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Essay Review

Paulo Freire, or Pedagogy as the Space and Time of Possibility

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When I think about history I think about possibility—that history is the time and space of possibility. . . . In making history we choose and realize possibilities. And in making history we begin to be made by history. (PAULO FREIRE)¹

We live, in the world today, in contradictory and paradoxical times. On the one hand, the nefarious consequences of the neoliberal politics consecrated in the Washington consensus are accentuated on all planes of human activity. On the other hand, in Brazil, one of the largest democracies in the world, we witness the election of a working-class, trade-union president who carries with him an immense amount of hope for the possible construction of a more just and cohesive society.

In the present world context, the election of President Ignácio “Lula” da Silva and the affirmation of the Worker’s Party (PT) as the largest and most representative political power in Brazil has an unequivocal symbolic significance. First, it calls attention to the importance of the resistance of the common people in affirming a counterhegemonic way of thinking. Second, in a period marked by the flux and disorientation of the world Left, it represents the

This review essay has been translated from the Portuguese by Peter Lownds.

¹ See the preface, “Making History: Education for the Future,” in Antonia Darder, *Reinventing Paulo Freire*, p. x. This preface is a transcription of the speech given by Paulo Freire at Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, Calif., on May 12, 1989.

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possible construction of new social alliances, from the (semi)periphery of the system, not only in Brazil but in also in Latin America and the rest of the world. Paulo Freire was a well-known militant in the Worker's Party, who accepted a position of political responsibility in the São Paulo municipality when that great metropolis was under the administration of the party founded by Lula da Silva.² He also represents today the principal reference in the field of education for the new president and the new majority, as neither tires of stressing in programmed texts and in all the public addresses given thus far.

The words offered by Freire in 1989 about history as the time and space of possibility, which Antonia Darder publishes as the preface of her book *Reinventing Paulo Freire* (pp. ix–xii), could not be more up-to-date. They are about the possibility of constructing a utopistic project, in the sense that Immanuel Wallerstein attributes to it: “Utopistics is the serious assessment of historical alternatives, the exercise of our judgment as to the substantive rationality of alternative possible historical systems. It is the sober, rational, and realistic evaluation of human social systems, the constraints on what they can be, and the zones open to human creativity. Not the face of the perfect (and inevitable) future, but the face of an alternative, credibly better, and historically possible (but far from certain) future. It is thus an exercise simultaneously in science, in politics, and in morality.”³

Brazil is more than a country. It is an immense region marked by profound asymmetries and economic, social, regional, and ethnic inequalities, with considerable and historic backwardness in the construction of schools for all. With a very young population and a notable increase in school attendance at all levels of instruction during the past decade, education looms as one of the greatest challenges to the new political power. Multiple mandates will certainly coexist in a country located on the semiperiphery of the world system, whether through the natural manifestation of interest on the part of social groups or the enormous permeability of hegemonic educational agendas throughout the world.

Michael Apple has shown, in a rigorous and analytic way, how the Right was able, in the last two decades, to create a hegemonic social block capable of producing an official knowledge and a new common sense, which has slightly influenced world educational public policy. It is, in Apple's words, “an odd combination of an emphasis on markets and ‘choice’ [weak state] on the one hand and an increasingly interventionist regulatory framework

² See Maria Pilar O'Cadiz, Pia Lindquist Wong, and Carlos Alberto Torres, *Education and Democracy: Paulo Freire, Social Movements, and Educational Reform in São Paulo* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1998).

³ Immanuel Wallerstein, *Utopistics, or Historical Choices of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: New Press, 1998), pp. 1–2. Notice the similarity of this concept with what Paulo Freire called “untested feasibility.”

[strong state] that focuses on national curricula, national standards, and national testing on the other.”⁴

Without questioning the objective and powerful circumstances that permitted the construction of this hegemony in the field of public policy and dominant social mandates, we share Apple’s opinion that the Left’s negative criticism facilitated its creation since, too many times, “it did not give people a sense of possibility.”⁵ This will be, perhaps, the greatest challenge for all those who find themselves in the camp of the Left, particularly Brazilian educators and intellectuals who have developed a strong critique of public policy in recent years. If they want to contribute to the construction of a utopistic political agenda capable of creating credible alternatives that will turn schools into democratic public spaces where a multicultural citizenship can gain consciousness and participate, they must make schools places where the Freirean declaration of unity in diversity wins affirmative space and becomes part of the daily praxis. These considerations arise in terms of the three books that are the objects of this review, all of them observing a singular and common purpose: to continue the critical legacy of Paulo Freire, deepening his contribution to fields as distinct as those of epistemology, social theory, pedagogical relations, and community action.

Reading Freire and Habermas: Critical Pedagogy and Social Change, by Raymond Morrow and Carlos Alberto Torres, constitutes a dense and rigorous critical assessment of the work of two of the most influential thinkers of the end of the twentieth century, who, although having had very different backgrounds, training, and trajectories, share crucial understandings in the social sciences, philosophy, social psychology, and educational praxis. The purpose of a joint reading of the best known and most influential contemporary German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, and Paulo Freire, the pedagogue of the second half of the twentieth century who knew best how to succeed Dewey in the search for a citizen school, is soon made explicit by Morrow and Torres in the book’s preface. It stems from their dissatisfaction with the concept of social reproduction, already present in a previous work by Morrow and Torres, and particularly with the limitations of the Marxist base-superstructure metaphor, utilized to explain relations between education and society.⁶

A comparative study, above all in the epistemological field, always imposes a definition and clarification of comparative strategy. In this case, the strategy is “to locate Freire’s work in the larger context of contemporary critical social theory and to identify the pedagogical implications of Habermas through

⁴ Michael W. Apple, *Official Knowledge: Democratic Action in a Conservative Age*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. xxv–xxvi.

⁵ Interview given to Carlos Torres and Raymond Morrow in 1990, published in the appendix to Apple, p. 166.

⁶ Raymond Morrow and Carlos Alberto Torres, *Social Theory and Education: A Critique of Theories of Social and Cultural Reproduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

Freire" (p. 14). To render this strategy concrete, Morrow and Torres identify four shared themes in the approaches of Freire and Habermas:

- (1) a metatheoretical framework or philosophy of social science that justifies the specific tasks of a critical social science oriented toward emancipatory possibilities;
- (2) a theory of society as a system of social and cultural reproduction that identifies contradictions that create possibilities for transformations;
- (3) a critical social psychological understanding of the social subject as constructed in relation to universal developmental possibilities that are thwarted by historical forms of domination but potentially challenged through critique and practice; and
- (4) a conception of individual and collective learning that is suggestive of strategies for rethinking the relations between education and transformative change. (Pp. 14–15)

The way in which Morrow and Torres develop these four themes is carried out with a potential reading public in mind, in which it is thought that educators engaged in social transformation and graduate students of education, social communication, and social psychology, as well as all those interested in social theory and critical pedagogy, will predominate. This is the reason presented to justify a line of argument that begins with Freire and concludes with Habermas. In a book of theoretical maturity, Morrow and Torres present an original and relevant contribution for the development of social theory and, above all, for the defense of critical theory as an educational theory capable of making sense of liberationist pedagogical praxis.

The second book, Antonia Darder's *Reinventing Paulo Freire: A Pedagogy of Love*, presents an interesting reading of Freire's work and some testaments about the emancipatory potential of his pedagogy. Opening with the aforementioned transcription of a discourse of Freire's entitled "Making History: Education for the Future," delivered in 1989 when he accepted yet another *honoris causa* doctorate from a North American university, Darder intends, from the first moment, to underline the possibilities for a revolutionary teaching practice, even in a context as markedly difficult for progressive educators as that of the United States at a time when the Right (and extreme Right) holds political sway. Darder organizes the book into four chapters, which are preceded by an introduction and with an afterword by Peter McLaren and an epilogue by the author.⁷ The result is a work that, in the main, constitutes an important contribution toward reinventing and continuing the intellectual pilgrimage of Paulo Freire.

The introduction, "Education in the Age of 'Globalization' and 'Difference,'" is possibly the part of the book in which, according to our reading, the author most distances herself from the dialectic thinking of Paulo Freire and from the concept of history as a space and time of possibility, a concept so present in the text by Freire that opens the book. As an essay

⁷ The following is a slight correction of what Peter McLaren writes on p. 247: Amílcar Cabral was not the leader of the Popular Movement of Angola (MPLA) but rather of the African party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde (PAIGC).

about globalization and its consequences in the social and educative field, Darder begins by seemingly identifying globalization with imperialism and monopolistic capital: “There was a time when this would have been publicly denounced as outright imperialism or capital monopoly, but now it travels under the more palatable euphemism of ‘globalization’” (p. 2).

I make this critical observation of Darder’s text because, to me, these are distinct concepts, particularly in their practical consequences. In an article specifically focused on educational policies but which can be generalized to apply to other fields, Roger Dale particularizes these differences: “This may be an appropriate juncture at which to raise the issue of the difference between globalisation and ‘imperialism’ or ‘colonialism,’ since it is quite plausible to suggest that the difference between globalisation and imperialism/colonialism is that what once happened only to third world or colonised countries is now happening to the most powerful states, previously the initiators rather than the recipients of external pressures on their national policies.”⁸

The understanding of history as a space of possibility leads us to consider that, really, one must speak not of globalization but, rather, of globalizations, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos insists: “That which we habitually designate as globalization are, in fact, differentiated groups of social relations: different groups of social relations give origin to different phenomena of globalization. In these terms, a unique entity called globalization does not exist; what exists instead are globalizations; to be precise, this term should only be used in the plural.”⁹

Placing the current world system in a group of three constellations of social practices—(i) practices between states, (ii) global capitalist practices, and (iii) transnational social and cultural practices, the third type of constellation, with implications in all the others, also generates modes for the production of a globalization of resistance against the unequal exchanges in the world system: “The resistance consists of transforming unequal exchanges into exchanges of shared authority, and translating these into struggles against exclusion, subaltern inclusion, dependency, disintegration, demotion.”¹⁰ These would surely represent a path and a perspective that Freire would have shared. The introductory essay by Darder has merit, however. First, it calls attention to the devastating consequences of neoliberal hegemonic globalization on North American society itself. Second, it calls for the participation of teachers in the construction of social movements wherever it is possible to make the Freirian utopia of unity in diversity concrete.

⁸ Roger Dale, “Specifying Globalization Effects on National Policy: A Focus on Mechanisms?” *Journal of Educational Policy* 14, no. 1 (1999): 1–17.

⁹ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “Processos de globalização,” in *A sociedade Portuguesa perante os desafios da globalização: Modernização econômica, social e cultural* (Oporto: Afrontamento, 2001), p. 62

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

In her first chapter, “The Passion of Paulo Freire,” the author remembers her first contacts with Paulo Freire and his work, highlighting what she considers indispensable qualities for progressive educators: “decisiveness, security, the tension between patience and impatience, and the joy of living” (p. 49). She adds tolerance—a quality that comes from our ability to love human beings—a revolutionary virtue opposed to sectarianism, as Darder recognizes in an interesting self-criticism: “With great political fervor, I rejected Freire’s position, making the case that what we needed was to be more *intolerant*—of oppression and social injustice! For years, I licked my wounds over being *scolded* in public by Freire. But eight years later, I must confess that I recognize great wisdom in Freire’s advice” (p. 42).

In the second and third chapters, “Restoring Our Humanity” and “Teaching as an Act of Love,” Darder underlines and develops some of the implications of Freire’s work. The first, an alliance between theory and practice, or a dialectical relationship between our objective and subjective worlds, can be fundamental to a teacher’s revolutionary practice. The second, a strong understanding of the act of teaching as an act of love, is born of dialogue and the ability of teachers to listen “closely and respectfully to how students spoke and how they understood their lived histories” (p. 107). In chapter 4, Darder reinvents and recreates Freire through the direct discourse of eight teachers, working in very distinct North American educational contexts, and who respond to the appeal of Freire himself to (re)create and (re)write his ideas, since “it is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them” (p. 150).

The third book, *The Freirean Legacy: Educating for Social Justice*, edited by Judith J. Slater, Stephen M. Fain, and Cesar A. Rosatto, is one of the results of the International Conference on Education, Labor, and Emancipation at Florida International University’s College of Education in 2000. Opening with a preface by Michael Apple, the book is organized in three parts: “The Personal,” “The Theoretical,” and “The Practical.” In the preface, Apple recalls Freire’s critical preoccupation, in the last years of his life, with neoliberalism and its maxim “we are all consumers.” Recognizing the progressives’ past mistakes in matters like dogmatism, mechanical analyses, and proposals, an inflexible and teleological sense of history blind to the transformative capacity of human agency, Apple, going back to Freire, raises a group of crucial questions for work to be developed from a critical perspective in the field of education: “How do we interrupt neoliberal common sense? How do we create pedagogies that are deeply connected to the daily realities of people’s lives and to struggles to overcome exploitation and domination in a time when the right has already understood how such connections might be creatively (albeit manipulatively) made? Who is this ‘we’ in the first place? How do we avoid the possible arrogance of a position that assumes that ‘we’ know the best and only path to emancipation and we will bring it to ‘you?’” (p. xi–xii).

Like all compilations, *The Freirean Legacy* is an uneven book, where Apple's appeal (and Freire's) is often absent. In the first part, "The Personal," Ana Maria Freire's contribution stands out as she develops one of the most interesting concepts in Freire's work, the *inédito viável* (untested feasibility), a phrase that, "carrying in its very essence the acts of denouncing and announcing, creates a new epistemology based on a new, hopeful, and substantively political, ethical, and ontological reading of the world" (p. 9). In a time of crisis for the great narratives, this concept can make sense of emancipatory education, starting with a transformative daily praxis, as a crucial and integrative part of the construction of a citizen school or of a democratic dream of social justice.

Of the five papers that make up the "Theoretical" part, Judith S. Slater's text, "Limitations of the Public Space: Habitus and Worldlessness," stands out. Starting with the concept of habitus, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, Slater approaches the possibility of the school evolving from a social space forming the dominant habitus to a new public space generating a collective and participative consciousness, involving teachers, parents, students, and community. Slater insists on the potential of a student's democratic participation in school life, permitting her or him to acquire skills for communitary action and for a public praxis: "The teacher must collaborate in the process of liberation from the forces that deny an open public arena by providing students with the necessary abilities, capabilities, beliefs, and values to reflect on who they are in relationship to the collective group" (p. 66). As such, Slater points out at least four elements necessary for the creation of responsible public spaces: (i) an inclusive leadership, (ii) a new discourse pointed toward participation and the construction of the future, (iii) the reinforcing of the community through the constant inclusion of new actors in the public space, and (iv) the restoration of imagination in the emancipatory possibilities of the human action present in values and beliefs.

This text is nicely complemented by Stephen M. Fain's chapter, "The Quest for Authentic Engagement," which opens the book's final part, "The Practical." Fain begins by describing the power of habitus in the training and the action of the teacher, which, in an organizational context both closed and slightly autonomous, can become an oppressive paradigm. Next, referring to Freire and his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970), he stresses that the liberation of the teacher confronted by a dehumanized and routine job can only lie in her or his own actions when she or he is guided by authentic human generosity and by a pedagogy that highlights human potential. In this context, Fain produces an interesting critique of the professional educator presented by the 1986 Carnegie Forum report, "A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the Twenty-First Century," concluding with the consideration that we ought to abandon "the notion that we need to develop education as a profession, as the concept of profession is more controlling than liberating" (p. 136). As an alternative: "We should begin to

search for authentic engagements through which we can keep the spark of liberation glowing so we can nurture an emancipatory flame. This can be done by working to ensure that we become involved in what I think of as authentic engagements. These encounters will require that we develop our individual and collective personalities in Freirean terms. To achieve a state of authenticity, we will need to be more human and generous, and we will need to focus our collective efforts on reflection and action so that in our initially small way we can begin to support a transformation of habitus” (pp. 136–37).

Paulo Freire always claimed that he would not like to have disciples, preferring to have critical carriers-on of his intellectual, worldly citizen wanderings. Although not all the texts analyzed in this essay respect these propositions, as a whole they constitute a good intellectual exercise about the work of Paulo Freire, particularly the book by Raymond Morrow and Carlos Alberto Torres, *Reading Freire and Habermas*, which makes a very interesting contribution to social theory in the field of education.

José Eustáquio Romão, one of the most lucid of Freire’s carriers-on, defends the hypothesis that “only the oppressed have the potential to permit the advancement of humanity in the sense of the Paidéia.”¹¹ One of the notable aspects of the last decades of the twentieth century was the slow but steady construction by the Right of a hegemonic social block in the field of education that imposed a new common sense: the market as the center of freedom. We have argued that Freire’s thinking can constitute a fine point of departure for a new leftist common sense that will succeed in making the motto unity in diversity a reality. The road that Brazil is beginning to walk will surely prove a social laboratory of unequivocal significance. Let us accompany it critically, but let us never forget that politics, like pedagogy, is a space and time of possibility.

¹¹ José Eustáquio Romão, “Civilização do oprimido: Introdução, A cultura como expressão de classe social,” paper presented at the third Paulo Freire International Forum, “Paulo Freire: Education and the Possible Dream, International Perspectives,” sponsored by the Paulo Freire Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, School of Education and Information Studies, September 19–21, 2002. (Translator’s addendum: Romão defines Paidéia, the Portuguese version of a Greek word, as “a process in search of the full realization of humanity” and/or “the movement in search of the human utopia.”)