

We can reinvent the world

Moacir Gadotti in conversation with Paulo Freire

Being the most important Brazilian educator, known and appreciated all over the world, Paulo Freire has already written more than thirty books.

Due to his liberating pedagogy and his political militancy, he was exiled after the military coup of 1964. While in exile he developed projects in several countries in Latin America, Europe and Africa and lectured at Harvard University in the United States. Most of the time he worked for the World Council of Churches with headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. He returned to Brazil in 1980 after an amnesty.

Nine years after his return he assumed the Municipal Secretariat of Education of the City of Sao Paulo during the government of Luiza Erundina and the Workers' Party. He occupied the job for two and a half years. He has been the target of accusations from the current Sao Paulo municipal administration, headed by Paulo Maluf, accusations which are similar to those which were made against him during the military regime: developing a pedagogic programme that is politicised and ideological. Paulo Freire defends himself from these accusations in talking to Moacir Gadotti, another important Brazilian educator, author of fifteen books.

Moacir Gadotti: Today we are living in a time of uncertainty; it seems that the ground we step on is moving and that we, in Brazil, cannot see what tomorrow will bring. Where does the hope that it is possible to transform the world, which you refer to in your book 'Pedagogy of Hope', come from?

Paulo Freire: It is a question that requires reflection about ourselves. What are we in the world? John, Mary, Charles? But what are we, why are we, how are we, who are we?. This gives me the chance to make comparisons. For example, I am looking at my small back yard now and I see other living beings there, but of the natural order – a jabolicaba and the kennel where Jim is, a German shepherd-dog – and I could already establish comparisons between how I am, how the jabolicaba is and how Jim is. Without going too far, I come to a first conclusion that the relationship existing between me and my jabolicabas and between me and Jim is not the same as the one between you and me. There is a different quality in these relationships. A second conclusion is that I can take as a reference, to distinguish myself from the other two beings (Jim and the jabolicabas), that – although all three of us are finite, unfinished, uncompleted, imperfect – only I know that we are finite, unfinished and uncompleted. The jabolicaba does not know. It has another kind of knowledge.

Moacir Gadotti: That is what you want to say when you write in your book 'I am hopeful by existential imperative'.

Paulo Freire: That's it too. I am hopeful because I cannot give up being hopeful as a human being. This being that is finite and that knows that it is finite, and that – due to the fact that it is

unfinished and knowing that it is so – necessarily is a being that is constantly searching for something better. It does not matter that the majority is not seeking. Not seeking is the result of the circumstances in which they could not seek. However, it is not the being's nature. Therefore, the large suffering masses, immersed in the social, political and economic reality, as I call it in 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', are prevented from being. Therefore, they become apathetic. Hope does not flourish in apathy. The struggle for hope is up to the teacher, the philosopher, the politician, to those who understand the reason for the masses' apathy – and, sometimes, the reason for their own apathy. I cannot give up hope because I know, first of all, that I cannot continue being human if I give up hope and the struggle for it. Hope is not a donation. It is part of me just like the air that I breathe. Unless there is air, I will die. Unless there is hope, there is no reason why history should continue. Hope is history, do you understand? At the moment you definitely lose hope, you fall into immobility. Then you are as much a jabolicaba as the jabolicaba itself.

Moacir Gadotti: What is new about your new book, 'Pedagogy of Hope', and what remains from your earlier book, 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'?

Paulo Freire: Many things have remained. Besides belief and hope, my respect for my conviction of the importance of the role of the individual has remained.

Moacir Gadotti: So you continue criticising the mechanistic (Marxist and non-Marxist) thesis that there is progress in history that will inevitably lead to socialism?

Paulo Freire: Of course. Just look at the enormous contradiction in this inevitability. If the thing will come tomorrow anyway, why should I die today struggling for it? I will wait. This belief may even lead to apathy. And it has been proved that it is not like that.

Moacir Gadotti: Look, what a strange thing! In 'Pedagogy of Hope' you say that 'the class-struggle is not the motor of history, but certainly is one of them'. You – who were criticised in 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' for not using the term class-struggle – you know that now you will be criticised for using it.

Paulo Freire: That is interesting. Do you know one of the risks we will encounter at the beginning of the millennium – and which we already encounter today? It is that many people from the left were so affected by the fall of the Berlin Wall that they lost their parameters and feel themselves immobilised. These people are perplexed about history, precisely because they thought that tomorrow was inevitable. They did not have time to reconstruct and rethink themselves.

Moacir Gadotti: But what are these risks?

Paulo Freire: First of all, the risk that a minority of these people manage to get into power and reactivate odious Stalinist methods. The second risk is that some of these who have been affected fall into such immobility that they begin to believe in the neo-liberal argument that the struggle between the social classes has come to an end, that ideology has come to an end, that history has come to an end. This second group constitutes an enormous danger to progress itself because it strengthens the majority of the right and the minority of the left that intend to reactivate Stalinism. A third risk we will encounter at the beginning of the millennium due to this historic disorder is exactly the power of neo-fascism, which has been growing especially in Europe but also in the Third World (see the outbreak

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of neo-Nazism in Sao Paulo, the threats of killing people from the North East of Brazil, the racism from the right). It is a frightening threat that is material but, above all, spiritual, ideological – which was not seen before. The educator cannot stay distant from that preoccupation. It has to be discussed at primary school and in the children's own language.

Moacir Gadotti: In 'Pedagogy of Hope' you approach the question of women and the pitfall that language represents. For example, when we affirm that men make history, we say that woman is necessarily included when I speak of man. How can we avoid this pitfall?

Paulo Freire: First of all, we have to acknowledge that language is a social production. In the second place, exactly therefore language is an ideological entity. It is not possible to think of language without ideology and without power. In the third place, grammar itself is born historically as a regulation by the powerful in society. It is obvious that in male-dominated cultures language is moulded to match those cultures. In a progressive perspective, therefore, it is absolutely fundamental that language is reinvented, because it is not possible to democratise a society, leaving out one of the fundamental aspects of society, human language.

Moacir Gadotti: Another preoccupation expressed in the book concerns the children's cultural identity which schools often ignore. Given a mono-cultural curriculum, what can a teacher do in the classroom in order to transform the school and the curriculum?

Paulo Freire: One of the things the teacher should do is, for example, to examine culture in a multicultural way, commenting to the students about the differences and saying that this part of the curriculum is not universal but has its regional dimensions and even family dimensions. Here the class problem enters. The culture of classes does exist. The language of classes does exist. There is a syntax that belongs to the working-class and there is another one that does not. It is necessary to know how to reinvent language, understanding the diversity of these syntaxes. As a teacher one understands very well the dialectic relation between tactics and strategy. That means, one has the strategic dream that is multiculturalism, but one must have tactics to achieve it. Every day you have to recreate your tactics to overcome the exclusivity of a mono-cultural curriculum without risking losing your job.

Moacir Gadotti: What is the difference between the pedagogy of liberation and the other that is being put into practice by the current administration?

Paulo Freire: The difference between the first one and the latter, which is said to be responsible, is that the conservative one is responsible in relation to the interests of the dominant in our society. Arguing, however, that to be responsible is absurd. It can't say either that we are the only responsible ones. However, I have to distinguish in which way I am responsible. My Utopia is not the conservative's Utopia. The conservative wants to preserve, therefore, he is reactionary; he struggles to preserve what is illegitimate.

Moacir Gadotti: What judgement would you make today of what was done during your administration?

Paulo Freire: I don't have any judgement, but if you asked me if I regretted anything, I would tell you that – despite the legitimacy of regret – I don't regret anything. I would do the same thing again. When we came together to administer the Secretariat, we didn't think that we were the greatest educators in the State. None

of us thought that we had been chosen by God to save education in Sao Paulo and in Brazil later on. What we knew was that we were capable of doing the job seriously. And we had political options. We knew, for example, that we advocated a school that, being public, should become a popular school. And you, Gadotti, added that it was necessary to make clear what the popular was.

When we wanted the public school to become popular, efficient and democratic, we did not think of making a bad school for the children who were born rich. We were convinced that we should make a school that, having the taste, the smell of the popular, would disgust the bourgeoisie. We wanted that school to have a Brazilian face and, therefore, to be an open school, a happy, critical school, that would encourage the children's creativity and not their fear. Therefore, we needed an administration which would also be like that. It is not possible to think of this democratic dream of the school having an authoritarian administration.

Moacir Gadotti: Therefore, you encouraged changes in the structures of power at the Secretariat?

Paulo Freire: We made a structural change through which the Secretary lost about 60% of the arbitrary power he previously had; I could not appoint even a school secretary. Unless we break with that colonial taste for authoritarian administration in which it was even up to the Secretary to dismiss the teacher who had missed lessons in the month of September the year before, one cannot speak of school autonomy. We searched for the School Councils, created by Marion Covas in 1985. The School Councils were an extraordinary step towards placing the parents', the pupils' and the teachers' power above the headmaster's power.

Moacir Gadotti: Do you think that this love of freedom, autonomy and participation is a mark left by your administration that will persist?

Paulo Freire: I believe in that. Even if this love suffers moments of suffocation when it will feel that it cannot express itself. For in the end, the love of being free forms part of the nature of the human being. Nobody can decree that men and women stop dreaming. That is what a dictator tries to do.

Note: This article is an edited version of an interview originally commissioned by the magazine Nova Escola.