
Freire's Understanding of History, Current Reality, and Future Aspirations: His Dream, Take on Ethics, and Pedagogy of Solidarity¹

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Paulo Freire's work can assist nearly anyone as she or he seeks to interpret history, to obtain a handle on the present, and to foresee the future. His ideas were impregnated with ontological hope, foundational understandings of our society and transformational empowerment. Thus, this article examines critically an interview I had with Paulo Freire in an effort to identify the relevance of his principles for our different realities and struggles today. Some of the questions I raised were brought up to clarify ideas that I encountered in my personal experiences in the academic community or in my university teachings.

Freire had a great influence in my academic upbringing and development. He was without any doubt my major inspiration. In 1997, when I was getting ready to start writing my doctoral dissertation, I felt the need to seek mentoring by Paulo. By coincidence it just happened that I had a unique opportunity to dialogue and interview him in his residence in São Paulo, Brazil.

In talking with one of his students she advised me not to wait for the following year, as I initially intended. She told me: "Paulo is already talking about dying, and he won't be around next year." I was shocked, but moved ahead as a friend offered to make the appointment for me. Both of us were students of Nita Freire, who we used to call Ana Maria, back in college in the early eighties.

Paulo's generosity and words of wisdom made a difference for me. The interview helped me immensely, given that I was thinking of doing my dissertation on cooperative learning, but was hesitant to do so. After

hearing Paulo talk about fatalism, I identified with him immediately. Because working in the *favelas* or slums of Brazil and U.S. I had often encountered people who would conform to a dismal reality, which Paulo calls fatalism. For years I had strong feelings about that kind of mentality. So that became the central focus of study for my dissertation, which later on became a book on optimism. It addresses how people perceive and use time. For that alone I am very grateful to Paulo. But his interview offered much more.

Since I considered myself one of his followers, I wanted to ask Paulo what he would expect of those who would carry on his teachings and legacy. And his answers made perfect sense to me. I loved it. Often I have used this interview with my graduate and undergraduate students and they have loved it, too. I was also curious about Freire's position on history, how he understood current realities, and what his visions of the future were. Paulo, as usual, provided a lot to clarity and was very down to earth, and direct, which I appreciated. In his humble way, he addressed neo-liberalism as one of the biggest maladies of this century and the lack of ethics he saw today. Nevertheless, for him, hope was one of the intrinsic "engines" that propelled activism and brought about social transformation. I conducted my dialogue with Paulo in the following way.

A Dialogue and One Last Interview with Paulo Freire

César A. Rossatto (CD): Professor Freire, regarding your well known concept of *conscientization*, or conscientious awareness, I would like to expand on your thoughts to define conscientization not only as a state of mind, but as a thought process that also expresses itself through actions. I am experimenting with merging Freirean pedagogy or critical pedagogy with cooperative learning techniques, whereby students work in groups cooperatively, with specific roles and responsibilities and are encouraged to assist one another. These techniques, I feel, are important for the development of collectivity and socialization. What would your opinion be of such an approach?

Paulo Freire (PF): Well, at this present historical moment, all over the world, more intensively in some parts than in others, I believe that any effort to create solidarity, any effort to exercise social or political solidarity, which would certainly include the cooperative effort you describe, is absolutely fundamental.

CR: Could you expand on that?

PF: In other words, we ultimately need to know: How can we identify with and relate to others? Where we cannot relate, why not? What

brought us into this world? What motivates us to keep on fighting, fighting in the sense of making this world less ugly, less aggressive; in the sense of making the world a better place? It is exactly because of this search by these different identities—if you will allow me to play with the contradiction—it is precisely because of the differences which characterize each of us that we will be able to exercise the possibility of solidarity (Author's note: mutual and reciprocal effort, an inclusive perspective) with others. And as I enter into solidarity with others, and they with me, we can combine our unique strengths to reach individual goals that, in reality, are not that different.

CR: And if we lack solidarity?

PF: We need to stimulate and construct solidarity. The absence of solidarity, or indeed the opposite of solidarity, is a powerful force, which derives from the neo-liberal discourse. This neo-liberal discourse is spreading throughout the world, not only in Brazil and the U.S., but also all over the world today. It is a discourse that contains and reveals a political and ideological power that is, perhaps, stronger than the economic dimension of the discourse itself. It is a profoundly fatalistic discourse in that it relates to the interests of the popular masses, but not fatalistic at all when the interests at stake are those of the dominant minorities (which exclude women). A case in point: when you point out that it is absurd that at the end of the twentieth century there are enormous numbers of men and women dying from hunger, the fatalistic neo-liberal discourse tells us: "This is tragic, but there is nothing we can do. This is reality and there is little we can do to change it." One may talk about world unemployment levels, and the fatalistic neo-liberal discourse tells us that the worldwide problem of unemployment is an unavoidable by-product of the economic realities of the late twentieth century. But that is not the case at all. No reality exists just because it must be so, without remedy. Social reality is not natural reality, but a historically induced reality. To confront this fatalistic attitude, which immobilizes people and forces them to adapt to the world, it is necessary to have a discourse of hope, a discourse of faith.

CR: How might this concept be applied in an educational context?

PF: We need to think of a discourse of searching, a discourse of affirmation that becomes reality through a practical solidarity. It is in this sense that I said to you, in the beginning of my answer, that solidarity is an imperative and cooperation is an imperative in the today's historical context. It is necessary for us to develop pedagogy of solidarity, pedagogy of unity in diversity.

CR: What about the broader social context?

PF: I will give you an example of how damaging and immobilizing this fatalistic ideology can be when it negates the unity possible through diversity: the reality of North American society is a strong and clear expression of what I am trying to say. In the United States, the only dominant minority is able to impose their values and dictate conduct to the majority. The majority in this case is the aggregate of all other minorities (including women).

CR: Could you be more specific?

PF: Think about it this way: African-Americans are a minority, Mexican-Americans are a minority, Native-Americans are a minority, and women are a minority. And each one of these minority groups is isolated within themselves and from each other. They stand alone not realizing that together they would be a majority. And from that conscientization they could seek solidarity in spite of their differences, in the sense of confronting an ideological power, the power of the only minority. In other words, my position is not that of someone who believes that the solidarity discourse alone, as if by magic, is sufficient to confront the discourse of isolation. No. What I believe is that this discourse must gain strength from the *practice* of solidarity. It is necessary that we not only talk of solidarity, or of cooperation, but that we practice cooperation and solidarity.

CR: Yes. And in the context of this practice I think that scientific work is very important, and, as you say: "Be an agent of your own history." This scientific work involves making history, but the kind of history that is founded in reality, which will encompass collective and critical action.

PF: Absolutely.

CR: But within this terminology, the term "critical" is often defined in conflicting ways, with different connotations, sometimes directly opposite of how the term was originally intended. I would like to know if you could elaborate on the meaning of the scientific work, which truly transforms society and constructs history, and how can we redefine the term "critical" to give it greater significance?

PF: Generally speaking, as an example, I utilize the term "critical," or *criticidade* (critique), to oppose naivety. I believe that a critical proximity to the world means a strict methodology, a rigorous and methodical relationship between the individual and the object of his or her study. The ability of any individual, you, me, to be critical is directly related to the rigor and method we apply to our search or in exercising our desire to acquire knowledge.

CR: How can this notion be applied in practice?

PF: That is what I call epistemological curiosity. When faced with the world, we experience at first an approximation in which our curiosity operates without reservations. That is, our curiosity operates naively, and for this very reason the findings of this naïve curiosity may lack accuracy. That is to say, I may go about the object of my study with curiosity, almost casually, my method aiming only at an approximation of the object. A more elaborate scientific approach endeavors precisely to overcome this method of approximation by following a rigorous and methodical plan. Rigorously methodical curiosity is exactly what we would otherwise call scientific curiosity. Therefore, to me one of the tasks of progressive education, rather than to hide truths behind naïve curiosity, is to inspire students' *critical* curiosity, and to reveal the world in a rigorously methodical manner. Such a task is crucial to a pedagogy of solidarity, or of cooperation. The task is to provoke the curiosity of the student so that he or she will be methodical and rigorous.

CR: Historical reality is changing rapidly worldwide. The decline of the Soviet Union and the ideological vacuum that decline created is leaving the capitalist system unchallenged and the globalization of economies as a viable option for dominant groups. In Brazil, as in many other countries, educational policies are extremely sensitive to, and influenced by, political factors and dominant macro realities. In the United States, for example, court decisions, and federal, state and local mandates have a major influence on educational policies. Decisions are made from the top down. Within this context, based on your practical experience as an educator, and as the former Secretary of Education for the City of Sao Paulo, how do you see the possibilities for the direction that educators must take when confronted with this historical reality, and how would it relate to my earlier question concerning conscientization and critical thinking?

PF: I believe that education, a progressive and democratic education, has never had a greater need than it does today for the development of a critical conscience and of an epistemological curiosity, particularly when confronted with the immobilizing discourse of the neo-liberal ideology. That is to say that one consequence of this discourse is exactly the materialization of fatalism contained in its message, the fatalism that pushes us to a compromise with the surrounding reality instead of attempting to transform such reality.

The neo-liberal discourse promotes adaptation, when, in my opinion, the ontological position of an individual is to change and transform the

world. Thus, I must become an agent of change and not of passive adaptation to the world, an agent of decision-making, of emancipation, and of ethics. The education of submission is an education that contradicts or that is contrary to the “necessity” of being subject/agent that I have as a human being. My thesis is one in which our engagement as progressive educators requires us to struggle against what is being labeled by the neo-liberal discourse of pragmatism, not in the Deweyan sense of the word, but in a neo-liberal sense. That is to say that education in the context of neo-liberalism is limited to training in the area of technical and vocational skills. In a way, there is certain coherence to this, in that the neo-liberal discourse states: “Reality is what it is; there is nothing we can do but to adapt to it. What matters most is that the individual receives sufficient training to function at a reasonable level of survival.”

This training is exclusively technical and practical in nature. It is limited to teaching basic skills and, from the perspective of the pragmatic neo-liberal discourse: “The dream is dead, the utopia is finished, and history has ended.” I believe the opposite is true: the dream is alive and well, utopia is within our reach. Because it is not possible to take away from the human psyche the inner desire to dream and to make these dreams a reality. Therefore, I must again refer to the initial point of the pedagogy of solidarity or cooperation, which are pedagogies that cannot exist without being driven by fundamental visions of a utopian society. That is why the question of globalization, for example, is interesting. You see, from a third world perspective, when one reads texts about globalization, newspaper articles, documents from conferences and symposia on the subject, all originating in first world countries, one gets the impression that globalization is its own creator—a metaphysical entity, something spontaneously natural and historical, something that emerged because it had to. I don't believe any of that. I believe in history, history made by us, history which molds us as we move forward in the process of making it. Globalization is a specific point in time in the process of the capitalist economical development. Globalization from the point of view of the United States, then, cannot be the same globalization as seen from Brazil's point of view.

The opening of a market is also the moment for economic development of the market. The ethic of the market is a castrated ethic; it is a reduced and lesser ethic. The fundamental ethic is the essential ethic of the human being, the natural ethic of the human being. What globalization proposes is that the natural ethic of the human being be submissive to the interests of the market. I fight against this because I am more than the market. I cannot reduce myself to the object of the market. So, you see, just yesterday a young man who is director of a factory in São

Paulo told us that he would be forced to lay off hundreds of employees within a month as a consequence of the so-called “globalization” of the economy. According to him, he had no choice in the matter; he had to reduce the number of employees or close the factory. This is the ethic of the market. If you ask industry leaders and advocates of globalization, they will tell you that they can do nothing; this is what the market dictates. In my view, it is not the market. Naturally, if we surrender to the laws of the market, then yes, it is the market. But we must change our understanding and practice of the market, so as not to kill men and women with the forces of the market. Humans, men and women, are the only creatures in the world that can, throughout their history, as they learn to compare, to relate to each other, to evaluate options and make decisions, become ethical beings.

Perhaps never before did we have so much need for ethics as we do today, but not the ethics of the market. I am referring to the kind of ethics that I call the essential ethics of the human being; the ethics that are presently suffering from the exploitation of humanity; the ethics that are suffering because of discrimination based on race, gender, and social class; the ethics that are suffering because of the negation of human beings at the hands of other human beings. Never before was the fight for such ethics so vital in the field of pedagogy as it is today, in the practice of teaching, in business, and in politics. I can tell you with confidence that there is only one way to reinvent the world, and that is to have ethics: ethics in politics, ethics in the means of production, and ethics in cultural activities.

Let me give an example. I just completed a short book that will be published here and in the United States entitled *Pedagogia da Autonomia: Saberes Necessários à Prática Educativa (Pedagogy of Autonomy: Necessary Knowledge for Educational Practice)*. This book has been completely structured around the necessity to fight in favor of addressing the ethics problem in great detail. From the first pages to the very last, I go back and forth on the subject of ethics. Because without ethics, I must confess, I would not know what to do.

CR: I agree. In fact, even Durkheim, who is perceived by many to be a more traditional sociologist and to have a tendency towards the bourgeois ideology, nevertheless explored some new characteristics of consensus and ethics at a group level that would be interesting to address, perhaps in the context of another discussion. However, in terms of the dialogue we are having now, what would you like to see develop in terms of the future work to be carried out on an international level, by those who follow your principles and concepts in the area of education, understanding, of course, that education is not the only avenue to transform society?

PF: Interesting. Could you expand on that?

CR: Here in Brazil, for instance, the PT, or Worker's Party, is engaged in a serious effort to empower its constituents and citizens in general to have a voice in educational and budgetary issues. In the United States, the recently formed Labor Party seeks to have candidates representing the working class running for public office within two years. Therefore, there is a concern and awareness at a worldwide level along the progressive line of thought which supports many of the ideas and concepts you have been advocating for quite some time now.

PF: I believe that is true.

CR: Specifically, what would you like to see your supporters practicing or constructing?

PF: Look, the one thing I always talk about, and that I hope to see in others as well, is that I am perpetually driven by my own dream. I am convinced that any progressive educator, any humanist in the broader sense of the word, can never repress or file away his or her Utopian dreams; otherwise, he or she has lost the battle. I believe my strongest calling is exactly the calling to fulfill my dream, to never allow the dream to die, to always therefore maintain hope. It is to wake up on a Tuesday with greater hope than on Monday.

CR: Can you describe this dream you talk about?

PF: My dream is the dream of having a society that is less ugly and less unjust; a society in which it would be easier to love, and therefore easier to live, easier to dream; a decent society, permanently striving to overcome discrimination and the negation of others, for example; a society that struggles for equality.

CR: In closing, the expression "to love" may have different connotations at different times. What is it, in your opinion, to love?

PF: The way I see it, to love is to feel good when we are together with others. It is to feel that one can be open towards others; it is to understand differences and be able to thrive with them.

CR: Professor Freire, thank you very much.

PF: My pleasure.

Reflections and Relevance of Freirean Principles Today

This bitter-sweet interview with Paulo can be a source for many

reflections and understanding of our past and current reality, shedding light on new possibilities for the future. As was evident above, he was a man of hope, stimulated by realistic and attainable aspirations. His words continue to be a source of inspiration for many social justice educators and activists in general to keep alive their dreams of a better society.

One might ask: What kind of dream? For what purpose? How do these ideas of hope translate into pedagogy? As it can be seen especially in regards to the question of decline of Soviet Union's gap, Freire remained strong in his belief that the ontological position of humans is to transform the world. He reiterates that a different society is possible. His understandings of our present economic and political conditions are current since education under neo-liberalism, in many countries, is limited to training. In which case, the dream is dead and history is manufactured by dominant groups. When we talk about these ideas in my classes, many students think I am referring to another country not the U.S. and fail to see that in the U.S., as elsewhere, people's thoughts are manipulated. For example, just looking at the present standardization movement alone gives witness to this kind of banking education and implies students are empty vessels. In addition, most of the school reforms historically have been done from a top-down approach, forcing educators and educatees to be subjugated to dictates.

Thus, Freire's words of wisdom argue against this kind of ideological domination. His harsh critique of neo-liberal globalization diffuses its immobilizing underpinnings, which discourage people from rising against oppression. He believes vehemently and consistently in historicism and its impending ability to sustain changes accomplished. This insistence comes from a Marxist analysis where determinant transformative events held within a historical and dialectical materialism can guarantee solid grounds for changes generated through solidarity and collective awareness (Marx, 1982).

In our brief conversation, my emphasis on the word "critical" was to dissolve the fear of critique many scholars hold when faced with its challenge. I believe it is important to be critical and maintain always a critical mind in order to avoid being dogmatic. The moment people develop a "perfect" and "complete system," they risk building a structure that can be exclusionary or oppressive to some, which many poststructuralists such as Popkewitz and Derrida warn against. In this sense Freire brings clarity to the issue to see that in our search for "truth" one can go about it casually at the beginning, but then apply a rigorous, analytical approach as a way of educating ourselves and cultivating a more informed dialogue; avoiding naïveté as we generate knowledge driven by epistemological curiosity. This calls for all progressive educators to inspire students with critical curiosity, rather than hiding "truths" behind a naïve curiosity.

The word *conscientização* in Portuguese can be divided in: *consciência* + *ação*, (consciousness + action), which makes perfect sense: when a person develops consciousness about something, the normal expectation is that the person will actually act accordingly, although this may not be true of everyone. For instance, when somebody knows why a particular system is oppressive to some people and who is exploiting whom, some people will make stronger commitments to bring about changes as opposed to some who would rather refrain from it. However, for Freire to know and not to act constitutes a hypocritical attitude. I heard this from his own mouth one time in one of his classes at PUC (*Pontifícia Universidade Católica*) in Brazil. He said that when somebody has consciousness about something and has been part of social justice movements and then sells out, it is like selling “the soul to the devil.” In other words, for Freire, somebody that knows better and yet works against that awareness there is no forgiveness, for that person is complicit. In fact he was rather respectful and companionate of those who didn’t know better, yet he would still put his words out there. This idea was extracted from my conversation with Paulo’s wife, Nita (Ana Maria) Freire. This failure to act is true for many people I have encountered throughout my academic life, people who choose to remain in denial of realities or at least pretend to be. As well, there are those who do not do what they know to do because they are inconvenienced with having to take different actions.

Further along, Paulo’s dream was based on a continuous process, one which evolved with time and collective consciousness. It’s an experience that requires humans to take charge of their collective destiny and mold a just and sustainable society that works for everyone—what McLaren and Jaramillo (2006) call “universal emancipation.” To some of my students, this sounds like communism. They often have difficulty understanding that Freire never pushed a ready-made utopia or formulaic pedagogy. Rather, he was concerned with a praxis of solidarity embedded in critical consciousness, which can empower any community or society to mold their own system.

Freire goes so far as to bring in the idea of love, seldom used in academic debates. Just like Ché Guevara would say, he believed that the true revolutionary is motivated by love. As Freire puts it, his dream was of a more just, less ugly society, where it would be easier to love others and to overcome divisiveness and discrimination. During the interview, I focused on the word “love” because in previous discussions with scholars at UCLA, I found to my dismay that the concept was viewed as superfluous. When I proposed to professors and a graduate-student-reading group that we read and discuss this concept, one professor told me in a dismissing and demeaning tone: “What is love? It is an abstract idea.”

Nevertheless, for Freire, love was a profound and meaningful experi-

ence. He was in fact rather surprised at my question, since for him the idea of love was a natural and practical human experience. He pointed out: "To love is to feel good when we are together with others. It is to feel that one can be open towards others; it is to understand differences and be able to thrive with them." Much of his thinking in this regard was, in fact influenced by Eric Fromm, who wrote about this notion from a sociological point of view (Fromm, 1983).

Freire was current with his research and understood that the neo-liberal discourse promoted by dominant social sectors is meant to deceive subordinated groups. As he reminded us, however, these dominant sectors are not fatalistic when it comes to their interest. Rather they use a *divide-and-conquer* strategy to keep the non-dominant sectors busy fighting against each other. Who is the oppressor then in this context?

In such a context, it is necessary to name the stake holders, including patriarchal and racist hegemonic discourses, structures, and practices. Freire, on the other hand, seems to present a more generic analysis of capitalist neo-liberal discourse.

Freire focused on the pedagogy of the oppressed because in Brazil the majority is poor. Twenty (20%) of the population owns eighty (80%) of the wealth, as opposed to the U.S. where the majority of the population, over all, are certainly better off than most of Brazil's poor.

In the U.S. a "pedagogy of the oppressor," whereby those who exercise a sense of privilege learn to recognize and deconstruct their contribution to oppression, might be more applicable. It goes without saying that persons from oppressed groups, when they come to occupy positions of power, can take on characteristics of their oppressors, or worse. The oppressed is also a potential oppressor. One in reality can be both "oppressed" and "oppressor" at the same time! For example, working-class white men in the U.S. sometimes have this tendency (Rossatto, Allen, & Pruyn, 2006).

These ideas have the potential to help us reinvent Freirean and critical pedagogy. Paulo put his commitment to the struggle before his personal interest. His greatest quality was his humility, from which his wisdom emerged naturally.

The work of Freire and others serves as the foundation for many critical theories and movements. Hence, a reinvention now seems appropriate. There is a need for Freirean or critical pedagogists to make a stronger commitment in the struggle to combat white supremacy and patriarchy. Most of the work in this paradigm has focused on social class issues. The recent advances made by critical race theory and related movements denounce many other oppressive conditions, bringing new insights to activism and demanding deeper commitments from educators and social justice activists (Bonilla Silva, 2003; Bell, 1992).

At the same time that we need to diversify social movements, we also need to unite them. Environmental studies, liberation theology, and indigenous rights are among many crucial areas of study and militancy. Freire, in his own way, expressed the necessity to develop a pedagogy of solidarity—unity in diversity. However, he rejected the discourse of solidarity alone, believing in the strength generated from its combination with practice.

Moreover, Freire reemphasized the importance of ethics as the last avenue that keeps society functional. He pled for a rejection of market ethics that imprison human beings to capitalist exploitation and interests. My main focus in this regard is the abolishment of institutionalized oppression by reinventing the world and education, providing equality and diversity in schooling that dignifies the school community and the community at large. This new alternative education ought to facilitate active inquiry and research, contrary to an education of passivity, where students are forced to master an institutionalized knowledge (Purpel, 1989), and to neo-liberal ethics, whose results constitute a top-down approach. Neo-liberal ethics mean the dominate class needs to discipline, punish, and train in order to correct and form a social subject adapted to capitalist interests and to increase productive, fulfilling contractual purposes with society (Sergiovanni, 1994; Foucault, 1977).

From a critical Freirean standpoint, ethics means an effort to create a more just society, where people can feel affirmed in multiple communities open to everyone, communities that comprehend and embrace differences and similarities. This ethos is guided by ontological conditions whereby character evolves out of integrity, commitment to self and collective action (Slater, Fain, & Rossatto, 2002).

Finally, a critical progressive ethic for teachers is oriented toward bringing out the best in all students, instead of focusing on what they are doing wrong. Rather than working from a disciplinary position, teachers generate democratic practices, whereby students and teacher collectively construct an ethical *modus operandi* or *modus vivendi*. In this humanistic vision, a genuine learning community can flourish. In contrast, the market model emphasizes standards and competitiveness and, thereby, pits human beings against each other. This market ethic establishes approval or disapproval of conduct based on perceptions within structures of privilege, while maintaining conformity to the ideals of the status quo.

In sum, Freire's point about ethics is well made and necessary: we do need a moral philosophy based on solidarity, understood as an inner compassionate principle that fosters critical consciousness and guarantees an equal opportunity for inclusion. This is a moral philosophy that

involves a reciprocal experience embedded in dialectical ethical social constructs and which empowers citizens to participate and be responsible for our social well being. It is ultimately out of a commitment to community that every person becomes a historical agent. And as Freire said: “there is only one way to reinvent the world, and that is to have ethics; ethics in politics, ethics in the means of production, and ethics in cultural activities.” He encourages all of us to be ethical and historical agents, ready, willing, and able to love.

Note

¹ This interview with Paulo Freire was first published in the book *Engaging Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of Possibility: From Blind to Transformative Optimism* and is reprinted in the *Journal of Thought* with permission from Rowman Littlefield Publishing Co. Special thanks go to Aurolyn Luykx, who kindly edited this piece.

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