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Paulo Freire: dreaming of a world of equality and justice



A tribute to Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator, who died 2 May 1997 aged 75. In a series of pioneering books he argued that culture was used as an instrument of oppression by means of which the elite imposed its values on the uneducated masses. In its place he proposed a 'pedagogy of the oppressed', in which the process of learning to read and write was also the means of empowerment for the poor.

At the time of writing, it is only a few days since Paulo Freire died, the victim of a heart-attack. For the past 23 years I lived and worked very closely with him. On 1 May, the day before his death, we were still talking about various projects to be developed by the Paulo Freire Institute (São Paulo, Brazil) which, for him, was a place to discuss and seek new perspectives on education. He had planned to give several courses there, including one for students from outside the country. He used to tell us it was a great sacrifice for him to travel abroad and that it would be better if foreign students who wished to hear him could be invited to the Institute. He died at the height of his intellectual activities, with a book unfinished and a great many projects.

The readers of this article, the first I am writing after his death, must understand that it is very difficult to say anything about him just now. I am still suffering from the shock of his death. I have not yet been able to transform grief into remembrance. Even so, I am going to try to write a little about his legacy, focusing mainly on his recent political-pedagogical praxis in the context of education in Brazil.

We can say with certainty that Paulo Freire's thinking is both an existential and historical product. He forged his thinking in struggle and praxis, the latter understood as 'action plus reflection', a definition he himself gave it. Brazilian and Latin American society of the 1960s can be viewed as a huge laboratory in which what became known as the 'Paulo Freire method' was distilled. The intense political mobilisation of that period profoundly affected Paulo Freire's thinking, whose roots lie in the 1950s. The historical period that Paulo Freire lived through in Chile is fundamental to explaining the consolidation of his work, begun in Brazil. In Chile, he found a political, social and educational environment that was very dynamic, rich and challenging, allowing him to rethink his methods in a different context, to evaluate it in practice and to systematize it theoretically.

What attracted the attention of educators and politicians of the period was the fact that Paulo Freire's methods

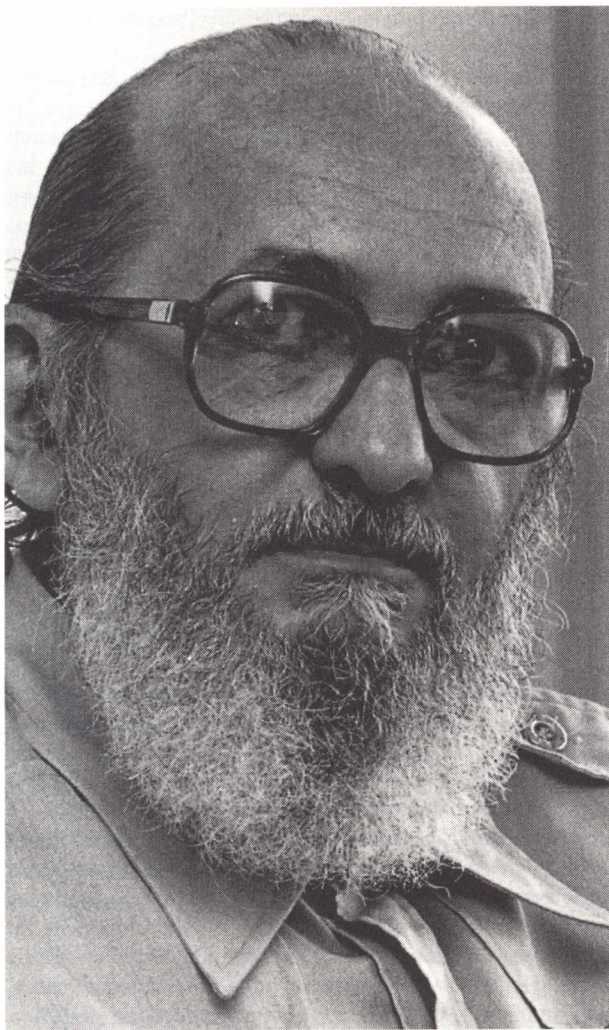
'accelerated' the process of adult literacy. He did not apply the methods applied to children to adults learning to read and write. It's true that others were already thinking along the same lines. But he was the first to systematize and to experiment with a method created entirely for adults.

Present-day constructivist theories are also based on the significance of lived experience, on the pupil's knowledge. But it is vital to know and to systematize it. However, Freirian constructivism goes beyond research and thematisation. It shows not only that everyone can learn (Piaget) but that everyone knows something and that the subject is responsible for the building up of knowledge and for the resignification of what he or she learns. Children, young persons or adults only learn when they have a life plan in which knowledge is meaningful for them. But it is the subject that learns through his or her own transforming action on the world. It is the subject who constructs his or her own categories of thought, organises his or her life and transforms the world.

Paulo Freire's work is interdisciplinary and can be seen from the perspective of researcher/scientist or educator. However, these two dimensions are caught up in yet another: Paulo Freire does not separate them from the political. Paulo Freire must also be seen as a politician. This is the most important dimension of his work. He does not think about reality as a sociologist, who only tries to understand it. He seeks, in the sciences, elements with which, understanding reality more scientifically, to be able to intervene more effectively in it. For this reason, he thinks of education as simultaneously a political act, as an act of knowledge and as a creative act. His whole thinking has a direct relationship with reality. That is his benchmark. He did not commit himself to bureaucratic schemes, either schemes for political or academic power. He committed himself, above all, to a reality to be transformed.

Paulo Freire proposed a new conception of the teaching relationship. It is not a question of conceiving education as the transmission of contents only on the part of the educator. On the contrary, it is a question of establishing dialogue. This means that the person educating is also learning. Traditional pedagogy also asserts this, but with Paulo Freire the educator also learns from the person being educated in the same way that the latter learns from the educator. No one can be considered definitively educated or trained. Each one, in his or her own way, together with others, can learn and discover new dimensions and possibilities about realities in life. Education becomes a shared and ongoing process of training.

But, Paulo Freire can still be read for his liking for freedom. This would be a libertarian reading. As many of his



Tributes to Paulo Freire (1921-97) have come from all parts of the world. Photo: John Taylor, WCC, Geneva.

interpreters assert, the central thesis of his work is that of freedom-liberation. From his first work onwards, freedom is the central focus of his conception of education. Liberation is the goal of education. The aim of education is to liberate oneself from oppressive reality and from injustice. Education aims at liberation, at the radical transformation of reality, to improve it, to make it more human, to allow men and women to be reconciled as subjects of their own history and not as objects.

Liberation, as the aim of education, is situated on the horizon of a utopian vision of society and of the role of education. Education and training must permit a critical reading of the world. The world around us is unfinished and this implies exposing the reality that oppresses, the reality that is unjust (unfinished) and, consequently, we need criticism that transforms, the proclamation of an alternative reality. Proclamation is necessary as the first step towards a new reality to be created. Tomorrow's new reality is the utopia of today's educator.

Consistency between theory and practice

There are many examples of Paulo Freire's thought that

could be cited, revealing above all the consistency between theory and practice. We shall only give one, the most recent, from his work as public administrator (1989-91) in the City Education Office of São Paulo.

For those who knew Paulo Freire well, his administrative abilities did not come as a surprise. His secret was knowing how to run things in a democratic way. In his almost two-and-a-half years as Secretary for Education, he managed to create a team of five or six assistants who could work with great autonomy and who could substitute for him in any emergency. There was just one weekly meeting in which they talked about the general policy of the Education Office. If it was necessary, new bearings were taken. Paulo Freire fiercely defended his opinions, but he knew how to work as part of a team, far from the waywardness of which he has been accused. He had authority, but he used it democratically. He faced situations of conflict with enormous patience. He used to say that working for change in education demanded patience of a historical nature because education is a long-term process.

What were the most important structural changes introduced by Paulo Freire in the city's network of schools?

He himself gives the answer in his book on his experiences as Secretary (*A educação na cidade*, pp.79-80): 'The most important structural changes introduced into the schools affected their autonomy.' School councils and student clubs were restructured. However, Paulo Freire goes on: 'The greatest step forward at the level of school autonomy was to allow the schools themselves to come up with their own teaching projects which with the administration's support could speed up change within the school.'

To illustrate this process, I shall give three examples: the programme of ongoing training for teachers, the literacy programme for young people and adults, and the practice of interdisciplinarity.

Ongoing training for teachers

From the beginning of his administration, Paulo Freire insisted that he was deeply committed to the question of the ongoing training of educators. His training programme for the teaching profession was governed by the following principles (*A educação na cidade*, p. 80):

- the educator is the subject of his or her practice, it being necessary to create it and recreate it through reflection about his or her daily work;
- the training of educators must be ongoing and systematic, because practice is done and redone;
- teaching practice requires understanding of the very genesis of knowledge, that is to say of how the process of knowing takes place;
- the training programme of educators is a condition for the process of restructuring the school curriculum.

With this programme, Paulo Freire wanted to train teachers to take a new stance on teaching, above all considering the authoritarian tradition in Brazil. No one could expect this to be overcome in a few years. For this reason, Paulo Freire put his well-known teaching patience to the test, in political decision-making, technical competency, affection and above all in the exercise of democracy. He ended up being successful. Teacher training goes far

beyond, transcends, theoretical courses of explanation about democracy. Training takes place through practice, through genuine participation. Democracy in practice is worth a lot more than democracy in theory.

Literacy programmes for young people and adults

As well as the intense programme of training the educator, Paulo Freire was the impetus behind a literacy movement in partnership with popular movements and alongside the expansion of evening classes and supplementary teaching.

This project, effectively initiated in January 1990, had great repercussions both in the city of São Paulo and in other Brazilian States, because its aim was to strengthen popular movements. It was one of the rare examples of partnership between civil society and the State. It is obvious that in these circumstances such a relationship is not always harmonious but shot through with tensions. But that is a necessary condition for the State and the popular movements to work in parity.

The MOVA-SP did not impose just one way of working or, as they used to call it, the 'Paulo Freire method'. It tried to maintain pluralism, only without accepting non-scientific and non-philosophical authoritarian and racist teaching methods. Even without imposing any methodology, the political-pedagogical principles of Paulo Freire's theory of education were maintained, synthesised in a libertarian concept of education, underlining the role of education in constructing a new historical project, the theory of knowledge that sets out from concrete practice in the building of knowledge, the student as subject of knowledge, and an understanding of literacy not just as a logical, intellectual process but also as being deeply affective and social.

Practising interdisciplinarity

The vastness of Paulo Freire's work and his many journeys through different areas of knowledge and practice bring us to another central theme of his theory-practice: interdisciplinarity. This is not just a teaching method or an attitude of the teacher. It is demanded by the very nature of the act of teaching.

The activity of teaching using interdisciplinarity or transdisciplinarity implies the establishment of a participatory and ultimate school in the training of the social subject. The educator, the subject of his or her teaching activity, is capable of drawing up teaching-apprenticeship programmes and methods which can be introduced into his or her school in the community. The fundamental aim of interdisciplinarity is to experience a global reality that is written into the daily lives of the pupil, teacher and people and which, in traditional schooling, is fragmented and compartmentalised. Articulating wisdom, knowledge, experience, school, community, environment, etc. is the aim of an interdisciplinarity which is translated into practice through working collectively and in solidarity in the organisation of work in the school. However, there is no interdisciplinarity unless there is decentralisation of power – unless the school has effective autonomy. Paulo Freire's last book, published in Brazil on 10 April 1997

less than a month before his death, is called the *Pedagogy of Autonomy*.

Paulo Freire left the City Education Office on 27 May 1991. After nearly two-and-a-half years, he returned to his library and to his academic activities 'in the manner of one who knowing, does' as he wrote in the epilogue to his book *A educação na cidade* (p. 143). In fact, Paulo Freire remained actively present in the Office, translating his wide experience into the praxis of the projects carried out by the Office. At his farewell, he said 'Even though I am no longer Secretary for Education, I shall remain with you in another way . . . You can continue to count on me in the formulation of an education policy, of a school with another "face", which is more joyful, companionable and democratic' (*A educação na cidade*, p. 144).

A transparent personality

How did Paulo Freire react to criticism of himself and his work? Attacks on him were extremely rare because his ideas might generate controversy, but not his person. His personality was transparent. He had no truck with hypocrisy. He never responded to personal criticism, neither did he argue with critics of his work. Paulo Freire believed that humour is a teaching weapon that favours progress, but not controversy. Humour is constructive and controversy, frequently, destructive. For this reason, he never argued with any of his critics. This does not mean that he ignored them or made no reply.

He looked on criticism positively and tried to learn from it. When he responded indirectly in his books – and he did so systematically – he tried, above all, to place his work in context, revealing him to be a child of his time. In this sense, we can say that there is an evolution in his thinking in which he overcomes a certain 'ingenuousness' – as he himself says in *Pedagogia da esperança* (p. 67).

But there are also critiques that come from very different and even contradictory readings of Paulo Freire's work. Legitimate and serious readings. However, in this case, he had the right to disagree and he did disagree with those readings: in many of them he did not recognise himself.

Certain conservative critics claim that he does not have a theory of knowledge because he does not study the relationships between the subject of knowledge and the object. He is only interested in the end product. This is not true: above all, his thinking is based on an explicit anthropological theory of knowledge. Others accuse him of authoritarianism, saying that his method assumes the transformation of reality and not everyone wishes to transform it. Therefore his method is not scientific (because it is not universally applicable). His method would certainly be authoritarian if it obliged everyone to participate in the transformation. It's obvious that this criticism ignores the fact that Paulo Freire does not accept the idea of pure theory – for him an illusion – but critical theory rooted in a social and political philosophy. He rejects the idea of scientific neutrality – as he rejects academicism – and argues that the conservatives, on the pretext of the political neutrality of pure theory, are concealing their conservative ideology.

What does an educator leave as a legacy?

In the first place he leaves a life, a biography. And Paulo enchanted us with his gentleness, his mildness, his charisma, his consistency, his commitment, his seriousness. His words and actions were words and actions of struggle for a 'less ugly, less wicked, less inhuman' world, as he used to say. Along with love and hope, he also leaves us a legacy of indignation in the face of injustice. In the face of it he would say that we cannot 'sweeten' our words.

As well as the testimony of a life of commitment to the cause of the oppressed, he leaves us an immense *œuvre* in countless editions of books, articles and videos scattered around the world. I was asked a number of times why his pedagogy was so successful. I replied that it was because a 'pedagogy of dialogue' did not humiliate the student or anyone else. Conservative pedagogy humiliates the student and Paulo Freire's pedagogy gave dignity to the student, placing the teacher at his or her side – with the task of orienting and guiding the educational process – as someone who is also seeking, like the student. He or she is also an apprentice . . . That is the legacy of Paulo Freire.

He did not see education as just a technique based on a theory of knowledge, but as a social, political and anthropological matter. Because he based his theory and practice on an anthropology and he devised a profoundly ethical way of teaching. It is necessary to conscientise, but without violating the conscience of the other person.

In the development of his education theory, Paulo Freire managed, on the one hand, to demystify the dreams of the pedagogism of the 1960s, which claimed, at least in Latin America, that the school could do everything, and, on the other hand, he managed to overcome the pessimism of the 1970s, when it was said that the school was purely reproductive. Doing this, overcoming ingenuous pedagogism and negativist pessimism, he managed to remain faithful to utopia, dreaming positive dreams.

Several generations of educators, anthropologists, social and political scientists, professionals in the areas of exact, natural and biological sciences were influenced by him and helped to construct a pedagogy founded on freedom. What he wrote is part of the lives of a whole generation who learnt to dream of a world of equality and justice, who struggled and are still struggling for it. Many will have to continue his work even though he left no 'disciples'. There is nothing less Freirian than the idea of a disciple, a follower of ideas. He always challenged us to 'reinvent' the world, to pursue truth and not to copy ideas. Paulo Freire left us roots, wings and dreams. ■

The above article was translated from Portuguese by Philip Lee.

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