

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Democratic freedom as resistance against self-hatred, epistemic injustice, and oppression in Paulo Freire's critical theory

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Funding information

São Paulo Research Foundation, FAPESP, Grant/Award Number: #2015/22251-0

No one can liberate anyone else, no one can be liberated alone:

People become free in communion

Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968)

1 | INTRODUCTION

This article elaborates a conception of democratic freedom as resistance against self-hatred, epistemic injustice, and oppression by focusing on the critical theory of Paulo Freire. Among the central themes that come up in Freire's critical theory, the concern with emancipation and freedom is doubtless a major one.¹ Paying special attention to the psychological effects of oppression, Freire poignantly describes the processes through which the oppressed internalize their oppression and become perpetrators of their own domination. Succumbing to self-hatred and epistemic injustice, the oppressed end up accepting the demeaning picture the oppressor has constructed of them. Therefore, instead of seeking to abolish domination, the oppressed desire at all costs to emulate the oppressor and participate in their own oppression. Confronted with such a dark diagnosis, what is the critical theorist to do? When oppression is internalized, how can people practice freedom and emancipate themselves? How can the demos achieve self-rule when their oppression is perpetuated by themselves?

Those questions constitute the leitmotiv of Freire's *Education: The Practice of Freedom* (1976) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), and *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (1998).² By juxtaposing these works I reveal that for Freire democratic participation is the means by which the oppressed can overcome self-hatred, epistemic injustice, and oppression, and thus achieve freedom.³ Moreover, a juxtaposed reading of these works reveals that freedom and democracy pertain not only to institutional politics but also to what Freire (2017a, p. 98) calls a "democratic mentality." Democracy and freedom for Freire are inextricably bound up with one another, because only by participating in the former can citizens acquire an ability that safeguards the latter; namely, the capacity to cultivate a "permeable consciousness" that allows citizens to judge the guiding norms of their life from the standpoint of others and to develop themselves autonomously (Freire, 2017a, p. 98). Freire's conceptualization of democratic freedom

qua resistance against self-hatred, epistemic injustice, and oppression shows that democratic participation shatters the self-enclosed, atomistic individual and calls forth a porous self, one that is always willing to review the norms and beliefs that guide her conduct and who is capable of taking the perspective of others.

2 | SELF-HATRED, EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE, AND OPPRESSION AS THE NEMESIS OF FREEDOM

Before explaining how self-hatred and epistemic injustice are identified as major obstacles to freedom in Freirean critical theory, it must be observed that Freire himself never used the expressions “self-hatred” and “epistemic injustice,” for in Portuguese—the language in which he wrote—the terms are virtually nonexistent. Self-hatred (*auto-ódio*) sounds rather bizarre in Portuguese and thus is never used. The expression epistemic injustice (*injustiça epistêmica*) also does not appear in Freire's writings and, up to this day, still has not been consolidated in (academic) Portuguese. Needless to say, these linguistic facts do not mean that oppressed groups do not experience self-hatred and epistemic injustice in the Portuguese-speaking world; as Freire's work points out, they obviously do. Indeed, a significant part of Freire's oeuvre seeks to explain how self-hatred and epistemic injustice impede the attainment of freedom.

In this section, I first draw out the opposition between self-hatred and freedom. Then, I explain how Freire's understanding of oppression encompasses what contemporary political theorists call epistemic injustice. Self-hatred and epistemic injustice, to be sure, are both manifestations of the oppressor's “shadow,” and they are the types of oppression Freire investigated most thoroughly in his works. That is why I shall focus on these two modes of oppression throughout this section.

It is one thing, however, to claim that epistemic injustice and self-hatred make up a considerable part of oppression, and yet another to argue that they exhaust the multitudinous forms oppression might take. That Freire concentrated on the psychological effects of oppression does not mean that he ignored the other vehicles of oppression apart from self-hatred and epistemic injustice.⁴ Physical violence and material destitution, to name two, are other examples of oppression that Freire (2017a, pp. 70, 185) was concerned with. Democratic freedom requires struggling not only against self-hatred and epistemic injustice, but against oppression in general.

Freire (2017a, p. 53) first addresses the issue of self-hatred in the introductory section of *Education: The Practice of Freedom*, when he presents the metaphor of the shadow. Domination, he explains, can be carried out “by drastic means or not,” and what the metaphor of the shadow aims to stress is that oppressive power can take up many forms besides actual physical violence (Freire, 2017a, p. 69). Explicitly drawing on Frankfurtian critical theory, Freire (2017a, p. 60) contends that the advertising industry is a great example of the more subtle forms that oppressive power can take (see Horkheimer, & Adorno 2002, pp. 131–136).

Advertising works as a subtle form of oppression insofar as it forces a person to “adopt a *self* [eu] that does not belong to him or her” (Freire, 2017a, p. 61). As one can see, Freire's critique of oppression relies on the vocabulary of authenticity.⁵ By converting man into a mere “spectator” of life, advertising makes them “fearful of authentic living” (Freire, 2017a, p. 62). Freire equates freedom with authentic self-development and inauthenticity with oppression. He thus opposes “a free and creative consciousness” to “a parasitical consciousness of oppression” (Freire, 2017a, p. 96) and defines oppression as any act that thwarts citizens' authentic self-development (Freire, 2017b, pp. 47, 60).

In one of the few passages in which he gives a concrete example of a “parasitical” consciousness, Freire alludes to the Brazilian intellectual who believes that the more cultivated she becomes, the less Brazilian she should be. According to Freire, what explains such behavior is the fact that the intellectual has surrendered to the master narrative.⁶ She has internalized “the European vision of Brazil as a primitive country” and therefore is at pains to eradicate the features of her identity that can be traced back to her life in Brazil (Freire, 2017a, p. 129).

The metaphor of the shadow and the antithesis between self-hatred and freedom are further developed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000). As its title makes clear, the goal of the book is to formulate an educational plan that incites the oppressed to emancipate themselves, thus allowing them to practice freedom and self-government. In the first

chapter, Freire affirms that human societies in the contemporary world are divided into two camps: the oppressors (who constitute a minority) and the oppressed (who are the majority).⁷ Needless to say, Freire does not deny that the exploitation of the latter by the former is largely due to material inequality, and he is adamant that emancipation requires the redistribution of extant goods. Nevertheless, he also emphasizes that, in order to encourage the oppressed to emancipate themselves, the psychological mechanisms through which their oppression is perpetuated should become a matter of critical reflection:

[T]he oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or "sub-oppressors." ... Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity. This phenomenon derives from the fact that the oppressed, at a certain moment of their existential experience, adopt an attitude of "adhesion" to the oppressor.... Their vision of the [emancipated] man or woman is individualistic; because of their identification with the oppressor, they have no consciousness of themselves as persons or as members of an oppressed class.... The oppressed, having internalized the "shadow" of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this "shadow" and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. (Freire, 2017b, pp. 44–46; English translation, Freire, 2000, pp. 45–47)

Here the metaphor of the shadow is associated with adhesion, a term used to describe the psychological process that causes many subaltern groups to be complicit in their own oppression. Adhesion ensures that the emotions and desires of the oppressed are manipulated in such a way as to make them accept their oppression as natural—nay, "adhesion" even causes them to relish their domination and cling to their conformity to oppression as a badge of superiority and honor, thus making it harder for them to perceive that they are being oppressed in the first place.⁸ To drive this point home, Freire (2017b, p. 45) mentions the case of poor peasants who want the land to be redistributed because their desire is "to become landowners—or, more precisely, bosses over other workers." The poor peasants—just as every other oppressed group—have been told all their lives, in a myriad of ways, that the oppressor epitomizes a "superior" human being. Hence, it comes as no surprise that

the oppressed feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressors and their way of life. Sharing this way of life becomes an overpowering aspiration.... [T]he oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressors, to imitate them, to follow them. (Freire, 2017b, p. 68; English translation, Freire, 2000, p. 62)

Here those who are concerned about freedom and popular rule come up against an overwhelming challenge. The alarm bell that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* rings is that the road to emancipation requires not only structural changes that redistribute material goods and resources—a Herculean task in its own right, to be sure—but also the exorcism of the oppressor's shadow that has been instilled in the oppressed, the undoing of the psychological mechanism of adhesion that permits oppression to reproduce itself well after its first perpetrators are gone.⁹

Simply expelling oppressive landowners from a given country and redistributing property equally among every native peasant does not suffice to eliminate oppression. If the oppressor's shadow is not exorcised, a new group of oppressors is bound to reemerge among the erstwhile oppressed peasants. Subaltern groups who, after a long period of struggle and resistance, conquer the right to live without being oppressed by their "superiors" will continue to experience oppression if they hierarchize themselves according to the standards their former oppressors invented to demean them.

The example of colonized ethnic groups is a good case in point (Freire, 2017b, pp. 68–69). Even after establishing sovereignty over a space where none of the old oppressors are around, the oppressed colonized group is going to remain unfree as long as they compete among themselves to see who resembles the old colonizers the most. For Freire, as we have observed, freedom requires authenticity. The *mestiço* intellectual who endeavors to emulate the European master who colonized his people will never be free, for the kind of development she imposes upon herself is inauthentic, that is, heteronomous.

To achieve freedom, autonomy, and authentic self-development—three terms that Freire employs synonymously—the oppressed must learn to step back from the perspective the oppressor has taught them to adopt. This will allow them, for the first time, to criticize the master narrative, the beliefs and norms that the oppressor has implanted in

them, whereupon the exorcism of the shadow becomes possible. I say possible, because nothing guarantees that the ability to put into brackets the initial perspective will lead the oppressed to formulate, autonomously, a perspective of their own. The ability to keep a distance from the oppressor's perspective and to expose it as a source of domination do not ensure that the shadow will be excised and self-hatred overcome—in short, they do not ensure the commencement of freedom.

Freire's antithesis between self-hatred and freedom brings to the fore the canny ways in which the former works against the latter. What is especially perverse about self-hatred is that, even after perceiving its deleterious effects, the oppressed can continue, in spite of themselves, to admire the oppressor and to despise their race, gender, sexuality, class, geographical origin or whatever attributes the shadow within them classifies as inferior (see Freire, 2017b, p. 98). Anticipating what Miranda Fricker (2017, p. 53) and other contemporary scholars term epistemic injustice, Freire argues that the shadow infuses in the oppressed feelings of intellectual inferiority, a poor self-assessment of their cognitive capacities that makes them overestimate the oppressor's cognitive assets and accept the master narrative without resistance.¹⁰ To support the argument, Freire recollects his own experience as a teacher of poor peasants who worked on sugarcane plantations in 1963:

They [the oppressed peasants] call themselves ignorant and say the "teacher" is the one who has knowledge and to whom they should listen. The criteria of knowledge imposed upon them are the conventional ones... . Almost never do they realize that they, too, "know things" they have learned in their relations with the world and with other women and men. Given the circumstances... it is only natural that they distrust themselves. Not infrequently, peasants in educational projects begin to discuss a generative theme in a lively manner, then stop suddenly and say to the educator: "Excuse us, we ought to keep quiet and let you talk. You are the one who knows, we don't know anything." (Freire, 2017b, pp. 69–70; English translation, Freire, 2000, p. 63)

As a consequence of the shadow within them, the oppressed buy into the idea that they are not entitled to produce knowledge. This in turn keeps freedom at bay, for it leads the oppressed to distrust their perception of the surrounding reality. As long as they believe in their putative cognitive inferiority the oppressed will never gather in order to scrutinize the causes of their oppression. If they are all cognitively inferior, why would they do that? Living under the shadow makes the oppressed think they are not entitled to produce knowledge. In sum, Freire's critical theory shows that, if the demos is to achieve freedom, they must overcome not only self-hatred but also epistemic injustice.¹¹

For those who were under the shadow of the master narrative, defeating self-hatred and epistemic injustice can come about only through "a painful delivery" (Freire, 2017b, p. 48). "Delivery" here translates *parto*, which, besides meaning childbirth, is often used to describe any strenuous task that takes a long time to be accomplished. Freirean liberty, we pointed out earlier, is both agonizing and agonistic. Agonizing because it requires expelling something within the self that is disturbing its proper development (namely, the oppressor's shadow). When the oppressed unite in resistance, each of them is born again; the flourishing of political freedom for Freire brings about a second birth, as it were.

Furthermore, Freirean liberty is agonistic because it cannot do without conflict and struggle. "Only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in organized struggle" can they approach freedom (Freire, 2017b, p. 72). Freire's critical theory espouses the defining feature of agonism: it considers conflict to be salutary and identifies it as a source of political liberty (Norman, 2001, pp. 7–8). Freedom is not a gift that the oppressor concedes to the oppressed. Rather, it is the outcome of open confrontation:

Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift... . To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity (Freire, 2017b, p. 46; English translation, Freire, 2000, p. 47).

Only when the oppressed struggle for authenticity and act together in order to become new people does freedom emerge (Freire, 2017b, p. 48). Freire (2017b, p. 62) takes issue with the theory of possessive individualism that, like other critical theorists of the 1960s, he associates with modern liberalism. Briefly put, this theory defines freedom as a personal attribute that each individual possesses, as if the absence of interference were enough for the protection of liberty (Macpherson, 1962, p. 263). Contra such view, Freire (2018, pp. 102–103) links freedom with democratic

participation and affirms that neither should be confused with the mere absence of limits. Absence of interference tout court is not enough for safeguarding liberty because, Freire (2017a, p. 59) explains, freedom entails the collective power of creating norms. Freedom, which for Freire (2017b, p. 60 and 2018, p. 106) can develop fully only in a democratic society, does not exclude coercion and the existence of rules (see Weffort, 2017, pp. 9–11). In order to safeguard freedom and reproduce the conditions under which popular rule is possible, democracies need coercive norms. Nevertheless, such norms do not qualify as oppressive in Freire's sense of the term—that is, they are not anathema to freedom—because, far from being the imposition of a minority of oppressors over a majority of oppressed people, they are autonomously produced by the demos.

“No one can liberate anyone else, no one can be liberated alone: people become free in communion [*em comunhão*]” (Freire, 2017b, p. 71). Freedom is not a personal property or something any single *individual* can possess. Rather than being the attribute of an atomistic self, freedom is the result of collective action and, as such, it requires a public space in between people, a place where the different social groups of the demos can act “in communion.”¹² Freire's Catholic vocabulary is telling; in the Catholic religion the communion is the moment in which every member of the flock coalesces and unites with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is the moment, that is, when the boundaries of each individual become fuzzy and *partially* disappear.¹³ Democratic freedom is akin to the Catholic communion insofar as it also demands the disruption of the atomistic self.

In Freire's view, the subject of democratic freedom is not the self-enclosed individual who is always in complete possession of herself and her attributes. That is why Freire (2017a, p. 62) differentiates between “the authentic co-existence” among democratic subjects and “gregariousness,” a pejorative term he uses to express “the juxtaposition of [discrete] individuals who lack a critical bond.” More than a form of government with open and competitive elections, Freirean democracy encompasses “highly permeable forms of life, which are critical, inquisitive and dialogical, as opposed to ‘mute’ ... forms of life,” which are typical of “authoritarian” regimes (Freire, 2017a, p. 84). Experiencing democratic freedom entails being affected and transformed by those with whom one critically interacts. To some extent it also entails, as Vladimir Safatle (2016, Chapter 1) has suggested, the experience of being dispossessed by the other, and it is in that sense that we should read Freire's (2017a, p. 160) claim that democracy cannot do without “openness” and “love.”¹⁴ One who is entirely certain and in full possession of oneself and of the guiding norms that organize one's life cannot love another being, for genuine love requires opening up oneself to someone different, someone whose features may well change one's identity. Those who are fully in control of themselves and hold on fast to a static conception of personal identity that precludes them from being affected and transformed by others cannot love.

Before moving on to the topic of freedom, let us note that love can be considered the opposite of self-hatred in Freire's critical theory. Whereas the former opens up the self to human plurality, the latter instills in the individual an obsession for the “superior” group of citizens that turns her deaf, insensitive to, and uninterested in the lives of all other social groups (the “inferiors”). Love imbues citizens with “an attitude of openness to others [that] exposes them to difference” and puts them in a state of “permanent *availability* for touching and being touched [*permanente disponibilidade a tocar e a ser tocado*]” (Freire, 2018, p. 131). Self-hatred, by contrast, makes the oppressed distrust one another and immures each of them in “dogmatic positions” (Freire, 2018, p. 131). Put differently, whereas love is the democratic passion par excellence, self-hatred is an affect that works against democracy.

3 | THE BEDROCK OF FREEDOM: DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION AND THE POROUS SELF

Education: The Practice of Freedom is where Freire most dwells upon the topic of democracy. Written a few months after the military coup that overthrew constitutional democracy in Brazil and forced Freire (2017a, p. 79) into exile, the first chapter of the book introduces the concept of authentic democracy, which is defined as the one that offers “special conditions for the development or ‘opening’ of [citizens’] consciousness.” Such a characterization pits Freire against the so-called minimalist conception of democracy, famously advocated by Joseph Schumpeter in 1942:

The voters outside of parliament must respect the division of labor between themselves and the politicians they elect. They must not withdraw confidence too easily between elections and they must understand that, once they have elected an individual, political action is his business and not theirs. (Schumpeter, 2003, p. 295)

Subscribing to a purely electoral view of democracy, Schumpeter held that political action was the prerogative of elected representatives. A well-functioning democracy for him amounted to a society where political participation was confined to the solitary act of voting (Miguel, 2014, Chapter 1).¹⁵ In a Schumpeterian democracy citizens should remain politically “mute” in the interval between elections; that is, “they must refrain from instructing him [the representative they elected] about what he is to do” after casting their ballot (Schumpeter, 2003, p. 295). In the minimalist paradigm, an active public sphere and a politically engaged citizenry are symptoms of democratic decay:

And, for the sake of this [supposedly] “threatened” freedom, they [minimalists] repel popular participation. They defend a sui generis democracy in which the people is a sick man who ought to be medicated. His sickness lies precisely in having a voice and in participating [in politics]. Every time he attempts to express himself freely and to participate [in politics] is further proof of the persistence of his disease and thus testifies to his need of more “medicine.” (Freire, 2017a, p. 76)

Freire's explanation surmises that minimalism puts forward a negative conception of freedom, according to which politics and freedom are reversely correlated.¹⁶ Rather than enhance freedom, too much democratic participation actually undermines it. Freire repudiates such a view and asserts that, far from being symptoms of democratic decay, an active public sphere and an engaged citizenry constitute the stuff of freedom.

As Freire (2017a p. 106) understands it, “a formally democratic state” where citizens are equally able to vote in periodic elections is not enough for the consolidation of an authentic democracy.¹⁷ The absence of autonomously reached consent, not the absence of any kind of consent, is what characterizes an oppressive regime for Freire. This means that a political regime can be oppressive even when its politicians take office with the consent of the majority. The presence of consent and the absence of resistance are not enough to ascertain the existence of freedom. To determine whether freedom is present in politics it is necessary to analyze the process of consent formation. Organized resistance against any kind of oppression depends upon the availability of discourses and interpretative schemes that allow the oppressed to frame their subjection as an actual obstacle to freedom.

That cannot happen, of course, if the majority lives under the oppressor's shadow. In that case, citizens become complicit with their oppression. Rather than seeing themselves as oppressed subjects who should build coalitions in order to struggle for freedom, citizens identify with the oppressor and cast their ballot in such a way that tends to perpetuate their oppression. According to Freire, an authentic democracy requires not only periodic elections but also freedom, which demands from the demos the power to eliminate self-hatred, epistemic injustice, and oppression. That, in turn, can happen only through vigorous popular political participation. Taken together, what the last two sentences reveal is that freedom and democratic participation are inexorably bound up with one another in Freire's critical theory. Freedom for Freire is always democratic freedom.¹⁸

Why does freedom require democratic participation? How can political participation spur the demos to struggle against self-hatred, epistemic injustice, and oppression? Freire helps us clarify these questions in chapter three of *Education: The Practice of Freedom*:

[E]ducation [for freedom], let us repeat it, would be first and foremost a constant effort to ... create democratic dispositions that would replace ... habits of passivism for new habits of participation ... permeability is constitutive of the critical consciousness, and criticality [criticidade] is precisely the defining feature of the democratic mentality. The more critical a human group is, the more democratic and permeable they are. (Freire, 2017a, pp. 123–126)

Political participation helps the demos overcome self-hatred, epistemic injustice, and oppression insofar as it allows them to develop a permeable consciousness, which in turn grants them the power to step back from the oppressor's perspective and to formulate a perspective of their own. Freire's underlying presupposition is that excessive proximity or attachment to the master narrative hinders critique and, therefore, deprives the demos from the power to break

free from the psychological chains wrought through the “adhesion” process. When the oppressed participate in politics and act in “communion,” for the first time they become able to access other perspectives besides the one perpetuated by the oppressor’s “shadow.” They then realize that they, too, are epistemic subjects who can construct and exchange knowledge about public affairs. Since they are anything but a homogeneous group, when the oppressed start discussing in public how political issues appear to each of them and produce collective knowledge, their consciousness becomes “permeable,” a word Freire uses to denote a fluid and flexible self, one who is able to take other perspectives and to enlarge her mentality. The democratic subject whose permeable consciousness bestows on her the ability to analyze political issues from plural perspectives constitutes what I call a porous self.¹⁹

I describe the democratic self that undergirds Freire’s critical theory as porous in order to bring into relief her incomplete character, something that the word permeable does not adequately convey. The democratic self is porous because she has pores, holes, an incompleteness that necessarily motivates her to open herself up to others. Such incompleteness is constitutive of the democratic self, who is thus always inclined to listen to others and to acknowledge that she is a fallible being. As Freire (2017a, p. 84) puts it, the subjects of a “true democracy” cultivate “a critical transitivity” that encourages them to be “always willing to review” their current set of beliefs. More than a form of government, democracy for Freire (2017a, p. 121) requires “forms of life” that are “plastic.”²⁰ Freire envisages democracy as the only political regime that is truly historical, that is, open to change. “Democratic regimes feed on ... constant change. They are flexible, disquieted [*inquietaos*] and that is why those living under them have a more flexible consciousness” (Freire, 2017a, p. 119).

In chapter two of *Education: The Practice of Freedom*, Freire (2017a, pp. 108–109) explains that “democracy, more than a political regime, is a form of life ... that does not spring nor develop unless man is thrown into debate, into the examination of ... public problems.” In the wake of John Dewey, a philosopher who is cited in the conclusion of the book, Freire (2017a, p. 123) argues that democratic participation is carried out through “the experiences of debate and the analysis of problems.” Moreover, Freire’s work resembles Dewey’s because it also postulates that democratic participation has epistemic properties (see Feinberg & Torres, 2014). Democratic participation, Freire (2017a, p. 96) claims, produces wisdom. Freire’s theory, like Dewey’s, puts forth a perspectivist epistemology. Perspectivism states that one’s knowledge and experience of the world vary according to one’s social context (Simpson, 2006, p. 29). As James Conant (2006, p. 51) and Linda Zerilli (2016, p. 268) emphasize, perspectivist epistemologies underscore the interplay between objectivity and subjectivity. It is only by collating and contrasting the different (subjective) perspectives on something through public debate that (objective) knowledge can be constructed. “One cannot think objectivity apart from subjectivity. Each one does not exist without the other, and they cannot be dichotomized” (Freire, 2017b, p. 50). The objectivity that emerges out of a democratic debate is different from Platonic objectivity because, unlike the latter, it recognizes itself as mutable.

When the demos take part in political debate and exchange their different perspectives on public issues, they construct “an objective representation of reality” (Freire, 2017a, p. 84). Ultimately, before the demos get together and collect their different viewpoints, political reality does not exist. For only when different perspectives are expressed and articulated can citizens create “a common world” (Freire, 2017b, p. 195). Unless I take part in a democratic debate teeming with conflict and diversity, the individual (i.e., partial) perspective from which I see and understand the world could never be revealed to me as my perspective; most likely, it would be mistaken for the whole of what is real. Citizens start inhabiting the same world only when they act together “in communion” (Freire, 2017b, p. 71). In fact, Freire (2017a, p. 96) goes as far as to surmise that, without “popular participation in the public realm,” “the people [do] not exist.” The demos performatively produce themselves as they participate in politics.

As an agonistic thinker, Freire was concerned with “the political [*o político*],” which for him differed from “politics [*política*]” (Fiori, 2017, p. 29). Whereas politics pertains to the more mundane and technical means necessary for organizing the collective life of a pre-given polity, the political refers to a more existential and extraordinary moment: the constitution of a “we” (e.g. the oppressed), which can come into being only through the demarcation of a “them” that is identified as the “enemy” (e.g. the oppressors). The political as such takes ontological precedence over politics, for it creates the very people that everyday politics takes for granted for its operation (see Mouffe, 2005, pp. 8–9).

For Freire (2017b p. 195), the political is experienced in the disclosure of “a common world” that citizens construct when they act together in the public sphere. The fact that such experience is riven with conflict and fueled by the eagerness to struggle against “the enemy” does not mean that the political is bereft of solidarity. Indeed, the notion of the political that underpins Freire’s work reveals, *pace* Andrew Schaap (2007, p. 60), that associating the political with “the friend–enemy relation” does not entail denying “the potential experience of solidarity in moments of collective action.” Schaap’s too-sharp dichotomy is inadequate for understanding not only Freire, but also the philosopher it purportedly seeks to address, namely, Carl Schmitt (1996).²¹ As William Rasch (2016, p. 313) has argued, one of the reasons that led Schmitt to reject liberalism and elaborate his concept of the political was precisely the longing for “an integrated community set on a common course and pursuing a common purpose.” For Schmitt, as for Freire, the experience of acting together as friends who wrangle against a common enemy is a moment of intense solidarity. It is for that reason that some of those who take part in that struggle may actually bemoan its end, for they know that the solidarity they lived through cannot survive the disappearance of the friend–enemy relation that initially mobilized them into action.

Democratic freedom puts into motion “a type of human relation that can create ... solidarity” (Freire, 2017a, p. 98). For Freire, the feelings of solidarity and social belonging result from the permeable ... consciousness and the porous self that ensues from it. Such feelings are consolidated in the exercise of democratic freedom, whereupon those who were alien to us become familiar through their presence as voices we have to listen to and perspectives we have to take into account when we deliberate in public.²²

4 | CONCLUSION

This article has presented a conception of democratic freedom as resistance against self-hatred, epistemic injustice, and oppression by dint of an analysis of Freire’s critical theory. Whereas oppression is broadly defined as any act that thwarts authentic self-development—which obviously may include acts that produce physical violence and material destitution—self-hatred and epistemic injustice are specifically portrayed as components of the shadow, a metaphor Freire uses to denote the psychological internalization of oppression that winds up co-opting the oppressed as participants in their own domination. Freire’s idea of authentic self-development, it has been claimed, is better read not as the discovery of an inner and immutable individual essence but as a process of self-fashioning that results from critical reflection, which is an ability citizens can acquire only through democratic participation.

Self-hatred makes the oppressed despise themselves and infuses in them a deep desire to emulate their superiors (that is, the ones who oppress them). Epistemic injustice is experienced when the oppressed believe their inferiority divests them of the power to produce knowledge about their surrounding reality and social life. Conversely, epistemic injustice is also experienced when the oppressed are taken in by the supposed supremacy of the oppressor’s cognitive abilities.

Conquering freedom demands struggling against self-hatred and epistemic injustice because, as Freire illustrates in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the shadow suffuses the relations among the oppressed with distrust and contempt. Since they are all equally “inferior beings” who are unable to produce reliable knowledge and give an adequate account of what is going on around them, why would the oppressed gather among themselves and criticize the perspective the oppressor has implanted in them in the first place? Self-hatred and epistemic injustice are anathema to freedom because, by making the oppressed leery of one another, they keep resistance and struggle at bay. As long as the oppressed buy into the idea that they are “inferior” citizens who should compete among themselves to see who can resemble more the oppressor, they will never fight for freedom:

Yes, but look, my friends have always been ... well, faggots [putazos], like I am, and among ourselves, well, how can I put it? We don't trust one another, because we know we are ... so easy to scare, so wishy-washy. And what we're always waiting for ... is like a friendship or something, with a more serious person ... with a [heterosexual] man, of course. And that can't happen. (Puig, 1994, p. 141, ellipses in the original; English translation, Puig, 1991, p. 203)

When confessing why he leads a lonely life, Luis Molina, the gay character of Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* (1994) who was incarcerated for practicing illicit sexual behavior, also reveals why he refuses to resist the oppressive regime that treats him as a degenerate. Having succumbed to self-hatred, Molina detests spending too much time with those like him and is eager to interact with the "superiors." Yet, his greatest efforts notwithstanding, that cannot happen because, as a member of the "superior" social group, the oppressor naturally does not want to befriend anyone who is "inferior." After countless failed attempts, Molina has finally come to terms with the social logic that would forever segregate him from the "superiors." Still, he kept praying for one of these superiors to become a little friendly towards him and failed to perceive that the reason why he despised other gay men was precisely because the oppressor disliked him. In Freire's terms, it is because Molina has adhered to the master narrative and internalized the oppressor's shadow—the hegemonic perspective according to which gay men are inferior—that he is doomed to a lonely and oppressed life.

According to Freire, the eradication of oppression and the advent of freedom can come about only through the exorcism of the shadow, a process that can take shape only through democratic participation. When the oppressed demos get together and construct their own narratives about the surrounding social-political reality, they start to challenge the hegemonic perspective the oppressor has implanted in them. For the first time they recognize each other as worthy epistemic peers who are entitled to produce knowledge and to alter the norms that structure their lives. Democratic participation is, among other things, a process imbued with epistemic properties that grants citizens the resources to construct objectivity and to grapple, no matter how imperfectly, with the collective problems of the polity.

Freedom for Freire is bound up with democracy because only when the demos participate in self-government and act in communion can they struggle against self-hatred and epistemic injustice by developing porous selves, whose permeable consciousness allows each of them to inhabit multiple perspectives. As Freire (2017b, p. 105) explains, the political communion that citizens experience when they act together and forge a common world tends to annihilate individualism. Freire's democratic conception of freedom decenters political action from the possessive individualism that, like other political theorists of the 1960s, he imputes to modern liberalism. The authentic co-existence among democratic citizens must thus be distinguished from gregariousness, a pejorative term Freire (2017a, p. 62) uses to denote "the juxtaposition of [discrete] individuals who lack a critical bond." Democratic freedom entails disrupting the atomistic, self-enclosed individual and overcoming self-hatred, epistemic injustice, and oppression. "No one can liberate anyone else, no one can be liberated alone: people become free in communion" (Freire, 2017b, p. 71).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A previous version of this article was presented in October 2018 at the Brazil Research Seminar Series organized by the Institute of Latin American Studies at Columbia University. I am grateful to all participants in the event, in particular to Randall Allsup, Pedro Dotto, and Nadia Urbinati. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their comments. This research received financial support from São Paulo Research Foundation, FAPESP grant #2015/22251-0.

NOTES

¹ Following Freire, I make no distinction between emancipation and freedom. I also do not differentiate between freedom and liberty.

² Though in the body of the text I use the titles of the translations, my page references are to the original versions: *Educação como prática da liberdade* (2017a), *Pedagogia do oprimido* (2017b) and *Pedagogia da autonomia* (2018). The first editions of these works were published, respectively, in 1965, 1968, and 1996. When citing long passages from *Pedagogia do oprimido* I indicate the page numbers of the English translation. I prefer to quote from the original version and offer my own translation because, although the published translations are helpful, there are a few occasions when they are inaccurate. Take for instance the passage where "shadow" (*sombra*) is rendered as "image" (Freire, 2000, p. 47). This odd choice receives no explanation from the translator ("image" in Portuguese is *imagem*, a word that Freire never uses when using the metaphor of the shadow).

³ Following Freire, I conceive of participation as a group of actions that are exercised in a myriad of ways. Citizens participate in politics whenever they act in order to exert influence over public affairs. Besides the suffrage, participation is also carried out through public debate, demonstrations, petitions, etc.

⁴ For a penetrating analysis of the differences between psychological and material oppression, see Ann E. Cudd (2006).

- ⁵ Instead of equating it with essentialism, we do better to read Freire's concept of authenticity as a synonym for autonomous self-development. Freire (1994, p. 184, 2017b, p. 92) conceives of human identity as a social and political construct that changes over time and place, and his partial endorsement of populism is a symptom of his refusal of essentialism. On the relationship between populism and anti-essentialism, see Ernesto Laclau (2005, p. 127).
- ⁶ I borrow the expression "master narrative" from Toni Morrison (1992, pp. 50–51).
- ⁷ Freire (1994, p. 201 and 2014b, p. 97) is aware that subjects occupy multiple social positions and knows that one can be oppressed in one social context while being an oppressor in a different context. For example, a working-class black man can be oppressed by his white boss, and nevertheless act as an oppressor when he beats his wife at home.
- ⁸ The Freirean concept of adhesion can be related to what contemporary critical race theorists call the white gaze, that is, the internalization of the oppressor's perspective by oppressed racial groups that contributes to making oppression less perceptible (see Medina, 2013, p. 192).
- ⁹ My use of the verb "exorcise" is to emphasize the agonistic and agonizing aspects of Freire's conception of freedom. Freire's agonism in no way should be read as a celebration of violence, which for him was intimately related to oppression insofar as every act of oppression constitutes a violent act (see Freire, 2017b, p. 58). Yet, though the conflict he deems salutary for democracy is first and foremost discursive, Freire does recognize that the struggle against oppression may require physical combat between the oppressed and the oppressors. It would be naïve to expect mere talk to persuade the oppressor to change her behavior, especially if the oppression she exerts is beneficial to her (see Freire, 2013, p. 53). More often than not, the struggle for freedom involves forcing those on top to disengage from oppression. To the extent that it only reacts to the violence initiated by the oppressor, such force does not qualify as violence for Freire (2017a, p. 69).
- ¹⁰ Kidd, Medina, and Pohlhaus (2017) have compiled several articles written by contemporary political theorists who study epistemic injustice. The concept of epistemic injustice acquired prominence mainly through the work of Fricker (2007, p. 1), who coined the term to express any "wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower."
- ¹¹ On the ways in which epistemic injustice can block political freedom, see also Susan E. Babbitt (2017), Susan Dieleman (2012, p. 260), and Miranda Fricker (2013).
- ¹² My understanding of atomism descends from Charles Taylor (1985, Chapter 7), a writer whose philosophical views, like Freire's, are partly informed by Catholicism. I underscore Freire and Taylor's Catholicism because the repudiation of atomism plays a pivotal role in the Catholic religion, especially in the ritual of communion (see also n 19). On the influence of Catholicism over Freire's and Taylor's works, see respectively Kirylo and Boyd (2017, Chapter 1) and Taylor (1999).
- ¹³ The italics are to emphasize that Freirean liberty does not long for a state where citizens' differences are subsumed under total sameness, for the concept of popular identity that lurks behind Freire's democratic conception of freedom corresponds to the idea of identity that undergirds Bergsonian *durée* (Bergson, 1898, Chapter 2 and Freire, 2017b, p. 102). For an analysis that clarifies how Henri Bergson's philosophy offers a conception of popular identity that can harbor diversity and opposing tendencies, see Paulina Ochoa Espejo (2012, pp. 165–167).
- ¹⁴ On the importance of love for democracy, see Bergson (1937, p. 304). As Freire was acquainted with this text it can be conjectured that his association between love and democracy was influenced by Bergson.
- ¹⁵ For an analysis that challenges the conventional reading of Schumpeter as a minimalist who reduced democracy to an electoral competition between political elites, see John Medearis (2001).
- ¹⁶ On the negative conception of liberty, see Isaiah Berlin (2000, pp. 201–202).
- ¹⁷ Unlike some of the participatory theories of democracy that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, Freire's critical theory is not hostile to political representation. Indeed, a participatory democracy for Freire can be reconciled with representation. Among the three books analyzed in this article, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is the one that most stresses the importance of representation (Freire, 2017b, p. 156). Nevertheless, even in this work, Freire stops short of giving due consideration to the vexed relationship between representation and democracy. Most likely, the reason for this is that several political theorists in the 1960s tended to take "the relationship of representation to democracy... for granted as unproblematic" (Pitkin, 2016, p. 226). The controversy surrounding the relationship between representation and democracy became a matter of academic research only later on (Pitkin & Rosenblum 2015, p. 4) and only in the 1990s did scholars begin to delve consistently into the topic of democratic representation (Brito Vieira, 2017, pp. 1–2; Urbinati & Warren 2008, p. 388).
- ¹⁸ On the intrinsic connection between democracy and freedom in Paulo Freire, see Nita Freire (2016, p. 60).
- ¹⁹ The association of democracy with a porous self that emerges and is sustained by collective action offers an alternative to the liberal understanding of the democratic subject that is endorsed by scholars such as George Kateb. A staunch individualist, Kateb (1992, p. 81) avers that democracy cannot do without "a theory of individual integrity." Unlike Freire, Kateb (1992, Chapter 3) contends that democracy requires a self-enclosed individual whose impermeable integrity shields her from nefarious influences from outside. Kateb (1992, p. 85) bases his liberal understanding of the democratic subject on transcendentalism, a 19th-century movement that was deeply influenced by Protestantism, and he singles out Ralph Waldo

Emerson's self-reliant individual as one of the best portrayals of the democratic subject ever made in American literature. Taking into account Freire's understanding of the democratic self, one could argue that it is Jack Kerouac, not Emerson, who has given one of the best portrayals of the democratic self in American literature. Far from being self-reliant individuals with impermeable integrity, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, the two protagonists of *On the Road*, are eager to have their identity transformed by people of the most varied races and social classes that come along their way (see especially Kerouac, 2007, p. 180). The idea that they should strive to become self-reliant *individuals* is absent in the novel. As its author explained, *On the Road* "was really a story about two Catholic buddies roaming the country in search of God. And we found him . . . and Dean (Neal) had God sweating on his forehead" (Kerouac, quoted in Cottrell, 2015, p. 24). The Catholic notion of communion, of having the other impregnate one's very flesh and pores, is what drives Sal and Dean's wild wanderings. Hence, it comes as no surprise that the nouns *individual* and *individuality*—two words Emerson and Kateb use several times—do not appear once in *On the Road*. In their resistance to capitalism, Kerouac's characters somehow understood that the cult of individuality, the interpellation of citizens as individuals who are exhorted to assume personal responsibility for their own "faults" and who must learn to become "self-reliant," could very easily be co-opted by economic powers that are actually inimical to human freedom. That understanding informs Freire's work as well. Freire also never uses the words *individual* or *individuality* when writing about the democratic subject. Given all this, I would venture to suggest that, while Emerson's self-reliant individual epitomizes the liberal-Katebian understanding of the democratic individual, Kerouac's beatniks embody the radical-Freirean conception of the democratic self.

- ²⁰ Freire seeks to convey with the word "plastic" (*plástico*) the power to assume different forms and shapes. The term can be read as a synonym for permeable. Freire's insistence on the plastic and permeable character of the democratic self has led some of his commentators to argue that his theory advances an "ontology of *becoming*" or "ontology of incompleteness" (Bolin, 2017, pp. 759, 761). Other commentators have submitted that Freire's (2014a, pp. 239–240) focus on the radical indeterminacy and incompleteness of the democratic subject aligns him, to some extent, with existentialism (Moreira & Rosa 2014).
- ²¹ Schaap's (2007, p. 60) dichotomy is straightforward: the political can be conceived of either along the lines of the republican tradition or in the vein of Schmitt and the realist tradition. Whereas the former views the political "as having a potentially world-disclosing or integrative function," the latter see it "as always tending towards a relation of exclusion" (Schaap, 2007, p. 60). The possibility of characterizing the political as having both an integrative and an exclusory function is never entertained by Schaap. Such neglect exposes a limitation of his reading, for the exclusion of the enemy was hailed by Schmitt precisely because of its integrative function. As section four of *Der Begriff des Politischen* makes clear, the political is located not in the exclusion of the enemy tout court, but in the *relation* that such exclusion creates among those who thereby are labeled as either friends or enemies (Schmitt, 1996, p. 37; English translation, Schmitt, 2007, p. 37). As Leo Strauss (1995 p. 125) nicely summarized it in a letter he sent to Schmitt, what the latter's concept of the political reveals is that "men can be *unified* only in a unity *against*—against other men. Every association of men is *necessarily* a separation from other men." In short, the integrative and exclusory functions of the political are mutually reinforcing in Schmitt's philosophy (as well as in Freire's). On the impossibility of severing the integrative and exclusory functions of political conflict, see also Georg Simmel (1955, pp. 13–20).
- ²² The italics are to emphasize that solidarity and social belonging do not require for Freire perfect identity among those who share it (see n 13). Needless to say, "being familiar with" and "being identical to" are not the same. On solidarity as "identifying *with*" rather than "identifying *as*," see Naomi Scheman (2011, p. 138).

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How to cite this article: Dalaqua GH. Democratic freedom as resistance against self-hatred, epistemic injustice, and oppression in Paulo Freire's critical theory. *Constellations*. 2018;1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12395>