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## Tribute to Paulo Freire (1921-1997)

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Paulo Freire has been one of the most significant educationists of the last 30 years. His work is cited freely in the literature on education and social thought emerging not only from the 'Third World', which provided the context for most of his pedagogical practice and ideas, but also from Western industrialised centres.

Freire continues to enjoy iconic status among educators and educationists alike. An Argentinian friend of mine, Daniel Schugurensky, wrote recently, with respect to adult education, that 'in Latin America, Paulo Freire constitutes a watershed. There is before and after Freire' (Schugurensky 1996: 344). Another Argentinian, Carlos Alberto Torres, once remarked: 'We can stay with Freire or against Freire, but not without Freire.' (Torres 1982: 94). And Freire's influence extends beyond the field of education to be felt in a variety of areas, including sociology, development studies, language studies, anthropology, philosophy, theology, communications and cultural studies.

The greatest and most enduring aspect of Freire's work is his emphasis on the political nature of all educational activity. In Freire's view, there is no such thing as a 'neutral' education. Education can domesticate individuals, contributing to their acceptance of or passivity in relation to the status quo. Alternatively, it can liberate them, providing them with the disposition to engage in a dialectical relationship with knowledge and society. This is part and parcel of a critical reading of the world.

One way teacher-student transmission, often a reflection of a wider prescriptive process of communication, constitutes a domesticating education. Freire advocates a process characterised by a dialogical approach to knowledge. Although not being on an equal footing (Freire in Shor and Freire 1987: 103), teacher and learner learn from each other as they co-investigate dialectically the object of knowledge. In his adult education work among peasants, he generated a process whereby learners are allowed to stand back from that which is familiar to them to perceive it in a more critical light (e.g. Scott 1996: 345). It is the means by which one can reflect critically on one's action with a view to transforming it. This process is referred to as 'praxis', a key concept in Freire's thinking and pedagogical work (Allman and Wallis 1990). The concept is initially used in the sense employed by Marx in his early writings ('revolutionising practice'). Later, in the analysis of the Guinea Bissau experience, where education is viewed in relation to the social relations of production, Freire employs it in a manner reminiscent of Marx's *Capital* Vol. 1, where the area of productive activity constitutes the focus of reflection for transformative action (Freire 1978).

In a number of works, Freire underlined the point, already implicit in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that educators have to be directive (Freire in Shor and Freire 1987: 103;

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Freire in Freire and Macedo, 1995: 394). He emphasised the term 'teacher', as opposed to 'facilitator', for this purpose. The kind of pedagogy he advocates is no laissez-faire pedagogy, but one which entails direction and substance. Freire has maintained, in various places, that teachers need to exercise authority in any teaching situation, an authority derived from their competence as pedagogues: 'Teachers maintain a certain level of authority through the depth and breadth of knowledge of the subject matter that they teach' (Freire in Freire and Macedo 1995: 378). He adds, however, that this authority should never degenerate into authoritarianism (Freire in Shor and Freire 1987: 91; Freire in Horton and Freire 1990: 181). The authority which Freire advocates rests on the strength of other important qualities: humility, tolerance and love (Freire 1995). An e-mail message by Valerie Scatamburlo, on the Progressive Sociologists Network, drew my attention to a remark which Freire is reported to have uttered only a few days before his death: 'I could never think of education without love and that is why I think I am an educator, first of all because I feel love...'. It captures the spirit of a published talk on the qualities which, Freire feels, a 'progressive teacher' should possess. This talk was originally delivered at the University of London's Institute of Education a few years ago (Freire 1995: 20).

The emphasis on a dialectical mode of thinking, certainly reflected in Freire's own style of conceptualisation (Allman 1988, 1994), immediately recalls Hegel and Marx, the latter being undoubtedly the greatest influence on Freire's work (Allman 1994, 1996). Marx's early writings are constantly referred to and provide the basis for Freire's social analysis in his most celebrated work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This book was conceived of and written during the first six years of his long period of exile which involved spells in Bolivia, Chile, the US and Geneva. Freire has often acknowledged, in this regard, the influence of his first wife, Elza (died in 1986) and such close collaborators as the Chilean, Marcela Gajardo (Freire 1994), a colleague who, among other things, introduced him to the writings of a very important source of influence - Antonio Gramsci (Morrow and Torres 1995: 457).

Freire was exiled following the multinationals-backed military coup of 1964 which overthrew the 'populist' administration of Joao Goulart. At the time of the coup, he was about to coordinate a nation-wide literacy programme which would have rendered several Brazilians (peasants and city dwellers alike) literate and therefore eligible to vote. Because of this and the fact that his approach involved a process of 'reading the word and the world' (Freire and Macedo 1987), Freire's work was perceived as posing a threat to the established status quo. Interestingly enough, he presents his experience of exile as a long process of 'praxis', of gaining critical distance from familiar surroundings (Freire and Faundez 1989).

The Marxist-humanist element is all pervasive in Freire's work which is, however, eclectic in that it draws on a broad range of writings, including the work of Leszek Kolakowski, Karel Kosik, Eric Fromm, Antonio Gramsci, Karl Mannheim, Mao, Che Guevara, Teilhard de Chardin, Franz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Lev Vygotski, Amilcar Cabral, and the Christian Personalism theory of Tristram de Atiade and Emanuel Mounier (Youngman 1986, Jarvis 1987, Torres 1993, Taylor 1993, Gadotti 1994, Elias 1994).

Pedagogical activity is not discussed in a vacuum, but in the context of an analysis of power and its structural manifestations. There are those who often miss this key point and, consequently, adulterate his work by reducing it to a 'method' or 'technique' (Aronowitz 1993, Macedo 1994, Macedo in Freire and Macedo 1995, Allman 1996). In his early work, the focus is primarily on the Latin American context where Freire, who

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was born in Recife in the north-east state of Pernambuco, draws on his experiences as an adult educator, the vocation he engaged in after having studied law and taught philosophy of education. The context of his adult education work is the Nord-este itself, one of the world's most impoverished areas.

Freire initially worked in a region characterised by semi-feudal relations of production which campesinos had to accept to gain access to land (Ireland 1987). They therefore lived and worked in a situation of abject thralldom. The rural landowning class is engaged in a historical alliance with the national indigenous bourgeoisie located in the south-east, the Sao Paulo area (Ireland 1987). Given the situation of stark contrast in access to material goods and power, in a country whose fortunes have been guided by colonial and neo-colonial interests, it is not surprising that social class analysis provides the guiding thread for Freire's writing in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This is something which, as Freire himself has admitted, is conspicuously missing from his first published work, *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (published in English as part of Freire 1973).

Social class analysis, however, constitutes an important feature of the radical Brazilian religious movement with which Freire's work is strongly associated. Freire, himself a 'man of faith',<sup>1</sup> was certainly influenced, in the development of his ideas, by the radical religious organisations which made their presence felt in Brazil in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Dekadt 1970). There are strong similarities between his emancipatory views on education and the education document produced by the Latin American bishops at the 1968 Episcopal Conference in Medellin, Colombia (Hartung and Ohlinger 1972: 21). This conference represents a landmark in the development of liberation theology. The strong relationship between his views and that of liberation theology has led the Church in Latin America, especially in the Christian base communities, to espouse many of Freire's pedagogical principles. Freire dwells at length on the concept of religious commitment, based on a lifelong struggle for social and economic justice, in a series of writings on the 'prophetic Church', which he distinguished from the 'traditional' or 'modernising' Church (Freire 1985: 137),<sup>2</sup> the former regarded by him as a 'necrophiliac winner of souls'.

His early work focused, for the most part, on class. Freire (Freire in Freire and Macedo 1993: 172) claims to have made no less than 33 references to social class in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and this led to some severe criticisms levelled at him, primarily by North American feminists who pointed to the invisibility of women and their experiences in his project of liberation. This criticism seems to have had a telling effect on Freire's later writings, including work which was born out of contact with the North American educational milieu. Issues concerning race and gender, and social movements in general, began to feature prominently in this work. In published dialogues, Donaldo P. Macedo, the US based scholar with whom Freire had a fruitful association (Freire and Macedo 1993, 1995), pushed him hard on such issues.

Writers like Kathleen Weiler (1991) sought to fuse his ideas with those representing different strands within feminism. Probably the one feminist writer who openly embraces his ideas, not allowing his earlier 'phallogocentric paradigm of liberation' (hooks 1993: 148) to stand in the way, is Gloria Watkins, alias bell hooks (hooks 1989, 1993, 1994). She incorporates Freire's pedagogical ideas within the best critical traditions of Afro-American writing. Freire's work, with its emphasis on liberatory pedagogy, appealed to other Afro-American activists and intellectuals, including Cornel West (1994: xiii) who hailed him 'as the exemplary organic intellectual of our time.' From the mid-1980s onwards, he engaged in 'talking books' (dialogical books) and co-authored texts with a number of writers and educators, including the radical

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adult educator, Myles Horton (founder of the Highlander Folk High School, Tennessee), fellow Latin American exile, Antonio Faundez, the Brazilian theologian Frei Betto (Freire and Betto 1985), a group of academics from UNAM, Mexico (Escobar *et al.* 1994) and the American critical pedagogue, Ira Shor. The last mentioned is one of a number of important North American critical pedagogues who are inspired by Freire's work. They include the Brazilian's great friends, Henry A. Giroux (1985, 1996) and Peter McLaren, the latter having edited two books on Freire (McLaren and Leonard 1993, McLaren and Lankshear 1994). In one of his most recent works, Freire has responded critically to a series of contributions by a number of authors (Freire *et al.* 1997).

Despite his large output as a writer, in Spanish, Portuguese and English, Freire did not forsake direct political activity. When in exile in Geneva, working for the World Council of Churches, he engaged in activities with trade unionists and other social activists in Spain and Italy (Freire 1994), and as a consultant to governments in such former Portuguese colonies in Africa as Guinea Bissau (Freire 1978, Freire and Macedo 1987, Freire and Faundez 1989)<sup>3</sup> Cape Verde, and Sao Tome and Principe. Following his return to Brazil, after 16 years in exile, he served as consultant for the Nicaraguan (Arnove 1986, Carnoy and Torres 1990) and Grenadian (Torres 1985, Jules 1995) literacy campaigns.

His lifelong commitment to social justice culminated in his serving, on behalf of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party), as Secretary of Education in the Municipal Government of Sao Paulo, during Mayor Luiza Erundina de Souza's term of office. There he engaged in reforming the public education sector and developing a strong adult education programme (Mova Sao Paulo), involving, as much as possible, mass organisations and other stakeholders in the educational enterprise (Freire 1991, Freire 1993, Torres 1993, 1994).<sup>4</sup>

His writing continued unabated until recently, when he published, as letters to his niece, a series of reflections on his youth, childhood, exile and contemporary debate (Freire 1996). More recent work includes Freire (1997), and Freire and Macedo (1997). Other writings and interviews will no doubt surface in the various books, centring around his ideas, which are about to see the light. And they will resurface in the various conferences, symposia and conference sessions celebrating his work.

He was due to visit Cuba, in the first fortnight of May, to collect an award from Castro, something to which he had really been looking forward. Alas, it was not to be! At 5.30 am (Brazilian time) on Friday 2nd May, Paulo Reglus Neves Freire breathed his last at the Albert Einstein Hospital in Sao Paulo, where he had been admitted because of heart problems. The spirit of this remarkable figure, however, lives on. It is constantly felt by those, like myself, who often seek refuge and solace in his works, to recuperate that sense of hope and agency which can easily be lost as we are constantly assailed by the dominant hegemonic discourse of technical rationality and marketability. This sense of hope is communicated to us through the constant fusion of reason and emotion which I consider to be one of the distinctive features of Paulo Freire's style as writer and speaker.<sup>5</sup>

The power of the Brazilian educator's spirit was recognised, a long time ago, by none other than General Augusto Pinochet who, on seizing power through the 1973 coup, years after Freire had left Chile, paid the Brazilian the supreme compliment, declaring him 'persona non grata'.<sup>6</sup>

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# Notes

1. This was stated by Freire himself in a forum, featuring himself, Augusto Boal and Peter McLaren, at the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* conference, University of Nebraska, Omaha, USA, March 1996.
2. For discussions concerning the connections between Freire's work and religion, see Retamal (1981), Elias (1994), Cooper (1995) and Lange Christensen (1996).
3. See also the video taped interview, *Guns and Pencils* featuring Paulo Freire, Alan Thomas and J. Roby Kidd.
4. On Freire's work as Education Secretary in Sao Paulo, see O'Cadiz *et al.* (1997).
5. I am indebted to my colleague, Dr Mary Darmanin, for reminding me, in a recent conversation, of this important aspect of Freire's work. Freire has always communicated with me, in his writings, on an emotional as well as an intellectual level.
6. I provide a more extensive treatment of Freire's work and ideas in Mayo (1993) and Mayo (1995).

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