

PAULO FREIRE AND THE POLITICS OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: A LEGACY FOR STRUGGLE

PAULO FREIRE Y LAS POLÍTICAS DE LA PEDAGOGÍA CRÍTICA: UN LEGADO DE LUCHA

Henry A. Giroux¹
McMaster University Professor
McMaster University
girouxh@mcmaster.ca

80

Abstract: Freire is one of the few writers whose body of work transcends the historical moment in which his contributions first appeared. His work reaches beyond its time and translates with even more power and relevance for addressing the future. His legacy at the present moment is prophetic and invaluable for navigating a dark time in history, a time that points to a mix of hope and despair. The intersecting crises of economics, health, climate change, politics, racism, and democracy appear apocalyptic, especially with the rise of far-right and updated versions of fascist politics emerging across the globe. What role might Paulo Freire's pedagogy and politics of hope have at a time when in the midst of a global pandemic it has become increasingly difficult "not to feel that something—perhaps the world—is ending, as we struggle to comprehend unprecedented disruptions to our social orders and personal lives?"

Key words: Critical pedagogy; Politics of hope; Crisis.

Resumen: Freire es uno de los pocos escritores cuya obra trasciende el momento histórico en el que aparecieron sus aportes. Su obra va más allá de su tiempo y se traduce con más fuerza y relevancia para abordar el futuro. Su legado en el momento actual es profético e inestimable para navegar en un momento oscuro de la historia, un momento que apunta a una mezcla de esperanza y desesperación. Las crisis entrecruzadas de la economía, la salud, el cambio climático, la política, el racismo y la democracia parecen apocalípticas, especialmente con el ascenso de la extrema derecha y las versiones actualizadas de políticas fascistas que emergen en todo el mundo. ¿Qué papel podrían tener la pedagogía y la política de la esperanza de Paulo Freire en un momento en que en medio de una pandemia mundial se ha vuelto cada vez más difícil "no sentir que algo -quizás el mundo- se está acabando, mientras luchamos por comprender las interrupciones sin precedentes de nuestros ordenamientos sociales y nuestras vidas personales"?

Palabras clave: Pedagogía crítica; Política de la esperanza; Crisis.

¹ McMaster University Professor for Scholarship in the Public Interest. The Paulo Freire Distinguished Scholar in Critical Pedagogy. Dept. of English and Cultural Studies.

Resumo: Freire é um dos poucos escritores cuja obra transcende o momento histórico em que surgiram suas contribuições. Sua obra vai além do seu tempo e se traduz com mais força e relevância para enfrentar o futuro. Seu legado no momento presente é profético e inestimável para navegar em um momento sombrio da história, um momento que aponta para um misto de esperança e desespero. As crises cruzadas da economia, saúde, mudança climática, política, racismo e democracia parecem apocalípticas, especialmente com a ascensão da extrema direita e versões atualizadas das políticas fascistas emergindo ao redor do mundo. Que papel poderiam ter a pedagogia e a política da esperança de Paulo Freire num momento em que em meio a uma pandemia global se torna cada vez mais difícil "não sentir que algo - talvez o mundo - está acabando, enquanto lutamos pela compreensão do inédito perturbações de nossos arranjos sociais e nossas vidas pessoais"?

Palavras-chave: Pedagogia crítica; Política de esperança; Crise.

Paulo Freire was a scholar and public intellectual who built upon his previous work while opening new doors of inquiry. He was an engaged and transformative educator who addressed issues far beyond the confines of academia and he did so by speaking with courage and conviction to broad audiences. For Paulo, education was the foundation of politics and critical literacy was the emancipatory tool to unlock what it meant to make pedagogy meaningful in order to make it critical and empowering. The echoes of suffering and the need to struggle to eliminate such hardships, particularly among the oppressed never left his work or heart. His interventions were political engagements that crossed boundaries far removed from the academy and its often-sheltered fields of study. He took stances, intervened in issues, and engaged with broader issues of societal significance well beyond the realms of specialized expertise. Freire was a border crosser, a man of courage, commitment, and hope.

Freire is one of the few writers whose body of work transcends the historical moment in which his contributions first appeared. His work reaches beyond its time and translates with even more power and relevance for addressing the future. His legacy at the present moment is prophetic and invaluable for navigating a dark time in history, a time that points to a mix of hope and despair. The intersecting crises of economics, health, climate change, politics, racism, and democracy appear apocalyptic, especially with the rise of far-right and updated versions of fascist politics emerging across the globe.

What role might Paulo Freire's pedagogy and politics of hope have at a time when in the midst of a global pandemic it has become increasingly difficult "not to feel that something—perhaps the world—is ending, as we struggle to comprehend unprecedented disruptions to our social orders and personal lives" (Merrick, 2020). Hope for Freire is not an antidote to what may be called the new age of pandemic times, it is a warning and call to arms to understand and mobilize the resources of the imagination and the tools of critical analysis to address how the crises we face then and today are the result of political, economic, and pedagogical forces that are tied to the mechanisms of a predatory global capitalism. These crises are not strictly the product of the forces of nature, but the outcome of destructive ideologies, institutions, and

relations of power produced by human beings, forces that can be both challenged and overcome.

For Freire, pessimism is the underside of apocalyptic thinking and functions largely to depoliticize people. Freire's politics and work encourage us not to look away in the face of such crisis or to surrender to such events as inescapable acts of fate, but to seize upon them as offering up new challenges and opportunities to make politics, hope, and education central to the challenge of rethinking politics and the possibilities of collective agency and resistance. Freire is not trying to locate redemption in the ruins that plague humankind as much as he believes that the impulses of hope can prevent us from becoming accomplices to the terror imposed by the pandemic and its mounting catastrophes. In the manner of Walter Benjamin, Freire wants to brush history against the grain, while affirming his own allegiance to the oppressed. In doing so, he reiterates Benjamin's notion that "Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope" (Bullock & Jennings, 1996, p. 356).

82

In the aftermath, of George Floyd's murder critical ideas once again have power as millions fill the streets demonstrating against police brutality and institutional racism. Young people across the globe are inserting themselves into the script of democracy, fighting for their place in shaping both the present and future through the registers of social, racial, and economic justice. Radical change once more seems possible as there is talk of embracing collective struggles and exercising power in order to build the institutions, networks, sites, and pedagogical spaces necessary to challenge neoliberal globalization, fascist politics, and its exploitative and racist policies. The mix of despair and hope speaks to a transitional moment in history, one ripe with both the promise of a radical democracy and the emergence of the dark abyss of authoritarianism. It is precisely at this historical interregnum that Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of Hope* can be read as an invaluable resource both to understand and critically engage the present moment.

Freire has a lot to teach the current generation fighting to insert themselves into the script of democracy. He regarded capitalism as an evil and repeatedly exposed it as a system of domination that engaged in psychological oppression while ruthlessly exploiting the labor of those considered disposable. He considered capitalism as not only an economic system but also as a cultural and pedagogical system that stripped people of their agency, condemning them to an ideology in which they internalized their own oppression. His work, over a lifetime reaffirms his emphasis on a critical pedagogy that promotes critical dialogue among teachers and students so that both can come to understand how the power of the oppressor is internalized and what it means to self-reflectively overcome what Erich Fromm once called the fear of freedom.

Moreover, rejecting a class-only understanding of domination, Freire understood the oppressed to include a wide variety of groups extending from the homeless, Black people, and poor people to undocumented immigrants, refugees, and indigenous groups. For Freire, inequalities and inequities had to be grasped as part of a series of intersections that made up the totality of the society. Critical pedagogy for Freire was also an intersectional pedagogy. He believed that popular sovereignty, social justice and equality were central elements of the society

he worked to bring about. Like the great sociologists, C. Wright Mills he insisted that education for critical consciousness was a foundational element of empowerment rooted in the intersection of the everyday lives of individuals, their histories and existing social structures.

His work was passionate, self-reflective, and global in its analysis of the relationship between education and politics. Not only did he view education as central to politics, but he also viewed systems of oppression as deeply pedagogical endeavors—hegemonic formations rooted in reactionary commonsense assumptions and a regressive notion of education—a theme vital to his classic book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In opposition to pedagogies of repression, Freire articulated a critical vision of education as an ongoing process of empowerment whose objective was the creation of critical agents. Pivotal to this project was his concern with understanding how matters of identification, desire, values, and agency provided the basis for both a critical consciousness and a deep sense of individual and social responsibility. Central to Freire's project was a view of civic literacy that rejected the notion that expanding one's knowledge, skills, and understanding of the world could be separated from the task of changing it. Pedagogy for him was contextual and personal in that he believed that one entered into knowledge through an understanding of the experiences that individuals brought to the learning process. Yet, he never abstracted the close-up individual engagements and experiences he encountered with students from larger economic, political, social, and ethical considerations.

Freire work is especially relevant to Brazil today given the repressive rule of Bolsonaro and his criminogenic bungling of the COVID-19 crisis that has resulted in the deaths of over 3000 children and over 500, 000 adults (Oliveira, 2021). This almost unimaginable degree of massive suffering and hardship is in part because of the failure of Bolsonaro's authoritarian neoliberal policies. Freire is a threat to Bolsonaro's authoritarian rule because Freire linked the politics of disposability to gangster capitalism being reproduced in the authoritarian regimes across the globe, particularly through its attacks on public and higher education.

Freire rightly recognized that under the reign of neoliberalism and authoritarian politics, education becomes an object of oppression, and a way of deskilling teachers who address matters of racial inequality and injustice. Right-wing authoritarians now use education to discredit any critical pedagogical approach that enables students to realize themselves as critical citizens. In doing so, they undermine and discredit the critical faculties students and others need to investigate “the core conflict between a nation founded on radical notions of liberty, freedom, and equality, and a nation built on slavery, exploitation, and exclusion” (Sanchez & English, 2020).

For Freire, pedagogy is always political because it is connected to the acquisition of agency and illuminates how knowledge, identities, and authority are constructed within particular relations of power. Moreover, he viewed pedagogy as a deliberative intervention into how knowledge is selected, shaped, and interpreted as part of a broader ethos in search of political, social and economic justice. For Freire, teaching and learning **had** to be connected to developing the critical capacities for informed modes of individual and social agency. Critical thinking was not enough. Freire wanted to educate students to be critical and knowledgeable actors capable of intervening in the world. This meant educating students to both master and use their critical

capacities as individual and social agents. At the same time, Freire urged educators to provide the conditions to teach students to learn how to govern rather than to be governed. He wanted them to master the knowledge and skills that would enable them to intervene in the spaces where social identities are shaped, values are distributed, and peoples' lives are shaped by power. Such interventions had to take place not only in the schools but also through a range of institutional sites marked by diverse material practices.

In spite of what some readers of Freire's work claim, his approach to critical pedagogy does not reduce educational practice to the mastery of methodologies. Freire stresses, instead, the importance of understanding what actually happens in classrooms and other educational settings by raising questions regarding the following: What is the relationship between learning and social change? What knowledge is of most worth? What does it mean to know something? And in what direction should one desire? Of course, for Freire, the language of critical pedagogy does something more. Pedagogy is simultaneously about the knowledge and practices teachers and students might engage in together and the values, social relations, and visions such practices legitimate.

Freire embraced the quest for a sufficient theory of subjectivity and took up the pedagogical task of addressing the conditions that enable people to think critically, make knowledge meaningful, articulate democratic values, and create pedagogical practices that contribute to producing critical agents, all of these concerns were crucial to his notion of a pedagogy of hope. Freire's pedagogy of hope was dialectical in that it critiqued those modes of pedagogy that uphold relations of subordination and oppression while enabling pedagogical practices that teach people to think critically, engage in problem solving, connect seemingly disparate events, learn how to hold power accountable, and take risks in doing so. Freire was insistent that educators had to expose themselves to the language, histories, and public cultures of those marginalized groups who inhabited the spaces of a "bare pedagogy," particularly those who operated in a high threshold of disappearance and were often relegated to zones of social abandonment.

Pedagogy has turned deadening in its denial of civic literacy and Freire efforts and pedagogy to link education to the creation of critically and actively informed individual. Under such circumstances rarely do educators ask questions asked 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 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 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).

85

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.

For 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 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 former Trump administration seemed to believe—given its willingness to denounce any teaching about racism in public and higher education and its call for “patriotic education.” Freire’s work rejects those modes of pedagogy that erased historical memory, 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 issue 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 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 scepticism 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 politicians, white supremacists, neoliberals, and a growing number of fascist groups.

Freire believed that pedagogy was more than a theoretical project, it was part of an emancipatory politics that acknowledged that democracy could not exist without the formative cultures that made it possible. In this instance, pedagogy embraced the experiences of the marginalized, establishing the conditions that enabled them to narrate themselves while subjecting such experiences and voices to the rigor of critical and theoretical analysis. Central to such a task was Freire’s notion of civic literacy whose aim was to enable students and others to understand how every day troubles connected to wider systemic considerations. Freire’s notion of pedagogy connected ideas to power and knowledge to informed notions of agency, and in doing so offered students the conditions for self-reflection and the possibilities for critically examining the forces that shaped their lives. Crucial here was a pedagogical practice in which individuals could identify with a pedagogical practice in which they could recognize themselves, provide a moment of recognition in which they can identify with the conditions that have relevance for their lives. Without that moment of identification and recognition, pedagogy became an empty abstraction, removed from the daily experiences that shape peoples lives. At the same time, Freire insisted that critical consciousness was not enough and must lead to critical interventions in the world. Pedagogy and education itself was a moral and political project.

It is worth repeating that Freire is insistent that making the pedagogical more political was not an activity that only took place in the classroom; on the contrary, it was also inscribed and fundamental to the workings of a variety of sites that extended from the school to cultural apparatuses as diverse as the media and religious institutions. In this sense, Freire expanded the sites of education, the scope of pedagogical practice, and the spaces of struggle and collective resistance. Freire viewed education in the broadest sense as the practice of empowerment, and praxis as a central outcome of critical consciousness--none of which were free from struggle or reduced exclusively to the neoliberal forces of consumption, instrumental rationality, privatization, and oppression.

In an age when solidarity is vanishing and social atomization becomes normalized, Freire rejected the false neoliberal narratives that defined responsibility solely as an individual undertaking. As part of his discourse of critique and hope, denunciation and annunciation, he fiercely criticized the notion that one is only responsible to oneself, and all problems should be reduced to the logic of self-responsibility. He was a fierce critic of how the neoliberal emphasis on privatization and competitive individualism eroded communal life making fragile those public spheres that embraced the social contract, welfare state, the common good and democratic

forms of social solidarities. Freire was insistent that the ideology of individual interest, unbridled personal responsibility, and the collapse of the public into the private erased broader systemic forces at work in the mechanisms of oppression. He also insisted that the narcissistic, consumerist, and privatizing logic of neoliberalism served mostly to depoliticize people and displace the idea of the public good and the governing principles of economic equality and social justice.

This neoliberal pedagogy of atomizing individualism distorted peoples' vision of themselves suggesting they were alone, and that personal responsibility was the only category for addressing every social problem they faced. All failures were now translated into individual failings. Pedagogy in this instance, collapses the public into the private, individualizes all social problems, and makes it difficult for students to connect private issues to broader public concerns. This is a pedagogy that kills the spirit, promotes conformity, and is more suited to an authoritarian society than a democracy. In opposition to the individualizing of all social problems, Freire embraced the radical nature of how human beings are connected historically, constituted relationally, intertwined and capable of translating private issues into larger social considerations.

Freire believed that politics without hope was a recipe for cynicism or worse. According to Freire, hope was central to the struggle for human rights, dignity, and those memories and histories that provided a legacy of struggle and resistance. Hope was not some idealistic wish for a better life, it was the material of transformation in that it offered alternative visions and possibilities for contesting the normalization of an oppressive order that insisted there were no other alternatives, and that the future was defined by the present. For Freire, the language of critique is inseparable from the discourse of hope and makes visible the power of the possible in forms of self-reflection, self-examination, and a historical rendering of the world. Hope was an educational concept in which ideas are married to power, and courage comes from being willing to refuse to give up the dream of a just and equitable society, one in which matters of literacy, education and pedagogy informed each other in the fight for justice, economic equality and democracy itself.

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" (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.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Adorno, T. (1998). *Education after Auschwitz. Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Aronowitz, S. (1998). Introducción. En P. Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*. Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Aronowitz, S. (2008). *Against Schooling: For an Education That Matters*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Aronowitz, S. (2009). Forward. En S. Macrine, *Critical Pedagogy in Uncertain Times: Hope and Possibilities*. N.Y.: New York, Palgrave MacMillan.
- Bullock, M., & Jennings, M. (1996). *Walter Benjamin's Selected Writings, volume 1: 1913-1926*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.
- Merrick, J. (4 de Septiembre de 2020). *The Angel of History*. Obtenido de Boston Review: <https://bostonreview.net/philosophy-religion/john-merrick-angel-history>
- Oliveira, N. (30 de June de 2021). *Brazil likely undercounting COVID deaths among kids: study*. Obtenido de New York Daily News: <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/ny-brazil-likely-undercounting-covid-deaths-among-kids-20210630-3sxt3th43fbx7ji5ozdmp2bywu-story.html>
- Pollock, S. (March/April de 1992). Robert Hass. *Mother Jones*, 18-21. Obtenido de Mother Jones.
- Said, E. (2001). *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Sanchez, G., & English, B. (September de 2020). *OAH Statement on White House Conference on American History*. Obtenido de Organization of American History: <https://www.oah.org/insights/posts/2020/september/oah-statement-on-white-house-conference-on-american-history/#:~:text=History%20is%20not%20and%20cannot%20be%20simply%20celebratory.&text=The%20history%20we%20teach%20must,slavery%2C%20exploitation%2C%20and>