

"There are no neutral educational systems. It is impossible for me to think about education without considering the question of power," says São Paulo's secretary of education and the author of the remarkable Pedagogy of the Oppressed

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INTERVIEW

PAULO FREIRE

Before you turn that thing on," Paulo Freire said to me as I was ready to press the record button on the tape recorder, "I want to talk to you." Sure, I responded, sipping a demitasse of sweet Brazilian coffee in his home in São Paulo. "Tell me about your universe." I stared at him, stunned. *Shit*, I thought. I began in a safe place, describing you, our readers. "Yes," he said, "now tell me who you are." I ventured deeper.

I had no idea when I boarded the plane for Brazil that Freire would "touch" me, but he did, literally and figuratively. I anticipated only a lively conversation with a man respected world over as a literacy expert. When Freire became excited, he'd move to the edge of his chair, reach out his arm, and touch my knee, tap my hand, claim my attention.

And figuratively? That's harder to describe. When I arrived

at his home, I looked from the cab into the front courtyard to see a short, slight man coming to meet me. He seemed tired and walked with a slight limp, cautiously, deliberately. But as he began to talk, he was clearly not a frail creature. Complementing his gentleness, perhaps even feeding it, is a rare and powerful indignation, purged of anger, bitterness, and spite. Sit with Freire and you will sense his power, a power that arises from the simple fact that he has militantly lived out his beliefs. Most of us aren't acquainted with that type of person. Apologies to those who think journalists should always approach subjects in a detached manner, looking for the hard, cold facts. Freire breaks through that nonsense.

These days Freire is a very, very happy man. And he'll tell you so. He's happy because now at age sixty-nine, as secretary of education for São Paulo's schools, he has the chance

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM ZIMBEROFF

ic. During the twenty-first hour of study, one member wrote, "I am amazed at myself." In another program, one illiterate said, "I want to read and write so that I can stop being the shadow of other people." Another wrote, "I have the school of the world."

Omni: How did you actually teach syllables, vowels, the rudimentary elements of reading?

Freire: With what I call generative words—*favela* (slum), *chuva* (rain), *terreno* (land), *batuque* (Afro-Brazilian dancing), *bicicleta* (bicycle). Generative words are weighted with emotion and meaning, expressing the anxieties, fears, demands, and dreams of the group. Fifteen or eighteen words seem enough to teach the basic phonemes of Portuguese. Take the word *brick*. After discussing all the aspects of a brick, we present the word: *tijolo*. Then it is divided into syllables: *ti-jo-lo*. After that, we introduce the phonemic family: *ta-te-ti-to-tu, ja-je-ji-jo-ju, la-le-li-lo-lu*. After a reading to grasp the vocal sounds, the group begins to "make" words: *tatu* (armadillo), *luta* (struggle), *loja* (store), *jacto* (jet), and so forth. Some participants take a vowel from one of the syllables, link it to another syllable, add a third, and form a word. One illiterate, on the first night, said, "*Tu ja le*" (You already read). In one culture circle, a participant wrote on the blackboard on the

fifth day: O POVO VAI RESOLVER OS PROBLEMAS DO BRASIL VOTANDO CONCIENTE (The people will solve the problems of Brazil by informed voting). How do you explain that a man who was illiterate several days earlier could write words with complex phonemes?

I'll give you one more example. In one small fishing community, Monte Mario, the participants had as a generative word the term *bonito* (beautiful), also the name of a fish. As a codification they had designed a little town with houses, fishing boats, and a man holding up a bonito. All at once, four of them stood up and walked over to the wall where the picture was hanging. They stared at it and then went to the window and said, "This is Monte Mario and we didn't know it." It was as if they were emerging from their world to understand it for the first time. Learners are empowered by the knowledge that they are learners. They are not empowered by simply acquiring literacy skills. One peasant, after a few literacy sessions, got up and said, "Before we did not know that we knew. Now we know that we knew. Because we today know that we knew, we can know even more."

Omni: Who were your mentors?

Freire: Christ was one of the greatest educators and teachers; he influenced me as a pedagogue. I am not reflecting on the transcendental dimension of

Christ. I take him as a man. There was a coherence between his words and actions. And Christ loved. Well, Christ sent me to Marx, but I have never denied myself the right to question either of them. The words of those you admire and love cannot be eaten, taken unquestionably. Marx excited me. Marx gave me the tools to understand the contradictions in society. Marx freed me to become indignant and allowed me to understand Christ's indignation when he cast out the tax collectors from the temple. The ideas of Sartre, Eric Fromm, Louis Althusser, Mao, Martin Luther King, Che Guevara influenced me, as did Frantz Fanon's books, particularly *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Omni: What are some of São Paulo's greatest problems?

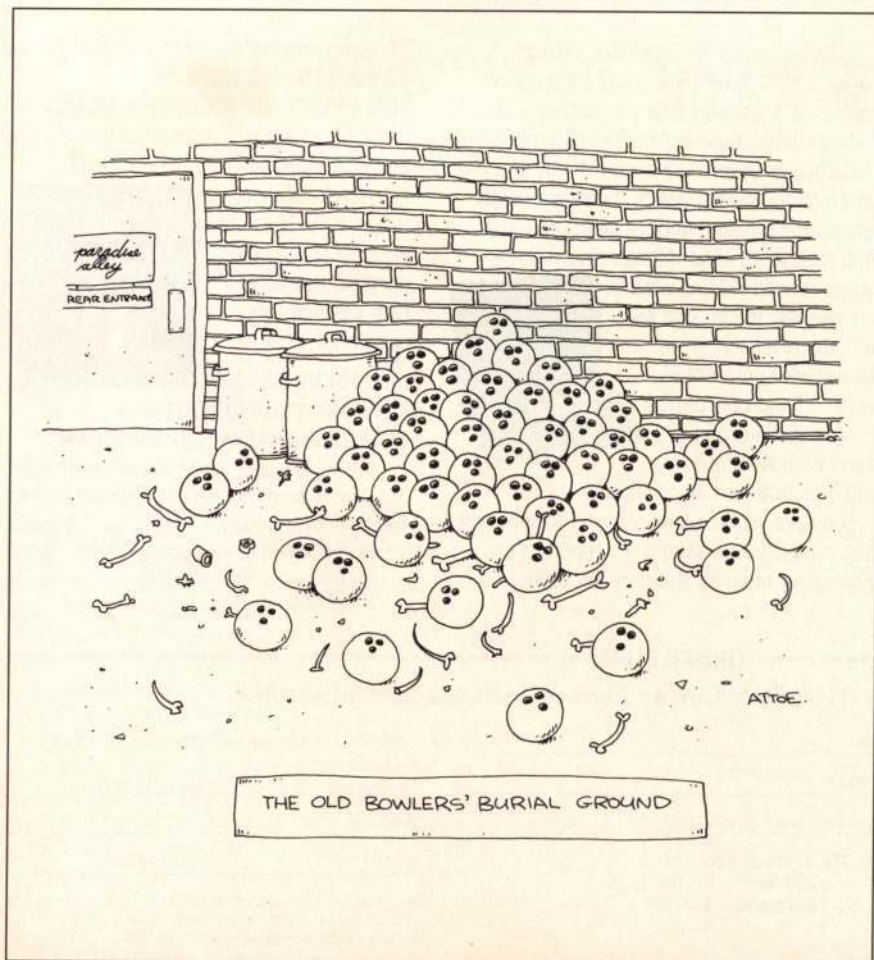
Freire: São Paulo is a fantastic example of social contradictions. It is both a rich, First World city and a poor, Third World city. On its outskirts, where the majority of our schools are located, there's so much misery, domination, exploitation! You ask about obstacles? Any educator who accepts the responsibility of directing a school system in this or any other country faces enormous odds. Brazil has arrived at the end of the twentieth century with eight million poor children seven to fourteen years old, without schools to attend. And kids four to seven, who should be in preschools, are not being accommodated either.

Omni: To say nothing about the kids who drop out.

Freire: Or those who are expelled. Thousands of working-class kids are expelled between the first and second year of primary school because they don't learn to read and write. Many are then expelled in the fifth and sixth grades for failing mathematics, history, or geography. Many educators say these kids drop out, but that's an evasion, a "sweet" concept to cover the system's failure. The kids don't leave school. They're expelled. We fail them but never, never talk about our failings. Or ask: When will we get these kids back into school? The question is a political one. To solve our educational problems, we must make political decisions.

Omni: Most educators in the United States have criticized the claim that education is tied to politics.

Freire: Yes, yes, I know. But just as there are no neutral city or state administrations, there are no neutral education systems. It is impossible for me to think about education without considering the question of power, of asking the question: In favor of whom or what do we promote education? In the United States it is necessary to negate the political nature of education to give the superficial appearance that education serves everyone. But the more you deny the political dimension of education, the more you assume the moral poten-



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tial to blame the victims—the dropouts are to blame. And the dropouts, for the most part, are from “minority” groups.

Ironically, the “minority” to whom you refer in the context of U.S. education are the “majority” who, in fact, find themselves outside the sphere of political and economic dominance. Maybe so many people emerge from your school systems illiterate because they are resisting, refusing to read the world the way they're being taught it. Although some U.S. educators are willing to describe a possible correlation between the high dropout rates and low socioeconomic background of the students, they fail to establish political and ideological linkages in any analyses. When curriculum designers fail to incorporate “minority” groups' values in the curriculum, when they refuse to accept and legitimize the students' language, their actions point to the inflexibility, insensitivity, and rigidity of a curriculum designed to benefit those who wrote it.

Omni: Did you face other obstacles?

Freire: Well, during my first year, I've concentrated on the school buildings themselves. We have the largest school system in Brazil—six hundred and fifty-four schools. Of these, three hundred and ninety needed immediate, major repairs. Roofs were caving in. There was exposed wiring, backed-up sewage,

threatening rats, to say nothing about the lack of chalk. I should have closed fifty-five schools immediately. I closed about five. If fifty-five bordered on calamity, this does not mean the rest of them were in excellent shape.

Sometimes I think Brazil is a country of inauguration, of celebration. After we celebrate the opening of a new building, we immediately forget it and in five years, the building is crumbling. And we constantly fight a colonial bureaucracy. It's such a contradiction: a country attempting to modernize with a colonial bureaucracy. It's a sorrow. It can take up to a month just to get approval to start repairs.

We need four hundred and fifty-six new schools to satisfy the demand for classrooms. In my first year, enrollment increased 6.39 percent from kindergarten to high school. We have used alternative spaces as classrooms: civic buildings, union halls, churches, community centers. We have also started nine hundred and sixty new teenage and adult education classrooms.

Omni: Have you had the time to begin to overhaul the curriculum?

Freire: Even before assuming this office, I had begun to work toward it. I invited one of the best Brazilian theoreticians in curricula, a professor at the Catholic University, to help redesign the cur-

riculum. Together we met with physicists, mathematicians, biologists, sociologists, philosophers, art educators—about one hundred professionals. We discussed theories of knowledge and education, art and education, ethics and education, sexuality and education, human rights and education, sports and education, social class and education, language and education, ideology and education. Our dream is that this team will meet with all thirty thousand teachers in São Paulo. We are also meeting with principals, supervisors, dietitians, community leaders, and parents. The Department of Education prepared a television program in which I addressed the schools. During the program I asked students to tell me what they wanted to change, to share their dreams. We received twenty thousand responses.

Omni: Don't most teachers think you're idealistic when you talk about teachers and students as equal participants in a dialogic process?

Freire: Where do you start to combat “the banking concept” of education—open head, insert fact? How do you empower teachers and students? I cannot decree today: “The schools in São Paulo are democratic.” We began by creating councils in each school, responsible for the life of that school. Some councils simply took the authority away from the princi-

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pal and became authoritarian themselves. That's no solution. In others, principals and councils are locked in a power struggle—nothing gets accomplished. But some are working with the principal, creating a more democratic atmosphere, discussing their problems, whether they're building, disciplinary, or curriculum problems. I want to videotape the sessions of the more successful councils—they're still the minority—to show the others what happens when power is distributed equally.

Omni: So you are hoping to create a disciplined but creative and curious environment? You have spoken about "the castration of curiosity."

Freire: Kids begin life as curious beings. They constantly ask questions. Then they go to school and the schools start slowly killing, killing their capacity to be curious. A wonderful chapter in a child's life, begun in infancy, is closed. It starts closing as soon as the child steps into the classroom, especially if the child is considered a "minority." Today the question we face is how to use curiosity as a fundamental instrument in the learning process.

Omni: Aspira, a Hispanic advocacy group in New York

City, reports that in American schools, "Hispanics are given a message: Your culture is not good enough; your language stinks; you have to adjust to our culture." And the Commission of Black New Yorkers issued the statement, "Many black students, confronted with an educational system that devalues their culture and does not expect them to achieve, have opted to leave the system." The high-school dropout rate of blacks, Alaskan natives, Native Americans, and Hispanics is about thirty-five percent. That's an alarming rate.

Freire: I say to myself: How can this be possible in a modernized society like yours? It's a tragedy, no? Aren't these dropout rates an example of an immense

contradiction in your society? No one seems to realize we are working against the kids, against the possibility that they will learn and, in learning, believe in themselves. It's interesting to consider the expulsion as a triumph, not a failure, of the student. If students are constantly repressed, if schools negate their day-to-day life experience, their language and culture, they resist by refusing to learn the word of the teacher, the curriculum, the wider culture. In a sense they are reaffirming their own words and perceptions of life.

Omni: We also have a literacy crisis in the United States; around sixty million Americans are illiterate or functionally

egated to the ghettos? I am not an American and I am not the one to address your problems. I can, however, speak about the school I dream of.

As educators we should never forget that the popular class has a syntax and linguistic code that differs from that of the dominant class. Take black English. Black Americans' linguistic code reflects their reality, their lived experience in history: the sense of daily alienation, the struggle to survive substandard living conditions, the drug culture. Educators need to understand how different dialects encode different worldviews.

Omni: At what point do you as an educator begin to teach the standard language? Or isn't that important?

Freire: I am continually misunderstood on this subject. I oppose allowing an underprivileged child to get away without knowing the standard language, the so-called "correct" Portuguese. I have been accused of denying kids access to proper standards and of ignoring grammatical errors. This is not true. But I have respect for the popular culture and language. A so-called "error" in language is only a brief moment in the search for getting it right. Each time, however, the teacher highlights an error, usually in red pencil, he gives the message: You don't know anything; you don't know

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illiterate. And the United States is in forty-ninth place among the one hundred and twenty-eight countries of the United Nations in terms of literacy. Former secretary of education William J. Bennett is on record saying that only English "will ensure that local schools will succeed in teaching non-English-speaking students English so that they will enjoy access to the opportunities of the American society."

Freire: Yes, yes. But if education in *only* English can guarantee the linguistic minorities a better future, as Bennett promises, why do the majority of black Americans, whose ancestors have been speaking English for more than two hundred years, find themselves still rel-

how to speak or write. The child eventually internalizes the message because we are language animals. Only through full appropriation of the dominant standard language do students become empowered and begin to understand the oppressive nature of their society. When they know the standard language, they may engage the wider society in dialogue—and challenge it.

Omni: Has any event or series of events crucially influenced your life's work?

Freire: When the 1929 stock market crash began to affect Brazil's economy, my family often didn't have enough food to eat. I fell behind in school. Before that, our family was situated between the working and middle class. I

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had friends who ate less and dressed in shabbier clothes than I did. I also had friends who ate more and dressed better. That experience, looking on both sides of the fence, had a profound impact on me. I discovered there was something basically wrong in the organization of society. I still remember asking how it can be possible that God wants some people to be poor and some rich. God was good, I had been taught by my mother, a woman with the rigid ethics of a devout Catholic. So I concluded that neither God nor destiny could be responsible for the divisions in society, though I could not find any satisfactory explanations. At age eleven I vowed to do anything I could to alleviate hunger in the world.

One day my brothers and I caught a neighbor's chicken that had wandered into our yard. We killed it. My mother heard the chicken's cries and came running. I expected her to punish us, give the chicken back to the neighbor, and ask him to forgive us. But she picked it up, went to the kitchen, and we ate it. A beautiful lunch! She was very realistic. I forgot the incident until much later, after she died. But I've often wondered what sort of turmoil she went through as she stood there looking at the dead chicken, then at us, deciding if she should return it or feed us.

Another important event was the day my mother, after hunting for a school that would take me without pay, said, "My son, I met a man who will open the door of his school to you. He's got one condition: that you love to study." When this man allowed me to enroll in his private school, one of the best in Recife, without knowing my mother, he demonstrated what it means to love others and showed me the importance of helping others. I've never believed in the statement, "I made myself." Self-made men do not exist. In the corners of the streets where the self-made man lives, there are many people hiding. We do not make ourselves alone. I ended up teaching at that school. After my first wife died, I married the daughter of the man who opened his doors to me.

Omni: You dream of a different world. What does it look like?

Freire: My dream is of a society in which saying the "word" is to become involved in the decision to transform the world. Today the majority of the people are silent. Why should they have to muffle their discussion, their dissent? When they are called upon to read, why do they read only the dominant discourse? From my childhood to my exile, from my exile to my return, I have searched for an education that stands for liberty and against the exploitation of the popular classes, the perversity of the social structures, the silence imposed on the poor—always aided by an authoritarian education. I have

searched for a pedagogy of indignation. Because my commitment is to a future that builds itself in the changing present, I have learned to remain curious.

Omni: Do you think we're witnessing the "failure of Communism, of socialism"?

Freire: In moments of great historical upheaval, it's difficult to read accurately what is really happening. To me, the people in Eastern Europe are rejecting authoritarianism. They are not necessarily trading the socialist project for the capitalist project. They are rejecting socialist extremes. The people are standing together and saying "no" to the negation of subjectivity. It is a collective reaffirmation of self, of myself, of yourself, of us. The people are saying no to those who have deprived them of their right to think, to question, to be subjects of their own history—to be curious.

I am not really interested in predicting which political project will win. I was in East Germany in the Seventies and denied the opportunity to visit any school. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was banned. Today I am sure they are reading it. Two months ago I spoke in Japan, and a young man from the Soviet Union approached me and said, "Professor, it is a pleasure to finally meet you. Today we not only are reading your books, we are using your ideas." Do the changes Gorbachev has initiated mean that he now prefers capitalism? I don't think so. But Gorbachev does realize that a political system cannot remain in power forever. Without being free it is impossible to risk. Without risking, it is impossible to create. Americans are prejudiced against any project that even vaguely looks Marxist or socialist. To the epochal changes occurring in Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union, Americans cry out: Failure of Communism, failure of socialism. Americans should study the power of their own prejudice. Perhaps, in the process, they would find areas in their democracy in which freedom does not exist. Sixty million functional illiterates in America represents a failure of something. **DO**

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