)

In other words, critical pedagogy forges an expanded notion of politics and agency through a language of skepticism and possibility, and a culture of openness, debate, and engagement – all those elements now at risk because of the current and most dangerous attacks on higher education. This was Paulo's legacy, one that invokes dangerous memories and is increasingly absent from any conservative discourse about current educational problems. Unfortunately, it is also absent from much of the discussion on the current status of academic labor.

I first met Paulo in the early 1980s, just after I had been denied tenure by John Silber, then the notorious right-wing President of Boston University. Paulo was giving a talk at the University of Massachusetts and he came to my house in Boston for dinner. His humility was completely at odds with his reputation and I remember being greeted with such warmth and sincerity that I felt completely at ease with him. We talked for a long time that night about his exile, my firing, what it meant to be a working-class intellectual, the risk one had to take to make a difference, and when the night was over a friendship was forged that lasted until his death 15 years later. I was in a very bad place after being denied tenure and had no idea what my future would hold for me. I am convinced that if it had not been for Freire and Donalddo Macedo, also a friend and co-author with Paulo (see Freire & Macedo, 1987), I am not sure I would have stayed in the field of education. But Freire's passion for education and Macedo's friendship convinced me that education was not merely important but a crucial site of struggle.

Unlike so many intellectuals I have met in academia, Paulo was always so generous, eager to publish the work of younger intellectuals, write letters of support, and give as much as possible of himself in the service of others. The early Eighties were exciting years in education in the USA and Paulo was at the center of it. Together we started a critical education and culture series at Bergin and Garvey and published over a hundred young authors, many of whom went on to have a significant influence in the university. Jim Bergin became Paulo's patron as his American publisher, Donalddo became his translator and a co-author, and we all took our best shots in translating, publishing, and distributing Paulo's work, always with the hope of inviting him back to the USA so we could meet, talk, drink good wine, and recharge the struggles that all marked us in different ways. Of course, it is difficult to write simply about Paulo as a person because who he was and how he entered one's space and the world could never be separated from his politics. Hence, I want to try to provide a broader context for my own understanding of him as well as those ideas that consistently shaped our relationship and his relationship with others.

Occupying the often difficult space between existing politics and the as-yet-possible, Paulo Freire spent most of his life working in the belief that the radical elements of democracy are worth struggling for, that critical education is a basic element of social change, and that how we think about politics is inseparable from how we come to understand the world, power, and the moral life

we aspire to lead. In many ways, Paulo embodied the important but often problematic relationship between the personal and the political. His own life was a testimonial not only to his belief in democracy, but also to the notion that one's life had to come as close as possible to modeling the social relations and experiences that spoke to a more humane and democratic future. At the same time, Paulo never moralized about politics, never employed the discourse of shame, or collapsed the political into the personal when talking about social issues. For him, private problems had to be understood in relation to larger public issues. Everything about him suggested that the first order of politics was humility, compassion, and a willingness to fight against human injustices.

Freire's belief in democracy as well as his deep and abiding faith in the ability of people to resist the weight of oppressive institutions and ideologies was forged in a spirit of struggle tempered by the grim realities of both his own imprisonment and exile, mediated by both a fierce sense of outrage and the belief that education and hope are the conditions of both agency and politics. Acutely aware that many contemporary versions of hope occupied their own corner in Disneyland, Freire fought against such appropriations and was passionate about recovering and rearticulating hope through, in his words, an 'understanding of history as opportunity and not determinism' (Freire, 1994, p. 91). Hope for Freire was a practice of witnessing, an act of moral imagination that enabled progressive educators and others to think otherwise in order to act otherwise. Hope demanded an anchoring in transformative practices, and one of the tasks of the progressive educator was to 'unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be' (Freire, 1994, p. 9). Underlying Freire's politics of hope was a view of radical pedagogy that located itself on the dividing lines where the relations between domination and oppression, power and powerlessness continued to be produced and reproduced. For Freire, hope as a defining element of politics and pedagogy always meant listening to and working with the poor and other subordinate groups so that they might speak and act in order to alter dominant relations of power. Whenever we talked, he never allowed himself to become cynical. He was always full of life, taking great delight in eating a good meal, listening to music, opening himself up to new experiences, and engaging in dialogue with a passion that both embodied his own politics and confirmed the lived presence of others.

Committed to the specific, the play of context, and the possibility inherent in what he called the unfinished nature of human beings, Freire offered no recipes for those in need of instant theoretical and political fixes. For him, pedagogy was strategic and performative: considered as part of a broader political practice for democratic change, critical pedagogy was never viewed as an *a priori* discourse to be reasserted or a methodology to be implemented, or for that matter a slavish attachment to knowledge that can only be quantified. On the contrary, for Freire pedagogy was a political and performative act organized around the 'instructive ambivalence of disrupted borders' (cited in Bhabha, 1994, p. 28), a practice of bafflement, interruption, understanding, and intervention that is the result of ongoing historical, social, and economic struggles. I was often amazed at how patient he always was in dealing with people who wanted him to provide menu-like answers to the problems they raised about education, not realizing that they were undermining his own insistence that pedagogy could never be reduced to a method. His patience was always instructive for me and I am convinced that it was only later in my life that I was able to begin to emulate it in my own interactions with audiences.

Paulo was a cosmopolitan intellectual who never overlooked the details in everyday life and the connections the latter had to a much broader, global world. He consistently reminded us that political struggles are won and lost in those specific yet hybridized spaces that linked narratives of everyday experience with the social gravity and material force of institutional power. Any pedagogy that called itself Freirean had to acknowledge the centrality of the particular and contingent in shaping historical contexts and political projects. Although Freire was a theoretician of radical contextualism, he also acknowledged the importance of understanding the particular and the local in relation to larger, global and cross-national forces. For Freire, literacy as a way of reading and changing the world had to be reconceived within a broader understanding of citizenship, democracy, and justice that was global and transnational. Making the pedagogical more political in this case meant moving beyond the celebration of tribal mentalities and developing a praxis that foregrounded 'power, history, memory, relational analysis, justice (not just

representation), and ethics as the issues central to transnational democratic struggles' (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997, p. xix).

But Freire's insistence that education was about the making and changing of contexts did more than seize upon the political and pedagogic potentialities to be found across a spectrum of social sites and practices in society, which, of course, included but were not limited to the school. He also challenged the separation of culture from politics by calling attention to how diverse technologies of power work pedagogically within institutions to produce, regulate, and legitimate particular forms of knowing, belonging, feeling, and desiring. But Freire did not make the mistake of many of his contemporaries by conflating culture with the politics of recognition. Politics was more than a gesture of translation, representation, and dialogue, it was also about creating the conditions for people to govern rather than be merely governed, capable of mobilizing social movements against the oppressive economic, racial, and sexist practices put into place by colonization, global capitalism, and other oppressive structures of power.

Paulo Freire left behind a corpus of work that emerged out of a lifetime of struggle and commitment. Refusing the comfort of master narratives, Freire's work was always unsettled and unsettling, restless yet engaging. Unlike so much of the politically arid and morally vacuous academic and public prose that characterizes contemporary intellectual discourse, Freire's work was consistently fuelled by a healthy moral rage over the needless oppression and suffering he witnessed throughout his life as he travelled all over the globe. Similarly, his work exhibited a vibrant and dynamic quality that allowed it to grow, refuse easy formulas, and open itself to new political realities and projects. Freire's genius was to elaborate a theory of social change and engagement that was neither vanguardist nor populist. While he had a profound faith in the ability of ordinary people to shape history and to become critical agents in shaping their own destinies, he refused to romanticize the culture and experiences that produced oppressive social conditions. Combining theoretical rigor, social relevance, and moral compassion, Freire gave new meaning to the politics of daily life while affirming the importance of theory in opening up the space of critique, possibility, politics, and practice. Theory and language were a site of struggle and possibility that gave experience meaning and action a political direction, and any attempt to reproduce the binarism of theory vs. politics was repeatedly condemned by Freire.[3] Freire loved theory but he never reified it. When he talked about Freud, Marx, or Erich Fromm one could feel his intense passion for ideas. And yet he never treated theory as an end in itself; it was always a resource whose value lay in understanding, critically engaging, and transforming the world as part of a larger project of freedom and justice. To say that his joy around such matters was infectious is to understate his own presence and impact on so many people that he met in his life.

I had a close personal relationship with Paulo for over 15 years, and I was always moved by the way in which his political courage and intellectual reach were matched by a love of life and generosity of spirit. The political and the personal mutually informed Freire's life and work. He was always the curious student even as he assumed the role of a critical teacher. As he moved between the private and the public, he revealed an astonishing gift for making everyone he met feel valued. His very presence embodied what it meant to combine political struggle and moral courage, to make hope meaningful and despair unpersuasive. Paulo was vigilant in bearing witness to the individual and collective suffering of others, but shunned the role of the isolated intellectual as an existential hero who struggles alone. For Freire, intellectuals must match their call for making the pedagogical more political with an ongoing effort to build those coalitions, affiliations, and social movements capable of mobilizing real power and promoting substantive social change. Freire understood quite keenly that democracy was threatened by a powerful military-industrial complex and the increased power of the warfare state, but he also recognized the pedagogical force of a corporate and militarized culture that eroded the moral and civic capacities of citizens to think beyond the common sense of official power and its legitimating ideologies. Freire never lost sight of Robert Hass's claim that the job of education, its political job 'is to refresh the idea of justice going dead in us all the time' (Hass, cited in Pollock, 1992, p. 22). At a time when education has become one of the official sites of conformity, disempowerment, and uncompromising modes of punishment, the legacy of Paulo Freire's work is more important than ever before.

## Notes

- [1] One of the best sources on the life and work of Paulo Freire is Peter Mayo's (2004) *Liberating Praxis: Freire's legacy for radical education and politics*. Two of the best translators of Freire's work to the American context are *Literacies of Power* (Macedo, 1994) and *Freire for the Classroom* (Shor, 1987).
- [2] On the issue of containment and the pedagogy of punishment, see Jenny Fisher (in press) "'The Walking Wounded': the crisis of youth, school violence, and precarious pedagogy'.
- [3] Surely, Freire would have agreed wholeheartedly with Stuart Hall's insight that: 'It is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are. There is no escape from the politics of representation' (Hall, 1992, p. 30).

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