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# An Interview with Adriana Puiggrós of Argentina: The Dilemmas of Latin American Educational Systems and the Work of Paulo Freire

Peter McLaren

Translated by Fiona Taler

Adriana Puiggrós is a Professor of Argentine and Latin American Education at the University of Buenos Aires. She is the daughter of Rudolpho Puiggrós, former President of the University of Buenos Aires and noted political essayist. Her maternal grandparents were Russian Jews who escaped the purges of Stalin, and finally settled in Argentina in 1931.

Dr. Puiggrós' family was targeted for assassination by the government of Isabel Perón. Professor Puiggrós's office and family home were bombed and she fled Argentina to Mexico. She earned her doctorate at the Autonomous National University of Mexico City. She returned to Argentina in 1984, and is now working as a researcher for the National Council of Science and Technology.

**Peter:** Can you describe your first encounter with Paulo Freire's work? At what point in your life did you first become aware of his writings?

**Adriana:** Initially, I became aware of Paulo Freire's work by word of mouth and via newspaper articles around 1966. Only in 1970 did I read *Education: The Practice of Freedom* for the first time, since Freire's thought faced

great difficulties in becoming known in Argentina.

**Peter:** What were those difficulties?

**Adriana:** Freire's thinking was introduced by activists of the Catholic left wing, advocates of "Liberation Theology," who, following the Bishops Conference in Medellin in 1968, sought to build a new philosophy within the Church. They were influenced particularly by Monsignor Helder Camara, Bishop of Olinda and Recife in Brazil, and they were committed to socialist revolution and trying to establish links between Marxism and Christianity. It was among these groups that the revolutionary Peronist left wing, active in Argentina between the end of the 1960s and the late 1970s, evolved.

**Peter:** How were you influenced?

**Adriana:** In those days, I was an associate lecturer at the University of Buenos Aires. In a lecture I gave in 1972, I included reference to Freire's works together with a paper that described liberation pedagogy, combining the strong and distinctively Latin American Marxism in which I had been educated myself with elements of Frantz Fanon's work. A key feature of this approach was the difficulty it posed to establishing the differences between a colonial and a hegemonic system, a difficulty shared by a large section of the left and Argentine popular nationalism.

**Peter:** Explain the differences here.

**Adriana:** The differences were no mere side issue. They were the key to understanding Argentina's distinctive situation, and where its economy, politics, social organization and culture differ from, or are similar to, those of other Latin American and Third World countries. Cultural colonialism, one of the axes of Freire's critical stance, involves one culture invading the consciousness of another, eliminating that culture and imposing another language and worldview in its place.

**Peter:** There is certainly a history of that in Latin America.

**Adriana:** Yes, one of the landmarks giving rise to modern history, 500 years ago, was indeed a colonialist event—the beginning of the conquest of America. The founding scene of Latin American education consists in the "conquistadores" reading to the indigenous people, in Spanish, a list of their rights and obligations. By this ritual, incomprehensible to the Incas, Nauhas, Guaranis, and other native peoples, a colonialist pedagogy was established. Later, however, came national liberation movements which developed into the struggle for independence in Latin America during the 19th century. These struggles were led by liberal politicians together with progressive sectors of the Latin American

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populations who sought modernization and democratization of their societies.

**Peter:** *How did these movements impact education?*

**Adriana:** One of the main aims of liberal political projects in education was to help integrate new nations, molding the population into the form of the citizen. The role of these projects was contradictory: they fought against "barbarity"—that is, popular political culture—contributing to the development of societies, but developed them in an unjust manner.

**Peter:** *What were the consequences of this development? In what ways was education impacted?*

**Adriana:** The development of Latin American education has been *uneven* in the way it has reached the people: *combined* in the sense that it has included discursive fragments derived from other cultures, from differing educational approaches to schooling, and from other stages of technological development; and *asynchronic* in the sense that its rate of development has differed in each country, region, and social sector.

The political, social, and cultural specifics of each society were very important in shaping the kind of "articulation" produced between the discourse of public school and that of popular

education. An example is evident in the political-cultural differences resulting from the "collision" between the indigenous population and public schooling in Mexico, and that between immigrants and public schooling in Argentina.

In Latin America, the classic tasks of ideological transmission and enforcing the dominant "habitus" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) were achieved in the context of deep inequalities. The school enacted simultaneously its unifying function and that of creating and maintaining distinction. These mechanisms are not, of course, the exclusive heritage of Latin American education systems, but are typical rather of the founding model of school systems.

**Peter:** *How has Freire's work shed light on these dilemmas?*

**Adriana:** Achieving unification and distinction together (articulating two seemingly contradictory functions) necessarily requires exercising hegemony; that is, it involves removing some differences and consolidating others, linking everything into a central system. One of the main differences between central and peripheral school systems is the weakness of the hegemonic function among the latter—which subverts the political-pedagogical modes of articulation in that framework.

Consequently, when we refer to the "combined" character of education systems in Latin America, it must be remembered that this term does not imply a complimentary exchange between forms that are culturally different but politically equal, but rather, an exchange that involves dominance and antagonism. As we will see shortly, the antagonism within the pedagogic relationship was one of the most salient ideas in Paulo Freire's pedagogical critique.

**Peter:** *In what ways is the inequality of the pedagogic relationship manifest in Latin America?*

**Adriana:** The "combined" character of Latin American education systems reflects deep rifts in the social and cultural fabric. These appear like imprints in the system.

**Peter:** *Give us an example.*

**Adriana:** One that especially stands out among them is the "gap" between the school *habitus* and the habitus of those educated within other pedagogical forms (such as within the family, in matched/pair groups, in ethno-linguistic groups, etc.). The high level of scholastic failure, in terms of both understanding and school retention, among a large part of the Latin American people shows that certain sectors of the society have not been "sufficiently integrated" into the hegemonic system.

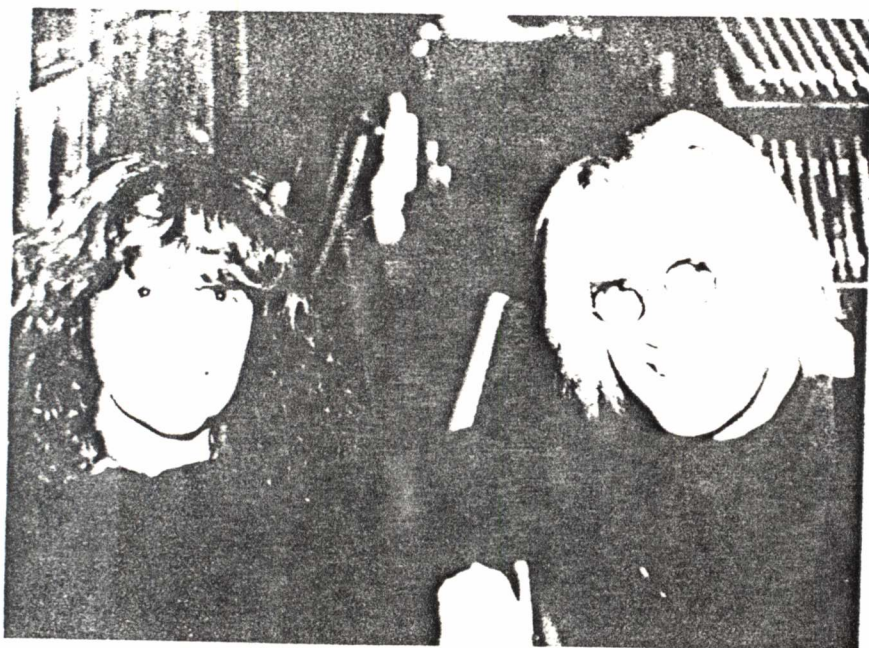
Even so, school systems have attained a very important place in all of Latin America. They have come to comprise the *legal education system*, and in many countries reach a very high proportion of the population. Their development depended on a range of conditions being met.

**Peter:** *Such as . . .*

**Adriana:** The most notable were:

- the existence of projects to build Nation-States, directed by social sectors having the potential to establish a hegemony
- bases for achieving the demand for mass conformity in the face of a project of national integration within a social order grounded in inequalities and differences; that is, to establish social accords, implicit or explicit, formal or informal, among "directors" and "directed"
- establishing the belief that the school system is able to promote

**Photo 1.** Adriana Puiggrós (left) and Peter McLaren (right) dialogue about the work of Paulo Freire in Latin America. At one point Puiggrós was driven from Argentina by the Perón Junta. She completed her doctoral work in Mexico.





movements within the society such as social mobility, morality and "recovery" or "redemption," and economic progress

- faith that agreements can be reached across generations such that projects can build from generation to generation
- agreement among the key social subjects (or forces/players) that there is a need for the state to play a formative role, that the periphery is moving toward development, and that the modern education system is also moving in that direction (Amin, 1989, p. 34)
- the existence of a dominant culture able to penetrate deeply into the rest of the cultures; a culture that expresses itself pedagogically through a *habitus* capable of transcending the gap that separates it from the *habitus* of these other cultures and imposing itself upon them (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p. 113)

The incomplete, unequal, and unjust development of Latin American societies and the unfinished nature of the nations themselves did not impede the spread and growth of school systems, in that some of these necessary conditions could nonetheless be met. The ways in which and extent to which conditions were met—in different combinations and degrees—gave rise, precisely, to different educational processes and pedagogical discourses among the various Latin American countries.

The differences can be ordered along a spectrum. At one end, we could locate those countries where a hegemonic modern pedagogical discourse existed which defeated other discourses, subordinating them to its logic and incorporating their elements. At the other end would be those countries where a modern pedagogical discourse could not fracture and articulate the "hard core" of other cultures and thus establish a dominant relationship over them. Everywhere, however, vestiges of colonialism remain encapsulated in Latin American education. They were never completely expunged from the hegemonic orders that proceeded to be built in each country after the formal creation of nation-states.

In those countries where the bourgeoisie effected a more elaborate de-

velopment of the state, a more diversified economy and a more comprehensive education system, the project of creating a nation-state took on a symbolic presence that was more diffused and better sustained than in other countries, although it remained incomplete in all of them. In general, the Latin American bourgeoisie is characterised by shortcomings in national and social consciousness and a structured dependent character. There are exceptions in those "national bourgeoisies" who participated in moments of the rise of popular nationalism, especially in Mexico. But for a century the pedagogical discourse of public schooling had fundamental ideological effects. It helped forge the idea of the Nation—albeit a dependent nation—within the collective imagination of large sectors of the urban population and, in some cases, among rural sectors as well.

I have been arguing in support of the view that situations of internal cultural colonialism, typical of Latin America, are not created independently of national school systems. Rather, they are a function of the *failure* of those very school systems, insofar as they constitute a large part of their being *resistant* to penetration by modern pedagogical discourses.

In Brazil, constituting public education had been a late development. Despite this, by the time Freire was building his educational position at the start of the 1960s, there already existed a school system of the type associated with nation-states—although deep cultural rifts remained and large segments of the population were not attending school. Paulo Freire was director of the Department of Education and Culture of the SESI (Industrial Social Service) in Pernambuco between 1946 and 1954, during the popular nationalist government of Getulio Vargas. Hence, Freire's early work comprised part of a program aimed at extending a hegemony of modern culture. That government had begun, around 1930, a process of building a national State via a strategy of articulating discursive fragments derived from diverse social and political "subjects" (Laclau, 1978). In 1947, Vargas implemented the Youth and Adult Education Campaign. This operated until 1954 (the year of Vargas' suicide), and prompted an important social mobilisation process. At that

time, public instruction was aimed at rural sectors as well as at technical-industrial training of mass workers.

The differences between the popular nationalist regime in Brazil from 1930 to 1945 and the popular nationalism occurring during the same period in Argentina (Peronism) can explain the different paths taken by liberation pedagogy in the two countries. The sheer range of contradictions evident in Brazil (a combination of regional, racial, ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic differences) resulted in a smaller political-cultural concentration to that in Argentina. There, as we will shortly see, Peronism acted upon a society that had been undergoing a process of cultural, political, and linguistic integration for decades. Amid the web of cultural relations in Brazilian society, colonialist enclaves persisted strongly. In Argentina, by contrast, they had all but disappeared. Between 1945 and 1955, the popular masses had gone through a profound process of cultural homogenisation.

Let me, finally, draw a conceptual distinction. The pedagogic discourse of the colonist tries to fill the minds of its recipients with another culture. It functions, however, as an external element which—according to Freirean thought—can be eradicated if the recipient becomes "conscientized" to the invasion he or she suffers. By contrast, hegemonic pedagogic discourse needs to break up (fragment) the recipient educatee's culture and establish multiple bonds with the fragments. Many educatees participate in the schemes of dominant pedagogical discourse in a resigned and subordinated manner.

*Peter: What do you see as the main contributions Freire has made to education specific to Argentina?*

*Adriana:* The fact that Freire's work encountered such difficulties in coming to influence Argentine education is really symptomatic of two things. First, Freirean discourse was not yet a pedagogical *theory* but existed rather as a series of ideas that were highly corrosive and had not transcended an identity as highly effective political-pedagogic strategies tied to a specific locale and historical moment. Second, it was evident that these ideas contained enormous potential for effecting a crisis within modern pedagogy: a pedagogy whose central axes are the



banking relationship; belief in the importance of the positions of *educator* and *educated*; recourse to a logic of similarity, identity, and homogeneity for building educational discourse; and the myth of the separation between education and politics. Putting liberation pedagogy into practice cast doubts over a pedagogy that had been hegemonic for a century—despite the fact that some of its theoretical trappings, such as the overgeneralized use of the term “colonialism,” were impediments to liberation pedagogy spreading through more modern Latin American societies.

Take the case of Argentina. There, from the beginning of the struggle for independence from Spain (1810) to the fall of Perón's second government, certain bourgeois sectors displayed progressive and industrial intentions, supporting these with corresponding education programs. But they were always overruled by projects stressing the export of agrarian commodities and the import of manufactured and capital goods: projects which were speculative and generated external debt. On the other hand, national education projects centered on popular demands for cultural transmission have always been linked to attempts to achieve a national economy that is relatively self-centered. The best examples of this came from the first Peronist governments (1945–1955; 1973–1976). The failure of those proposals in the hands of the old school system was an aspect of the failure of popular nationalist states in their attempts to overcome the old social model [viz., colonial or neo-colonial dependence and subordination. Ed.]

Let's look briefly at the origins of Argentina's school system. In the 1880s, the first pillars of educational legislation were put in place. From then until 1910, various struggles emerged between different educational projects. These culminated in the establishment of a “habitus,” curriculum (explicit and hidden), and hegemonic rituals under the direction of political-pedagogues whom we will call “normalizers.” They espoused a view of education linked to a “vision” of an agricultural exporting country that was culturally and politically limited, rather than to the vision of an industrialized progressive country dreamed by the 1837 generation (whose main

representative was Domingo F. Sarmiento, a strong admirer of Horace Mann), and a good proportion of Argentina's delegates who attended the South American Pedagogical Congress in Buenos Aires at the end of 1882.

In 1910—as expressed in the words of José María Ramos Mejía, president of the National Council of Education, in 1908—it was a common belief in the corpus of Argentine society that:

The power of the State to keep the people on the right road, and at the same time to maintain its own unity and strength, resides, as I have said in the first place, in the school. (Ramos Mejía, 1910)

A few years earlier, in 1905, Law No. 4874, as proposed by Senator Manuel Láinez, had been decreed. That law amended Law No. 1420 (from 1884), which dealt with free and compulsory common education in terms of the national government's responsibilities for provincial primary education. The policies of cutting back and of strengthened federalism that came with Law 1420 were replaced by others through which central—and real—power took in hand the inability of the provinces to contribute to educational provision, and at the same time brought within its compass the basis of a national education system. The decision to centralize came from a political-pedagogical conviction: the people must be kept on the right track. There were several grounds for this, according to someone as representative of oligarchic thought as Ramos Mejía. The most important, however, was the “deeply felt need” that “impels us to open the doors of our country to anyone in the world who wants to inhabit Argentinean soil . . .” but whose “moral consequence has not delayed in making itself felt.”

For “establishment” intellectuals, achieving national unity was a pressing need. This, they felt, was threatened by ideological and cultural plurality. It was argued that differences along these lines were the cause of the bad political and social behaviour of new inhabitants in the central Argentine cities. The State was an indispensable means to carrying out actions tending to limit, keep on track, and subject immigrants to the rules of the game as established by the oligarchy. The latter had called for European migration to deal with

the problem of underpopulation of the national territory. The source of oligarchic riches was not dependent, however, upon a workforce or technical advances, but rather upon the easy rents coming from extensive exploitation of the land. Thus, Argentina received its immigrants in a very different way from the United States. In Argentina, those getting off the ships found themselves facing a closed economic system, where almost all of land ownership was in very large “latifundios” (landholdings) and where industrial development was limited. Immigration was accepted by the Argentine ruling classes as an unfortunate necessity, as an unpleasant and dangerous remedy for “natural ills”—namely, large expanses of land that were not exploited, but which its owners, paradoxically, were unwilling to divide up, as well as underpopulation and the mestizo characteristics of the population. The oligarchy saw integrating immigrants as a political-pedagogic matter. For this reason, they created laws to repress the political and union activity of migrants, and charged public schooling with reaching every corner of the nation to impose the culture of the oligarchic state.

At the same time, however, from the end of the 19th century, the dominant trend among immigrants was toward integration. Almost all the Spanish, most Italians, and great portions of other immigrant groups [though possibly not the English] preferred to send their children to public school, even if this risked losing their language, customs and traditions. Immigrants shared with the Argentine oligarchy the belief in a myth: national unity was possible only through socio-cultural homogeneity. Argentinean society as a whole was unable to conceive of national unity as a product of the articulation of differences, preferring to be accomplices to educational strategies that tended toward concealment, censure or elimination of these differences.

The complementarity between government and civil society was very important in implanting public education; enough to meet the tasks of basic primary education necessary in a country to which tens of thousands of illiterate people were migrating—many of them not Spanish speakers. The compulsory requirement of education had to be assured in many ways. Instruction was



provided on the ships that brought the European migrants. In port and in the immigrants' hotels, signs were posted stating the current rules and obligations concerning public education, along with the penalties for not observing them.

Within civil society, various other means of educating evolved which complemented public schooling. First, there were popular educational societies and popular libraries belonging to groups of Italians, Spanish, Germans and others, as well as attached to guilds, neighbourhoods, progressive political groups, and so on. Their role was one of augmenting public education, with the exception of those under an anarchist banner which, at least on account of their philosophy, were antagonistic to the state. Popular educational societies covered the gamut of educational demands which the state system failed to meet or, rather, that the bureaucracy with its "normalizing" mentality did not identify as shortcomings: for example, women's education, training of workers, and the education of truants or dropouts and illiterate individuals. When associated with political groups, typically the Socialist party or anarchist groups, popular education societies provided ideological-political knowledge. In other cases, they linked with schools, supporting their teaching activities and carrying out complementary tasks inside and outside the schools. The *raison d'être* of the popular education societies was essentially to integrate with the public schools, functioning as support groups. They never comprised a parallel education system.

No Argentine government (conservative, popular nationalist, or development oriented) doubted its obligation to ensure the fulfillment of compulsory schooling until the advent of neoconservatism from the mid 1970s. From the beginning of the century, publicity and social pressure were used to coerce parents to send their children to school. A structure of school agents motivated parents who were either neglectful or ignorant of their obligation to send their children to school. They assumed the model of North American "truant officers," Scottish "compulsory officers," and English "attendance officers" (whose reports were observed by Marx in *Capital* in reference to the exploitation of child labor).

Observation of the law regarding child and female labor was policed through inspection of all workshops and factories by the "Bureau of Compulsory Schooling and Penalties" ("Oficina de Obligación Escolar y Multas"). Popular education societies also played an important role in motivating parents to send their children to public school *which was not only a medium for the political and cultural subjugation of immigrants, but also a site of relationship between State and civil society.*

The demands of the newly emerging working and middle classes, outgrowths partly of external and partly of internal migration, as well as antagonism between the port of Buenos Aires (the center of power) and the interior of the country, were determining factors in the decision to centralize educational power in the nation state. The political-educational concentration (of power) was consolidated during the first half of the century. Administration of the system fell on central organisms. Decision-making mechanisms were vertical. Local, regional, and provincial structures had their power stripped away. Educational organizations of civil society, especially the popular education societies, lost their real power. Rigid norms were established for the teaching profession. Private school activity for monetary gain was subordinated to the national government.

Law 1420 of 1884 had imposed a secular form of state education which was a bastion of the oligarchy and liberal sectors during the period of mass migration. However, in coming to power through elections, the popular-nationalist government of Hipólito Yrigoyen (1916-22) cast doubt on the infallibility of government and public schooling in being able to guarantee political-cultural imposition. Nearing the 1930s, Argentina's Catholic Church, among the most conservative in Latin America, had gained ground, and was imposing obligatory instruction in the Catholic religion in all public (state) schools.

The significance of that development can be seen in relation to the process of ritualization. At the beginning of the century, secular and nationalist rituals were established within the school system. A large part of civil society participated spontaneously in these rituals. The Nation, its symbols and

heroes were venerated in public and private spaces. The day-to-day running of the school was influenced by secular symbols and practices like the use of the flag, the coat of arms, the national anthem and other patriotic songs; regulating behaviour (lining up, standing up in the presence of an adult, not speaking without permission, greeting an adult in chorus, standing to listen to the national anthem, following conventions in covering exercise books and setting out correctly the title page, margins and illustrations, and beginning each page correctly); the choice of pictures and other objects to decorate the classroom; and school functions. As you, Peter, have observed in your book, *Schooling as a Ritual Performance*, school rituals are a substitution for religious rituals, where what is substituted or displaced is subordinated. That subordination has political significance.

Nationalism and secularism, however, were tactical rather than ideological positions within the political culture of the Argentine oligarchy. The oligarchy never seriously intended to subordinate the church, and never allowed its legal separation from the state; in fact, it is still part of the state. At the start of 1940, the Argentine government attained an ideal balance between the state, the Nation, the church, and the interests of class education. Patriotic rituals were not actually substituted but, rather, had religious rituals added to them, such that symbols relating to public and secular school coexisted along with

Photo 2. Photo of Paulo Freire by Tom Alleman.





images from the calendar of saints' days.

In 1946, General Juan Perón took power through popular elections, the first non-fraudulent elections since 1916. Perón's government made an agreement with the church, and religious studies continued to be taught in all public schools. However, a third kind of ritual was introduced and superimposed on the two former types: namely, the ritual of popular nationalism.

**Peter:** *I am interested in the phenomena of Peronism, especially after attending a seminar which you gave on the myth of Peronism in Buenos Aires in the summer of 1992. Can you expand on this?*

**Adriana:** In a strategy typical of Latin American popular nationalism, the Peronist government assumed care of educational needs which traditionally had been catered for by popular education societies or had otherwise been left unmet. Examples include education of the working class, women, adults, and the general democratization of access to all forms of primary and intermediate schooling (a consequence of the improving economic and social status of workers). The positive response of the government toward meeting these needs was a "promissory" act, since in a dependent underdeveloped country with a weak civil society, the government is the only organ with the capacity to provide for mass education.

At the same time, it is necessary to appreciate that the popular nationalist state tends to take control of society's entire educational processes, appropriating the pedagogical elements present in social, political and cultural discourse, public and private alike. In the case of Peronism, state discourse reached into all homes by various means such as party militants, public schools, and through direct communication between the popular president-leader and the working masses at meetings in the public squares, which had been turned into important political-pedagogical sites. Government plans took on many different guises in order to reach all Argentines. One could say, to use a phrase from Argentinean author Julio Cortázar, that following Peronism "there are no more desert islands" in Argentina.

In order to turn this brief history toward explaining the difficulties Freire's ideas met in finding acceptance by Argentinean educationists in the 1960s and 1970s, it must be stressed that the model of popular nationalist education was geared basically to building up *The Nation* on the basis of a new subject, what Laclau (1978) calls *the people* as subject. This project involved the articulation of many discursive fragments coming from diverse popular sectors and media (e.g., women, children, the elderly, working class youth, etc.) into a national discourse which would promote independent capitalist development. This was undertaken in greater depth than had been attempted by the earlier government of Hipólito Yrigoyen between 1916 and 1922. At the same time, however, fulfilling that end required a large measure of symbolic violence, that is, establishing a "banking" model as the organizational norm of political-educational processes. This coercive element gradually took over the whole of Peronist pedagogical discourse, bringing about a separation of the base from the political leaders/directors. But we must point out that this coercion was possible only through the consensus of the entire socio-economic stratum that benefited from the regime's policies, and which still adhered—as did the opposition also—to the theory that political pedagogical homogeneity [uniformity] is the only way for an independent nation to consolidate and for that same group to be elevated as a "power bloc."

After Peronism was ousted by the military coup of 1955, liberal Catholicism began a campaign against state education and in favour of subsidies to private schools. The state began to put schemes in place intended to free it from educational forms designed for the popular sectors and to limit official response to educational needs—with the exception of basic or primary education. Civil society did not have popular institutions capable of generating new democratic alternatives. The experiences under Peronism rekindled in the dominant bloc a mistrust of the state and a preference for their own education system, without, however, removing their demands that this same state should subsidize the greater part of private education. This demand for subsidies to private schooling had a

dual function: it strengthened the elite education system and weakened the public education system.

The equation pushed by the dominant bloc between 1955 and the mid 1980s was as follows:

- Basic (primary) education was to be generalized from the public school system, but with a Catholic orientation, and met from the smallest possible investment.
- From the intermediate level up there should be a strong selection mechanism and the public should be encouraged into the private system.
- A private school system comprising both secular and religious institutions would exist, subsidized by the state, and would be highly profitable for investors.

As is evident from all this, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the time that Freire's work was becoming known, Argentina was not ripe for tackling the matters Freire was addressing. The literacy rate was equal to that of developed countries; almost the entire population had been to school long enough to have absorbed the influence of school patriotism: the newspapers, radio and national cinema reached to the furthest corners of the country. But above all, a comprehensive process of articulation had taken place in the great national political-cultural discourses, an articulation of the differences that simultaneously divided and ordered society.

Here, then, there is a difference by comparison with the situation in Brazil. In Brazil, despite the wide reach of public schooling, "trabalhismo" ["workerism"]—a movement led by Getúlio Vargas—did not comprise all-embracing [totalizing] social discourses. Rather, it promoted modernization of Brazil without fracturing or rearticulating the many discourses peculiar to the diverse groups within the country, such as ethnic, religious, cultural, ritualistic, social, and regional groupings. In Argentina, on the other hand, the modernization brought about by Peronism depended on a process of subordinating, adjusting, and fitting together all political-cultural differences. Public education has played a leading role in this process since the turn of the century.

A hypothesis could be proposed here



that Freire's ideas on literacy (which in fact comprise a political-cultural strategy) would be especially applicable in a society where modern pedagogical discourse has not developed sufficiently to be able to incorporate the educational-cultural "production" of all sectors within a single hegemony. This hypothesis is supported by recent events in Argentina. Precisely when the activities of the last military dictatorship (1976-83) and of Saúl Menem's neo-conservative government managed to fracture the school system, important educational experiments among the popular sectors based strongly on Freire's methodology began to surface. At the moment, Argentina is closer to Brazilian society than to English, Italian, or French society which, for a century, were the mirrors reflecting it.

**Peter:** *How has Freire's work woven itself into your various projects over the years?*

**Adriana:** I met Paulo Freire in Buenos Aires in 1974. At that time (1973-76), Peron was in power for the third time, having won the elections after eighteen years of exile. But by now Peronism was highly fragmented internally and the discourse, which in earlier times had been able to articulate needs and demands from very diverse social levels, was now split into tendencies which could even be mutually antagonistic. The university was governed by the more radical Peronist groups, the so-called Peronist left, which had been infiltrated by liberation pedagogy. I was Dean of the Arts, Faculty of the University of Buenos Aires. The Ministry of Education had invited Freire to give a seminar to a group of Ministry and University leaders. From the Arts Faculty, we had asked him to supervise reforms we were carrying out within the Department and the Institute of Research in Educational Science which belonged to the Faculty. Freire was very interested in our work which, as one of its key pivots, called for a change in the power relations between educators and educatees, and for linking teaching and research with a national popular-democratic project.

Freire insisted, however, that it was necessary to take into account the political and cultural conditions in which these reforms were taking place. At the end of his visit, a colleague and I talked with him through an entire

night. I recall Freire being very concerned about the situation in Argentina, especially about the experiments in participation he had seen in the area of adult education within the Ministry of Education and at the university. He was impressed by the enormous student/teacher mobilization which accompanied and propelled the university reforms. We were very enthusiastic, as everyone is who finds themselves in the midst of those rare moments of political-cultural creativity. Like those who are privileged to participate in the fleeting materializations of a Utopia, we did not understand that the time span for innovative production is always very short, and we thought we had conquered the universe—just like Paulo himself in 1963 during the popular national government of João Goulart, when he established his first dialogues with the "campesinos" [peasants] of Rio Grande do Norte. He had hundreds of campesinos learning to read and write, propelled by the dialogic relationship and the advance of a progressive wave in Brazil. However, by the time he visited Argentina, Paulo Freire had been in prison, and was living in exile. He had suffered the pain of running up against the limits, of realizing that deep changes are only produced convulsively in a society, asynchronously. He was aware that there would never be a single "great day of Resurrection or Liberation" in Latin American societies, and that there was still much work to be done. He also knew that between the fancy of intellectuals and the needs of the people, there are very serious rifts and irretrievable differences. It was probably for these reasons that he talked to us all that night sharing his perception of the imminent end to our experiments. These are deep reforms, he said to us, and this degree of depth cannot be tolerated by the conservative social sectors: the bureaucrats, the people within and outside the government who are opposed to the transformation of this society.

I recall arguing with him until dawn, maintaining that we could still go ahead. I also recall the memo I sent him two months later from my own exile in Mexico. It said: "Paulo, you were right." The Executive Power intervened in the National Universities and these were occupied by the army. The inspector of the Faculty of Arts, Father

Sánchez Abelenda, a very conservative Catholic priest, went through all the classrooms in several faculties of the University of Buenos Aires carrying an olive branch in his hand and exorcizing "the evil spirits of Freud, Marx and Piaget." Many of the university leaders—and many political and trade union leaders—suffered fascist attempts on their lives; these were the first steps in preparing for installing the military dictatorship in March 1976.

I saw Freire again on a few occasions and continued to learn much from him: one always learns when talking to Paulo. I was also concerned during those years about the harassment he endured from the left in Latin America, and particularly the left in Brazil. They were trying to imprison him inside his conceptual parameters and that was very hard. They discounted Freire's contributions because the categories he used did not belong to the Marxist world. A centerpiece of this dispute was his use of the category "pueblo" [people], the complexity of which could not be grasped by the traditional left.

**Peter:** *The traditional left here has also been inhospitable to those of us who have tried to bring new categories and frameworks of analysis into the political project of educational and social transformation.*

**Adriana:** I think that reduction has been one of the most salient mechanisms of discourse building among the traditional left. They confined historical-social processes to categories given in a matrix that actually followed a positivist logic, although it was couched in Marxist terminology. The category "social class" was the only one accepted as a true theoretical mode for classifying the population, as the only valid dimension of social differentiation.

The category "pueblo" is very important in Freire's conceptual universe, precisely because it allows complex social, cultural and political subjects to be included, subjects that don't always coincide in Latin America. This complexity is incompatible with the simplicity demanded by "social class" as a category, which implies the existence of some socio-economically homogeneous sector of the population that exists in opposition to another. Such



homogeneity [uniformity] implies that only elements falling within a narrow spectrum will be admitted under a particular class grouping, but at the same time it hints at *continuity* between ideology, politics and socio-economic organization within society. That is, consciousness is a reflex of structure.

So far as Freire's discourse in the 1960s and, especially the 1970s, is concerned, there were important conceptual differences from Marxism. The basic category for socio-pedagogic analysis, "pueblo," is wider in Freire's thought than social class. It does not exclude class, but allows for identifying subjects that are the outcome of multiple articulations between discontinuous elements. The main characteristic of "pueblo" is that it is a theoretical semi-structured space which allows *specific* articulation between subjects to be recognized. In Freire's work, "pueblo" is used without giving it a conceptual definition. One could say it is used intuitively, and is derived from the personalism of the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier, from Jacques Maritain, from Gabriel Marcel and the Brazilian Tristão de Ataíde. These had influenced Freire's work. The most important feature is that "pueblo" acts as an operator, allowing words that are "contained" in the dispossessed to burst into pedagogical discourse.

The *generative word* is an expression of a *subject* in literacy work, not of an object. Therefore, Freire conceives the very process of literacy as a process of building up discourse, a process of articulating differences rather than an imposition by the colonizer of a closed discourse upon another discourse. The education process, for Freire, becomes legitimate through being a space where new Subjects can emerge.

Conversely, indoctrination not only makes people adapt to the reality in which they live, but also hides that reality from them and makes them incapable of emerging from it and being able to change it. "Pueblo" is a conceptual element within pedagogical discourse that permits the object to emerge as a Subject, within a process where Freire conceives the educator as more than a mere reproducer of dominant ideology and gives her/him the flexibility to engage in cultural interchange with the educatee.

A decade after the appearance of

Freire's first books, another Latin American author, the Argentinean historian and political scientist, Ernesto Laclau, undertook important research into popular nationalisms. In his work, Laclau recovers the richness of the category "pueblo," and explains popular nationalisms as discursive formations whose central axis is the special articulation between the categories "Pueblo" and "Nation," according to the specific features of the historical-social condition in each case that arises.

Returning to the question, it was particularly important for me to read Freire again, in the late 1980s when I was in Mexico, in the light of Laclau's deconstruction of the categories of people and nation, noting that Laclau had not met them via Freire's pedagogy, but rather as a result of the impact that popular national discourses had made on his Marxist roots. Because of my dual position as a Latin American pedagogue/educationist and an intellectual whose political life story was similar to Laclau's, both authors were of great importance to me.

**Peter:** *What do you see as the general strengths and weakness of Freire's work, particularly as it relates to your own?*

**Adriana:** I think Freire offers us elements that enable us to break with modern pedagogical discourse. He constructs a new set of pedagogical images. I have noted earlier that during the 1960s, Freire's developments were still linked to the political-social conditions within which they were produced. Freire himself said in *Education: The Practice of Freedom* that Brazil was living through the transition from one epoch to another, and that it was not possible for the educator to detach her/himself from the new "cultural climate" that was emerging (1972: 47). But when Freire, from his exile, together with educators he had influenced, tried to bring liberation pedagogy into general use, they met serious problems of an epistemological and political nature. This is the stage we are at. I believe Freire's discourse has enormous potential because it probed the limits of modern pedagogy. Now we have to deepen and develop it conceptually, moving it from the imaginary plane to a symbolic plane. Theorizing can also be helpful in using

Freire's pedagogy to frame political-pedagogical strategies. Failure to pursue its theoretical development and its engagement and articulation with other theories could be dangerous for Freire's theory. It would result in his theory being appropriated, and his experience being transferred without effecting the required theoretical-methodological changes. Conversely, greater theoretical development will clarify the unassailable gap that presently exists between theory and practice, revealing that it is precisely in acknowledging existing divisions between these two "registers" that a major advance in constructing new pedagogies is to be found.

"Practicism" has been one of the key characteristics among many groups of educators who claim to be following Freire. The reckless unreflective use of his ideas as if they were *tactics* rather than ideas capable of becoming constructs has had unfortunate political and pedagogical consequences for Latin American education. I'm coming increasingly to believe that in order to implement practice successfully, there is nothing better than a sound theory.

**Peter:** *"Practicism" exists here, too, especially among those who deride theory and pride themselves on being "activists," and it has had a debilitating effect not only on the potential for Freire's work to effect change in the North American context, but on the ability of students and teachers to confront the harsh realities associated with post-modern culture and new global forms of capitalism.*

**Adriana:** Let me briefly discuss the deep fracture I believe Freire has forced in the history of modern Latin American pedagogy. Various axes stand out as supporting the theoretical structure of Latin American pedagogical thought, and which Freire has called into question. I will look at three of these here.

a. The *educator* (it could be the teacher, the Party, the state, adults, humanity, the Anglo-Saxon culture, mass culture as directed by TV . . .) and the *educated* (the student at school, the son or daughter, the activist, the citizen, etc.) are positions that essentially relate to the subjects filling them. In his third thesis on Feuerbach, Marx points out that the educator too must be educated. In



this, Marx undertakes a critique that does not deal with the subordinate position of the educated with respect to the educator, but rather to the class identity of the educator and the contents of her/his culture. Freire advances further in stating that the positions of *educator* and *educatee* are not givens. They are, in fact, positions that are constituted historically and politically and are interchangeable. The educator can be the educatee and vice versa. These are the conditions that make dialogical education possible, and also that defeat reproduction theory.

In the light of Freire's argument, reproductivist critique (reproduction theory) is shown clearly to be a circular way of thinking, an internalized expression of modern pedagogy itself (Puiggrós, 1984; 1986; 1991). It does not recognize education as a site of struggle or modern pedagogy as the outcome of articulation between the different forces that feature in the battle for hegemony. Reproduction theory posits education as a mechanism for reproducing dominant ideology, and in so doing it freezes the educator and educatee within theory in positions that necessarily correspond to dominant class/dominated class. When Freire posits the interchangeability of the educator/educatee positions, he unfreezes the theorizing of this situation, allowing each term in this educational relationship to be recognized as a subject formed by multiple distinguishing features. These subjects grow inside pedagogical discourse; it is within the process of discursive production that the educator/educatee relationship is created. Consequently, that relation has specificity; it is educational.

The specific character of the pedagogical relationship is rejected when Freire analyzes the dominator/dominated relationship in the *cultural* register, rather than as a mere reflex of dominance relations that exist in other planes of social life. The political aspects become internal elements of the pedagogical relation, rather than fixed and eternal as posed by functionalism. It is a quasi-Foucauldian perspective where a "micro-

physics" of educational power can be glimpsed.

b. Within modern pedagogy the precondition for the existence of the *educator* is precisely the existence of an *empty subject*, the educatee, who lacks knowledge, has no form, but needs to be encultured, formed, "subjected." That is, the basis of the pedagogical relationship is the acceptance of a lack of knowledge in the one and possession of knowledge in the other. Once this is established as legitimate, the pedagogical relationship is shaped by a relational bond of political domination. This emerges as a contradiction that could be permanent if conceived outside the context of struggle for hegemony: each generation would receive the same cultural legacy from the previous one; nothing would change; there would be no history; education, defined as a process of "subjection" of the individual to the culture, would be entirely possible.

However, social conflict cuts across the pedagogical relationship thus conceived and history shows, fortunately, that colonizing moves by educators who take learners to be a "tabula rasa" are seldom successful. This view can be supported by using arguments from reproduction theory, but using them in a different sense, thus:

- One of the myths of modern pedagogy, but not a necessary condition for the education relation, is that the educator possesses the whole culture and the educatee is devoid of discourse, so that the roles can be played and the education scenario realized.
  - If, as Bourdieu suggests, the educator transmits an arbitrary cultural element (only a segment and not the whole culture) and the educatees are exposed to countless educators, as happens in modern society, then cultural arbitrariness ensures the impossibility of totalizing all the discourses; producing facsimiles or clones is a matter confined to science fiction.
- c. Freire paints a picture where literacy teaching is possible only so far as the educator recognizes that the educatee has a different culture and

is not a cultural void, and opens herself or himself to the discourse of the educatee. That means education is possible only as a consequence of the "incompleteness" [lack of totality] of the educator's discourse, and recognition that other discourses reside among those being educated. Let us consider two opposing positions within modern pedagogy: Durkheim's functionalism and the Marxist view of reproductive education.

According to the first, it is possible for each generation to transmit its culture, which is considered culture "par excellence," to the following generation. It is seen as necessary that systematic transmission is ensured so that the social order is not altered. In the latter, it is recognized that the dominant class transmits its ideology to the dominated class through education, even though Marxist critique may reject that process as being the mechanism that maintains the social order. Both are typical modern positions. Both conceive education as no more than a function to "homogenize" or "uniformize" society in the mould of the "citizen," and entail a theoretical-political search for synchrony and continuity among educational, political, socio-economic and ideological elements.

Extending Freire's position beyond what is contained in his texts, we could reach the view that dialogical education, conversely, is opposed to banking homogeneity and opens the way to envisaging the possibility of a pedagogical discourse emerging from articulation of *differences*. Now, it must be recognized that when we talk of "differences," we still presuppose inequality, which is an inherent condition of pedagogical relationships. However, contrary to modern pedagogy, we consider that the character of this proposed pedagogical discourse, based as it is on dialectical antagonism, is the only way open to producing the *new*.

This last statement immediately poses the problem of relationship with the teacher *Paulo Freire*. I believe Freire deserves that we, his readers, adherents and other people he has influenced, should incorporate him critically into our work, rather than merely imitate him, try to "apply" his ideas, or



make him into a myth. He had the necessary courage and intelligence to lay the foundation of what you, Peter, have called "a new democratic pedagogical imaginary."

For those pedagogues who are willing to further the development of Freirean pedagogy, a program of hard work is currently unfolding to meet major conceptual challenges. It is essential to develop further and more deeply the "deconstruction" of modern pedagogy, and to identify the routes taken by those who have brought it to the very edge of the abyss: people like John Dewey, Francisco Ferrer y Guardia, A. S. Neill, or the Russian revolutionary pedagogues in the years before the Soviet revolution. Within the Latin American tradition, it involves following tracks that start way back at the beginning of the nineteenth century in pursuit of popular education; a trek undertaken by Bolívar's master, the Venezuelan Simón Rodríguez, arriving

finally at Paulo Freire's liberation pedagogy. This way we advance toward building what Henry Giroux calls "border pedagogy." We will contribute to a pedagogy that is capable of opening up as a space where political-cultural associations and differences can be produced. This can be achieved by allowing all kinds of "antagonisms" (generational, linguistic, domestic, traditional, etc.) to be expressed, and by offering an opportunity for them to be resolved democratically.

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