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The Political-pedagogical Praxis of Paulo Freire

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Just a few days ago, Paulo Freire passed away, victim of a heart attack. I lived and worked closely with him during the last 23 years. On May First, a few days before his death, we were discussing various projects to be developed by the Instituto Paulo Freire (IPF) (Paulo Freire Institute), which was, for him, a space for discussion and for inquiry into new educational perspectives. He had been intending to give various courses, including one for foreign students. He had told us that it was becoming more difficult to travel abroad and that he preferred to have those interested foreign students come to the IPF to study with him. He died at the height of his intellectual production, with one unfinished book and many projects underway.

Although it is difficult to talk about him at this time -- I have not yet transformed my pain into *saudades* -- I will try to say something about his legacy, focusing principally on his recent political-pedagogical praxis with the Brazilian educational context. This book, *Education and Politics*, pulls together some of Paulo Freire's more significant writings about political-pedagogical praxis. Thus, it seems appropriate to build on this theme at this time.

Certainly, we can say that the thinking and ideas of Paulo Freire are an existential and historical product. He forged his ideas in struggle, in praxis -- understood as "action with reflection," a definition which he developed. Brazilian and Latin American society in the 1960's could be considered as a grand laboratory in which the "Paulo Freire Method" was solidified. The intense political mobilization that characterized this era played a fundamentally important role in the consolidation of Paulo Freire's ideas, whose origins can be found in the 1950's. The historical moment that Paulo Freire lived in Chile was fundamental in explaining the consolidation of his work, initiated in Brasil. In Chile, he found a political, social and educational space that was very dynamic, rich and defiant, permitting him to re-study and re-examine his method in a different context, evaluating its practice and systematizing it theoretically.

What caught the attention of educators and politicians of that era was the fact that the Paulo Freire method "accelerated" the literacy process for adults. Paulo Freire was not using the same methods with adults that were used with children. It is true, others had already thought of this same idea. Still, he was the first to systematize and experiment with a method that was entirely created for adult education.

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There is no adequate translation for "saudades" -- a word which is alternately translated as longing, homesickness, yearning and nostalgia but represents more of a state of being, an emptiness, an absence. Brazilians have "saudades" for their hometown, for their favorite meal and, of course, for people they who are dear to them.

Current constructivist theories also support the significance of lived experience and students' prior knowledge. Thus, it is necessary to know and systematize this experience and knowledge. Nevertheless, Freirean constructivism goes beyond research and beyond thematic learning. Freirean constructivism demonstrated that not only can all people learn (Piaget), but that all people know something and that each is the subject responsible for the construction of this knowledge and for the redefinition of that which is learned. A child, a young person and an adult only learn when they have a life project where the knowledge is meaningful and significant for them. But it is the subject that learns through his/her own transformative action in the human world. It is the subject that constructs the proper categories of thought, organizes his/her world and transforms it.

The work of Paulo Freire is interdisciplinary and can be seen as research and science or as education. And, these two dimensions imply a third: Paulo Freire did not separate either from politics. Paulo Freire should also be considered a political figure. This is the most important dimension of this work. He did not think about reality as a sociologist would, attempting to merely understand it. He sought elements in the sciences that, by providing a more scientific understanding of reality, would allow for intervention in that reality in the most efficacious form. Because of this, he viewed education as a political act, as an act of knowing and as a creative act. All of his thinking has a direct relation with reality. This is his mark in history. He did not concern himself with bureaucratic schemes -- whether they were schemes about political power or schemes about academic power. He was committed to a reality to be transformed, above all else.

Paulo Freire proposed a new conception of the pedagogic relationship. He did not view education as the mere transmission of content from teacher to student. On the contrary, he viewed it as the establishment of a dialogue. This means that while the teacher teaches, s/he also learns. Traditional pedagogy affirms this idea, but Paulo Freire placed the educator in a position to learn from the learner, in the same form that the learner learned from the educator. Thus, no one could be considered definitively educated or complete. Each person, in his or her own way, together with others, could learn and discover new dimensions and possibilities from the realities of life. Education becomes a process of collective and continuous formation.

But Paulo Freire can be read in yet another light, that of his passion for liberation. This would be a liberatory reading. As many of his interpreters confirm, the central thesis of his work is a thesis of liberty-liberation. Liberation is the central point of his educational conception, beginning with his very first work. Liberation is the endpoint of education. The destination of education would be to liberate oneself from an oppressive and unjust reality. Education aims for liberation, the radical transformation of reality, in an effort to improve it, make it more human, and ensure that men and women are recognized as subjects of their own history rather than as objects.

Liberation, as a objective of education, situates itself on the horizon of a utopic vision of society. Education or formation should permit a critical reading of the world. The world that surrounds us is a world still in formation and this requires the denouncement of oppressive and unjust realities and, consequently, a transformative critical sense in the declaration of another reality. This declaration is necessary as a moment for the new reality which is still in the making. This new reality is the utopia of today's educator.

There are numerous works that could be cited demonstrating the strict coherence between Freire's theory and practice. We will look only at the most recent: his work as a public administrator (1989-1991) at the helm of the Municipal Secretariat of Education for São Paulo.

For those who knew Paulo Freire well, his administrative skills were not a surprise. His secret, however, was knowing how to govern democratically. During the almost two and a half years at the helm of the Secretariat of Education, he succeeded in creating a team of five or six assistants that were able to work with considerable autonomy and could substitute for him in any type of emergency. There was only one weekly meeting in which the general policy initiatives of the Secretariat were discussed. If it was necessary, new directions were explored. Paulo Freire defended vehemently his opinions, but knew how to work as part of a team -- just the opposite of the spontaneity of which has had been accused. He had authority but he exercised it in a democratic manner. He dealt with conflictual situations with great patience. He was accustomed to saying that the work of educational change requires historic patience because education is a long-term process.

What were the most important structural changes introduced in the municipal schools under Paulo Freire's leadership?

Freire himself responded to this question in his book about his experience as Secretariat (*A educação na cidade*, São Paulo, Cortez, 1991, pp. 79-80): "the most important structural changes introduced in the schools relate to expanded school autonomy." The School Councils and Student Associations were re-established. Thus, continued Paulo Freire, "the biggest advance for school autonomy came in granting the site authority over its own pedagogical projects, which received support from the administration, and accelerated the overall school transformation."

In order to illustrate this process of change, I would like to present three examples: the program of continuous professional development, the program of literacy for youth and adults and the practice of interdisciplinarity.

1) The program of continuous professional development of educators.

From the beginning of his administration, Paulo Freire insisted that he was profoundly challenged by the question of professional development for teachers. His professional development program was oriented by the following principles (idem, p. 80):

- a) The educator is the subject of his/her practice, which s/he creates and recreates through the process of reflecting on day-to-day events and work.
- b) An educator's formation/professional development should be continuous and systematic, because practice is made and remade.
- c) Pedagogic practice requires an understanding of the very origins of knowledge; that is, how the process of understanding unfolds.
- d) A program for the professional development of educators is a requisite condition for the process of curricular reorientation in schools.

With this program Paulo Freire wanted to prepare teachers with a new pedagogical attitude and approach, particularly given the authoritarian pedagogical tradition in Brazil. It was not possible to hope that in a few years, this tradition would be overcome. Because of this Paulo Freire was willing to put a number of issues on the line: his well-known pedagogic patience, political decisions, technical competence, affection, and, above all, the exercise of democracy. The end result was success. The formation of teachers went beyond expectations and transcended that which might have been

offering his immense experience which was translated into the practice of the projects developed by the Secretariat. In his farewell, he stated: "though I will not longer by Secretariat, I will continue together with all of you in another form... Continue to count on me in the development of educational policy, in the construction of a schools with another 'face,' one that is happier, more collegial and more democratic" (Idem, p. 144).

How did Paulo Freire react to the criticisms of his work and of him as a person?

Personal attacks were quite rare because though his ideas may have been polemical, he as a person was not. His personality was transparent. There was no room for hypocrisy. He didn't respond to personal criticisms. He also didn't tussle with critiques of his work. Paulo Freire believed that good humor was a pedagogical and progressive weapon, but that polemics were not. Humor is constructive, polemics are, quite often, destructive. Because of this, he never argued with any of his critics. At the same time, he was not silent in the face of their charges.

He considered criticisms in a positive light and tried to learn from them. When he responded to them indirectly in his books -- and he did this systematically -- he attempted to contextualize his work, demonstrating that he was a product of his time. In this way, we can say that his thinking evolved, each time conquering and surpassing specific "naivetés" -- as he himself observes in Pedagogy of Hope (São Paulo, Paz e Terra, 1992: 67).

But there are also criticisms that come from readings and interpretations of his work that are different and at times contradictory. These are legitimate and serious interpretations. Above all, in these cases, Paulo Freire had the right to disagree and he did disagree with these readings: he did not recognize himself in many of them.

Certain conservative critics argued that he did not have a theory of knowledge because he had not studied the relations between the subject of knowledge and the object. He was interested merely in the product. This is not true: before anything else, his thinking is founded in an explicit anthropological theory of knowledge. Others accuse him of authoritarianism stating that his method supposes a transformation of reality even though such an objective may not be shared by all. As a result, it is an unscientific method (because it doesn't have universal applicability). His method would be authoritarian to the extent that he obligates everyone to participate in transformation. It is clear that this criticism ignores the fact that Paulo Freire did not accept the idea of pure theory -- he thought this was an illusion -- but rather argued for a critical theory rooted in a social and political philosophy. He rejected the idea of scientific neutrality -- just as he distanced himself from academicism -- and argued that the conservatives, hid their ideological conservatism under the rubric of politically neutral and pure theory.

What does an educator leave as a legacy?

In the first place, he leaves a life, a biography. And Paulo enchanted us with his tenderness, his sweetness, his charisma, his coherence, his commitment and his seriousness. His words and actions were words and actions of struggle for a world that was "less ugly, less mean-spirited and less inhumane", as he used to tell us. On the side of love and hope, he also left us a legacy of daily outrage about injustice, which he told us we could not "sweeten" or "sugar-coat" with our words.

In addition to the testimony of a life committed to the cause of the oppressed, he left us with an immense body of work, recorded in numerous editions of books, articles and videos found throughout the world. Some have asked me why his pedagogy had such success. I responded that it was because his "pedagogy of dialogue" did not humiliate the student, the other. A conservative pedagogy humiliates students and the pedagogy of Paulo Freire gave students dignity, putting the teacher at their side -- with the task of orienting and directing the educational process -- but as a being also in a mode of searching, like they were. The teacher was also a learner... This is the legacy of Freire.

Paulo Freire did not define education as simply a technique based in a theory of knowledge, but as a political, social and anthropological roadmap of what to do. Because he based his theory and practice in anthropology, he constructed a pedagogy that was profoundly ethical. It is necessary to conscientize, but without doing violence to the consciousness of others.

In the development of his educational theory, Paulo Freire succeeded, on one hand to demystify the pedagogic dreams of the 1960's that, at least in Latin America, viewed the school as responsible for changing everything, and on the other, he was able to overcome the pessimism of the 1970's when people thought that schooling was purely reproductive. In doing this, he went beyond naive pedagogy and negative pessimism, keeping himself true to the idea of utopia, dreaming dreams of the possible.

Various generations of educators, anthropologists, social and political scientists, professionals in the natural and biological sciences, were influenced by Freire and helped to construct a pedagogy grounded in liberation. What he wrote is a part of the lives of an entire generation that learned to dream about a world of equality and justice, that fought and continues to struggle for this world. Many will continue his work, even though he didn't leave behind "disciples." Nothing could be less Freirean than to be a disciple or a follower of ideas. He always challenged us to "reinvent" the world, to pursue truth and not to copy ideas. Paulo Freire left us with roots, wings and dreams.