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IN MEMORY OF PAULO FREIRE: LEARNING LIBERATES!

Dialogue, pedagogy and transformation in intercultural societies

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FREIRE'S LESSONS

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Once I had read that "true friendship comes when silence between two people is pleasant"... With Paulo Freire so it was. We used to talk for hours, agreed in many things, and disagreed in many others. Sometimes our debates lightened us up, but never burned our mutual respect down. We used to place our diverging points of view and the respective arguments to sustain them. Paulo always with a naughty glance tenderly used to put his hand in my shoulders, when exposing his opinions, as he used to do with all his friends to attract their attention to his words. Paulo never refused a debate. But there were also, after long conversations, moments of absolute stillness, the pleasant silence mentioned before. Tender silence, silent pause to reflection, merry silence full of joy for learning.

This way time went by, since 1974. We built a relationship of agreement and silence, dialogues and conflicts. First in Geneva, in his smoky office, in his apartment at Rue de Lancy, at the World Council of Churches' restaurant for lunches or a cup of coffee.

In 1967 I deeply studied the book *Education as the practice of freedom*., in my Pedagogy Course. My University demanded, as final work, the production of a kind of thesis for conferral the degree of licentiate. I focused my exposition on the analysis of the third chapter of that book which treated the relation between "massification versus education". His book *Pedagogy of the oppressed* was not published yet. I have read it in French for the first time, when I already was living abroad.

Back to 1967, when I presented my work at the University, Paulo Freire was known mainly for his "method" of teaching adults. It was three years after the

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military coup d'état and Paulo Freire's banishment from Brazil, the news about the exiled ones were censured. Many newspapers, and intellectual people too, were just beginning to be conscious of the **brutality of the military government**, that would aggravate in the next years. The repression have been **intensified** since one year before with arrests of students and teachers that manifested themselves against the regime.

Repression and intimidation still got recrudescient. In 1969 I began to teach at a College in São Paulo, Brazil. Our colleagues were constantly watched over. One of these colleagues from the Philosophy Department was forced to leave the country and all of us were afraid of more repression and terror. Then, I decided to leave Brazil for a foreigner doctor's degree and get in touch with educators like Paulo Freire, it was not an escape, but an option to learn from outside more about my birthplace. So it happened to me. Far and counting on freedom that we didn't have in Brazil, I could see better my motherland. My meeting, in 1974, at the **University of Geneva**, with the educator from whom I had learned seven years before in Brazil, was very emotional for me. It was like my dreams about the land of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Paulo invited me to come along to **Africa** with my course's colleagues Arturo Ornellas and Miguel Escobar. But it was not possible to me due to the long journey of six months being absent from home, where I had my baby children. It was hard to me not to participate but my family needed me that moment. However I carefully followed Paulo's experiment in Africa by his reports and essays about it.

Between 1975 and 77 Paulo discussed with me the thesis I was writing about permanent education. He took part of the my examining board, speaking in Portuguese. In that time we decided to return to Brazil. At first, Paulo's wife, Elza, was against the idea due to better health care in Switzerland than in Brazil. She had cardiac problems and later had a pass marker implanted.

I returned to **Brazil** in June 1977 and Paulo and Elza two years and a half later. In 1980, Paulo visited the CEDES (Educational and Societal Center of Studies), a Non-Governmental Organization, directed by myself under University of Campinas, a public university that invited Paulo Freire to work with. Two years later, as members of The Workers' Party in Brazil we created The Wilson Pinheiro Foundation to subsidize the party with studies, researches and reflections about socio-political, economical and cultural questions. We started with an intensive program on debates and conferences around the world. We wrote together some works and, in 1989, when Paulo Freire was chosen São Paulo's Municipal Secretary of Education, I was chosen his cabinet chief officer. In 1991 he suggested the creation of an institute. This institute has his name and, from the beginning, we have been working hard, studying, researching and divulging his legacy.

After these many years of having a such close **relationship** with Paulo Freire, the reader of this little essay will certainly understand my difficulty in talking about Paulo, just few months after he passed away. Its difficult to me to turn the pain into

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just missing him (saudades)¹. On First of May, a day before his death, we were discussing some projects to be developed by The Paulo Freire Institute (IPF), which was for him a place of searching new theories and practical work in education. He intended to teach there many courses, including one for foreign students. He told us that it was to him very sacrificing to travel abroad, and that foreign students interested in listening him had better come to IPF. He left us in the climax of his intellectual production, with an unfinished book and many projects.

After Paulo Freire passed away, we have received more than 600 messages of condolences, sent to his family and to the Institute. All of them are tender manifestations and of immense appreciation for the great educator. They mention the deep grief and sorrow by the loss of the master, but also the empty place that he left, making evident the impact that his praxis caused in many different parts of the world. Teachers of about 150 universities sent their messages. It demonstrates the echo of Paulo Freire's ideas also at the academical centers.

His ideas could bring controversy, but not he as a person. In many of the messages received by the IPF we can read textually "my life wouldn't be the same if I hadn't read the work of Paulo Freire. What he had written will remain in my heart and in my mind". This relationship between the **cognitive** and the **affective** is very strong in the work of Paulo Freire and also to those who have been influenced by him. He got people emotionally involved not only by his fascinating speeches but also by his written works.

I still have another observation on the received messages. Beyond revealing the theoretical and affective impact to the lives of so many human beings from so many different places around the world, the writers of those messages always end wishing to join other people and institutions to continue **Paulo Freire's work**, and his commitment, which was, above all, the commitment to oppressed people. Not the engagement with the oppressed people from this place or from another - from Latin America for instance - but to **oppressed people from all the world**. There is, therefore, a common feeling of continuing his task of awareness-raising (**conscientization**), of non-violence, of the work in organizing the excluded people, of the poor ones, of the fishermen, of the farmers, of those without their land to cultivate, of the homeless, of the oppressed social minorities.

Still after more than one month of his death, the **walls of the Paulo Freire Institute** are deeply impregnated with his presence. There is a feeling that he hasn't died. Our sensation is like missing him and being concerned with his absence just for the period between one trip and another, one meeting and another, and that he can be among us again, any time. We received messages from people that are praying for him. Others tell us that there is a strong impression that mixes his

¹ There is no adequate translation for "saudades" - a word which is alternately translated as longing, homesickness, yearning and nostalgia but represents more of a state of being, an emptiness, an absence. Brazilians have "saudades" for their hometown, for their favorite meal and, of course, for people they who are dear to them.

absence and presence. It is like when he left the São Paulo Municipal Secretary of Education in 1992, in his farewell letter: "You can continue counting on me to build a school with a new face, happier, more fraternal and democratic... I will be next to you all, in another way. I will be freer to assume another kind of presence". Now we have the presence of his legacy.

Paulo Freire confessed in his last great International Conference about his ideas, that took place in September 1996, in Vitoria (ES), Brazil, that since his childhood, he was a "**connective boy**". This feature was not only personal. It was also epistemological. He could, better than any other intellectual that I know, create bows, interconnect the categories of history, politics, economy, class, gender, ethnic groups, poor people and **non-poor people**. His pedagogy is not just a pedagogy for the poor ones. He as a connective being did want to see also the non-poor people and the middle classes of society engaging themselves in transforming the world.

In all of Paulo Freire's written works, from the oldest to the newest, he tells us about the **virtues** as demands, or necessary virtues to the transforming educational praxis. But he also gave us examples of some virtues such as **coherence** and **simplicity**. For him coherence is a virtue which turns into permanent hope. Paulo practiced the virtue of exemplification above all the other virtues. He testified his ideas. In this coherence between **theory and practice** I would detach the value of his solidarity. Paulo rebelled himself against a popular Brazilian proverb that says "My freedom is finished where the freedom of another one begins". No, said he: My freedom is finished when the freedom of another one finishes. If other people are not free I am not free, either.

Another virtue conquered by him was **simplicity**. The simple is not easy. It's difficult to be simple. It's wisdom. He could astonish the daily wisdom without being arrogant. Paulo hated arrogant intellectuals, specially the arrogant intellectual from the left. For him the intellectual from the right is by conviction arrogant, but the left one is arrogant due to a mind distortion. Simplicity doesn't oppose itself to the concrete and to the complicated. It opposes itself to the prolix.

Paulo Freire was also a hopeful human being, not for being obstinate, but for "an historic and existential imperative", says he in his book *Pedagogy of Hope*. Besides **hope**, Paulo Freire has cultivated **autonomy**. Autonomy is the skill to make decisions, to take your own destiny in your own hands. In a market economy that invades all our lives' spheres we need to fight, also using education, to create in the civil society the skill of governing and controlling the process of development (an alternative to the authoritarian socialism). Paulo Freire had a true **taste for democracy**. He always treated it with love.

His major concern during his last years was the global advance of a neoliberal capitalism. Why did Paulo Freire fight so much neoliberal **thinking and practice**? Because **neoliberalism** is viscerally against the heart of Freirean thinking, which is utopia. While Freirean thought is the utopia, the neoliberal thought hates the dream. For Paulo Freire future is an instance of real **possibilities**. For the neoliberalism

future is the **fatality** of events. Neoliberalism is shown as the only answer to present reality, disregarding any other proposal of answering our living questions. Specially dismissing the roles of the State, labor unions and political parties. It denounces politic making politics, as well. Paulo Freire attacked the **market ethics** supported by the neoliberalism, cause its based on the logic of controlling and states an **integral ethic** of the human being. In his book *Pedagogy of Autonomy* (p.15) he emphasizes: "Therefore, my permanent criticism to the neoliberal cruelty, to the cynicism of a fatalistic ideology and its inflexible denial of dream and utopia. Therefore anger, my genuine anger, which involves my speech when I mention the injustice that subjugates the wretched of Earth. Therefore my non interest in, doesn't matter how, assuming the posture of the impartial observer, objective, assured of facts and events. At no time, could I be the neutral observer, but I have always been close to a rigorous ethical position". The anti-academic posture of Paulo Freire is known. And in this way ends this book (p.165): "Neither arrogance is a sign of competence nor competence is a cause for arrogance. On one hand I don't deny the competence of certain arrogant people, but, on the other hand, I am sorry for their lack of simplicity, which could make them better people, without decreasing their knowledge. They could be more humane".

Education cannot drive itself by the business paradigm, which emphasizes only efficiency. This kind of paradigm ignores the human being. For this business paradigm the human being acts only as authentic economic agent, a "human factor". The **pedagogical act** is democratic by its nature, the **business act** drives itself by the controlling logic. The neoliberal ideology **can make natural inequality**. "So it is". "There is nothing to do", people say. Thus, Paulo Freire requests our attention to the process of building the **democratic subjectivity**, by showing us that inequality is not natural. It is necessary to sharpen our curiosity, our indignation. We need to be careful in front of the anesthetic neoliberal ideology process. It is fatalistic, survives from a fatalistic discourse. There is no reality owner of itself. Neoliberalism acts as if **globalization** were a definitive reality and not a historic category.

Paulo Freire's view of the world and his socio-political-educational theory help us not only to better understand how the neoliberal model acts, but also help us to build the necessary answer to neoliberalism. He supports a **new modernity**, whose rationality should be "moistured by affection". Against the pedagogical and cultural iluminism that stresses only curricular contents, he emphasizes the importance of the cultural dimension in the social transformation process. Education is much more than instruction. To be a real transformative process, to transform the oppression's conditions, education must take its roots in **people's culture**. Pos-modernity is characterized by the simulacrum and immediate consumption. Now, education is a long term process and needs to fight the immediatism, the consumption, if it wants to contribute to building a progressive pos-modernity. To be a liberating process, education needs to build between students and teachers a real historical consciousness. It takes time indeed.

Paulo Freire was a happy person. He felt great joy in learning and transmitting this joy to the ones who lived together with him in the classroom or at any other place. We learn when we really **want**, and we only learn what is **significant**, so say the constructivists. Paulo Freire was one of the constructivism's creators, but of the critical constructivism. Since his first pedagogical experiences in Brazilian northeast region, in the early 60's, he searched to build teaching and learning in an **interactive environment**, through using audio-visual resources. Later he strengthened the use of new technology, especially television, video and informatics, but didn't accept its using in a non-critical way.

Freirian constructivism goes beyond **research** and **thematization**: the third stage of his method - the problematization - supposes a transforming action. Knowledge is not liberating by itself. It needs to be associated to a political commitment to the excluded people's cause. Knowledge is an essential value to our existential production. Thus, knowledge cannot be object of buying and selling as goods, whose possession is restricted to a few people. Paulo Freire had a true love for knowledge and love for learning. And he used to say that we know for: a) **understanding** the world (word and world); b) for **inquising** (about the right and wrong, to search for truth and not only to exchange points of view); c) for **interpreting** and **transforming** the world. Knowledge must constitute itself in an essential tool to intervene in the world.

For Paulo Freire, knowledge is built in an integrating and interactive way. It's not **something ready** to be appropriated or socialized, as the "pedagogy of contents" supports. Until now this pedagogy of contents sustains the need of memorizing, but to know is to **discover** and to **build** and not to copy. In searching for knowledge Paulo Freire approaches the aesthetic, the epistemological and the social. For him it's necessary to reinvent a new knowledge which has "the shape of beauty".

School doesn't distribute power, but builds knowledge which is power indeed. We don't change history without knowledge, but we have to **educate the knowledge** to make it possible for people to interfere in the market as subjects, not as objects. In a critical way of thinking, **school's role** is to set knowledge in the hands of excluded people, because **political poverty** produces **economic poverty**. "Nobody ignores everything, no one knows everything", so Freire used to say. Nobody is a complete ignorant, but the "political illiterate" cannot understand the causes of his economic poverty. Thus, Paulo Freire associated literacy and political awareness-raising. Neoliberal pedagogy is a **pedagogy of exclusion**, just because it reduces the pedagogical matter to the strictly pedagogical field, searching to eliminate from pedagogy its political essence. The **pedagogy of hope** is the opposite. To teach is to insert yourself in history: it is not just to be in the classroom, but to make part of a larger political imaginary.

Paulo Freire set the oppressed in the **history's stage**, by his political engagement and his theory as counternarrative to the discourse of the powerful and privileged people. His theory valorizes besides the elaborate scientific knowledge,

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also the first knowledge, the **daily knowledge**. It sustains that the student doesn't register under separate the instructive significance from the daily and educative significance. In incorporating knowledge, people incorporate also other significances such as: how to know, how to produce and how society uses the knowledge... in summary, the daily knowledge of its social groups.

Another notion that Paulo Freire has developed, which distinguishes itself from every neoliberal connotation, is the notion of **quality**. When he was ahead the São Paulo Municipal Secretary of Education, Paulo told us about "a new quality". Quality is everyone (quantity) having access to knowledge for the social and human relations to be renewed. Quality is an **ethical commitment**, the **happiness of learning**. For the neoliberal thinking, quality is involved with **competitiveness**. It denies the need of **solidarity**. However, people are not competent because they are competitive, but because they know how to face and deal with their daily problems together with other people and not individually.

Another contribution of Paulo Freire to the pedagogical ideas history, is his **conception of curriculum**. We cannot understand Freirean pedagogy without understanding his conception of transdisciplinarity, transculturality, and interculturality. The Freirean inter- and transdisciplinarity are not just a pedagogical **method** or an **attitude** of the teacher, they constitute themselves in a real **demand** of the very nature of the pedagogical act. Paulo Freire himself could practically work with **many disciplines** at the same time: ethnography, theory of literature, philosophy, politics, economy, sociology, etc... He worked more with theories than with disciplines or curricula, which he considered should be overcome. He insisted that students should search for more, beyond their curricula, for other kind of knowledge, especially in education. To the pedagogical act many sciences concur. Besides, he worked at the same time also with **many theoretical perspectives**: the one of the politic militant, of the liberation philosopher, of the scientist, of the intellectual, of the revolutionary etc.

In these last years, Paulo Freire was programming the organization of a **video** series to make knowledge access possible for the largest number of people. You cannot learn everything at school, he continued to insist. Television, video and computers can be precious tools to the popular class. But we need to learn how to be **issuers** and not just **receptors**. He appreciated **mediatic culture**, and recognized that it can be a complement to what we learn at school and an engine for knowledge, that can move us on, in direction to some **generative themes** that scholar knowledge ignores or give little value upon, which can be, on one hand, poverty and violence, for instance, and solidarity and interculturality, on the other hand. The mass media explore human sensibility. Now, it's true that we just learn what we deeply feel. Media can make us sensitive and school can start from this point to go ahead. Both the middle class children and the children from popular classes, are equally exposed to mediatic culture. This way they compete in equal conditions. This is not the case of scholar culture. Children from popular classes don't find at school a

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continuity for their familiar culture, as the middle class children do, for having a scholarly environment at home. School and video are different and not opposite spaces for learning.

What is Paulo Freire's **legacy** to us ?

First, he gave us his life, a rich **biography**. Paulo enchanted us with his tenderness, his sweetness, his charisma, his coherence, his commitment, his seriousness. His words and his actions were words and actions of fighting for a better world , "not so ugly, not so mean, not so inhumane". Besides love and hope he also left us a legacy of indignation in front of injustice. In front of injustice, he used to say that we cannot use "sweet words".

Beyond his testimony of a life committed to the oppressed people's cause, he left us an **immense work**, pressed and released in many editions of his books, his essays and videos, spread around the world. In his work we find a **revolutionary pedagogy**. The conservative pedagogy humbles the student. The Freirean pedagogy, the "pedagogy of dialogue", gave **dignity** to the student, by giving respect and placing the teacher beside the student - as a searching creature - with the same task of orienting and driving the educational process. As much as the student, the teacher is also an apprentice... This is Paulo Freire's legacy. In developing his theory of education, Paulo Freire succeeded in indismistifying the dreams of **pedagogism** of the 60's, the theoretical statement that, at least in Latin America, supported school as being able to do everything. Paulo Freire also succeeded in transcending the 70's **pessimism**, when school was only a *status quo* reproducer. Acting so - by surpassing the ingenuous pedagogism and the negative pessimism - he succeeded in keeping himself faithful to the utopia, dreaming possible dreams. Making today the possible for today, for tomorrow making the impossible for today.

In March, 1997, a group of young men in Brasilia, Brazil, set on fire and killed a Pataxo Indian that was sleeping in the street. Paulo Freire was deeply affected with all this terror. He asked himself why and how we have come to such a barbarism. There are plenty of causes: there is midia, school, society... all of us are responsible. But there is also the impunity which allows to do, specially to the dominant class, almost everything. Seldom someone is punished. Few are the rich people who are in prison. That's why we need to say "no, it may not be", without fearing to be against democracy. There is what is permitted and what is not permitted. To face injustice, unpunishment and barbarism, we need a **pedagogy of indignation**. To say "no" provokes knowledge. "No" is: upsetting, disturbing, disquieting. It obliges us to research. To say "no" is to declare our identity. It is the search for ethic, value, attitude. Paulo Freire frequently told us about the **pedagogy of rebellion**.

His present subject of research was, what we called, **Ecopedagogy**. He was telling us that it is necessary to read again Ivan Illich and Herbert McLuhan with our today's comprehension about technology, and also with a **new ethic**. As, the philosopher and theologian Leonardo Boff says, "justice must not to be only social,

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it must be socio-cosmic". Paulo Freire told us about the need of creating bows, of friendship, of the social and human relationship. In his last interview, in April 16, 1997, he stated: "I would like to be remembered as a person that loved plants and animals, men and women, the earth...". In his book *A sombra desta mangueira* (Under the shadow of this Mango Tree), he appreciated exactly this "**happiness for free**". As said Ladislau Dowbord who prefaced Paulo Freire's book: happiness given by nature, against "**happiness bought or sold**" as the infinity of electronic toys, offered by the neoliberal capitalism. A liberating pedagogy needs to create new experiences, solidarian experiences, need to create new social and human relationships and not only transmit contents.

To finalize, I would like to highlight the significance of the many **homages** rendered to Paulo Freire, that are taking place around the world. To ensure their significance, they have to have a transforming meaning, they may not simplify Paulo Freire or mythicize him. In the case of such a complex work as his work is, there is always the danger of simplification. It can consist, for instance, in a choice of some sentence, of some approach or a particular idea which most delight us and taking it as the absolute truth, without contextualizing it. Nothing less Freirean than that. Paulo Freire wrote a lot and it is possible to take certain approaches without contextualizing them. Every one of his ideas must be read in its context of living and writing, and within all his work context. Using sectarianly without criticism any part of his work, is disfiguring Paulo Freire. In spite of the magnitude of his legacy, we must not mythicize him or his work, but follow his example.

Paulo Freire was a complete human being. Gentle warrior of from words, idealist, he believed in the importance of school, of knowledge, of the words, of culture, of the educator. He confessed once: "I am not ashamed of being a teacher". As a planter of future, he will be always remembered, because he gave us **roots**, **wings** and **dreams** as legacy. As a creator of spirits, the best way to honor him is reinventing him. Not to copy him. It is to go ahead with the effort for an education with new quality for everyone. This new quality will not be measured by the assimilated quantity of technical and scientific contents, but by its skill of producing of new kind of knowledge, "**moistured by existence**" and history, a knowledge that must be a transforming tool for the living conditions of those who have no access to entire existence. Paulo Freire left us **theories** and **examples** which can take us far ahead where we are today. As a teacher said just after hearing that Paulo Freire passed away: "He left us poorer by leaving us, but richer, by having lived among us".

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