

**BRAZIL'S UNINTENDED GIFT TO THE WORLD:
PAULO FREIRE'S *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED*,
FIFTY YEARS LATERⁱ**

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ABSTRACT

The text contextualizes briefly the work of literacy director Paulo Freire in the João Goulart government, which culminated in the military coup of 1964. During the dark times of civil-military dictatorship in Brazil, which remained until 1985, the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, written in 1968, was born for hope and democracy. Forbidden in Brazil, this work would be read by millions of people around the world. Emerging from a growing democratic movement in Brazil in the 1950s, Freire's pedagogy taught illiterates to read and write in just 40 hours. For Paulo Freire, throughout his life and work, the essential questions of his most famous book remained: What kind of society is this which we live in? Is it fair, democratic and egalitarian? What kind of world do we want? How do we get there from here? These questions were amplified on a global scale, when a sad story and a tragic destiny forced Paulo Freire to leave Brazil for 15 years, at a time of great vigor of his professional life, during which he became an unintended gift from Brazil to the world. Few books have been so widely debated, quoted, anthologized, and also used for teacher education, maintaining an extraordinary appeal fifty years later.

KEYWORDS: Paulo Freire. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Social Justice.

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*UM PRESENTE NÃO INTENCIONAL DO BRASIL PARA O MUNDO:
A PEDAGOGIA DO OPRIMIDO DE PAULO FREIRE, CINQUENTA ANOS DEPOIS*

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RESUMO

O texto contextualiza, brevemente, o trabalho do diretor de alfabetização Paulo Freire, no governo João Goulart, que culminou com o golpe militar de 1964. Durante os tempos sombrios de ditadura civil-militar no Brasil, que permaneceram até 1985, a Pedagogia do Oprimido, escrita em 1968, nasceu para a esperança e a democracia. Proibida no Brasil, essa obra seria lida por milhões de pessoas em todo o mundo. Emergindo de um movimento democrático crescente no Brasil, na década de 1950, a pedagogia de Freire ensinou analfabetos a ler e escrever em apenas 40 horas. Para Paulo Freire, ao longo de sua vida e trabalho, as questões essenciais do seu livro mais famoso permaneceram: Que tipo de sociedade é essa em que vivemos? É justa, democrática e igualitária? Que tipo de mundo queremos? Como é que vamos chegar lá, a partir daqui? Estas perguntas foram amplificadas em uma escala global, quando uma história triste e um destino trágico forçaram Paulo Freire a sair do Brasil por 15 anos, em um momento de grande vigor de sua vida profissional, durante o qual ele se tornou um presente não intencional do Brasil para o mundo. Poucos livros têm sido tão amplamente debatidos, citados, antologizados, e também usados para a formação de professores mantendo, cinquenta anos depois, um apelo extraordinário.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Paulo Freire. Pedagogia do Oprimido. Justiça Social.*

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“Now I am no longer part of the ‘masses,’ I am “people” and I can demand my rights.”

Francisca Andrade, student in a Freirean literacy circle in Angicos, Brazil, 1963, (Kirkendall, 40)

The Angicos culture circles celebrated graduation April 2, 1963, with 41-year-old literacy director Paulo Freire in attendance as well as the liberal President of the Republic, Joao Goulart. Freire told the President, there “...exists today a people who decides, a people that is rising up, a people that has begun to become aware of its destiny and has begun to take part in the Brazilian historical process irreversibly.” (KIRKENDALL, p. 40) President Goulart had brought his entire Cabinet to that ceremony, including the military minister General Humberto Castelo Branco. One year later almost to the day, March 30, 1964, Castelo Branco would reverse democracy by leading a coup that overthrew Goulart and forced him to flee to Uruguay April 5. Days later, Paulo’s national literacy program was disbanded and Paulo was eventually thrown in jail. On the brink of a peaceful democratic revolution from below, the oligarchs of Brazil supported by the United States called out the generals to launch a violent counter-revolution from above.

The lights went out in Brazil for too long after that, with military rule lasting until 1985. Pedagogy of the Oppressed, published first in 1968 but banned then in Brazil, would be read by millions around the world. This influential book was born from dark times, born for hope and democracy. Emerging from a growing democratic movement in Brazil in the 1950s, Freire’s pedagogy taught illiterates to read and write in only 40 hours of inexpensive instruction. Once basically literate, poor peasants and workers could finally qualify to vote after centuries of imposed silence, vastly expanding the electorate from the bottom up. The Brazilian Constitution of 1932 had allowed only men and women to vote if they could prove they were literate. But, if thousands of culture circles had opened as Freire and Goulart had planned in 1964, millions of impoverished illiterates would read and write well enough to register as new voters, moving electoral power to popular forces at a moment of rising movements in Brazil. To stop such a democratic possibility, the oligarchy and its army overthrew the elected Goulart administration which had appointed Freire to his national post.

Dismissed by the “junta”, interrogated multiple times, jailed in June, 1964, released ten weeks later in August, then harassed and interrogated again, Freire thought another arrest was imminent. He decided to go into exile, but only the Bolivian embassy would shelter him, and arrange his safe passage to La Paz, but another coup overthrew that government twenty days later, forcing Paulo to leave for Chile, where he was finally joined by his first wife Elza and their five young children.

Forced into exile, Paulo found a way to be productive in Chile working in the Agrarian Reform under the Christian Democratic President Eduardo Frei, but political tensions rose there too ahead of the terrible coup of September, 1973, by which time Paulo had left Santiago for a brief stint at Harvard before joining the World Council of Churches in Geneva. In these years, he began global travel to lecture and consult widely as word of his philosophy and methods spread. Constantly in demand, Paulo was then at the peak of his creative powers which he brought to the world but would rather have brought to the Brazil he missed terribly.

Others who could not escape the 1964 coup were imprisoned, beaten, or hounded as the generals restored a conservative elite to unaccountable power. Paulo’s fate was to become a world-renowned educational thinker and innovator, so he used his exile well, addressing large crowds in Europe and North America as well as working with governments, NGO’s, and local projects. By the time of his passing in 1997, he had become the most famous educator of his time as well as the foremost advocate for social justice in education. Producing *A Pedagogy of the Oppressed* while the wounds of the coup were still fresh, Paulo wrote: “Problem-posing education is revolutionary futurity...Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence.” (p. 65-66).

Few books have been so widely debated, quoted, anthologized, and also used for teacher education. Fifty years later, what can explain the extraordinary appeal of **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**?

In four brief chapters, Paulo Freire integrated a remarkable array of concerns:

- 1) A theory and a practice for a critical-democratic pedagogy to question the unequal status quo in the name of social justice.

- 2) The theory and practice involved a “situated pedagogy” which could be adapted for diverse places, different stakeholders, and varying conditions.
- 3) This situated pedagogy provided a rich lexicon of practice: a dialogue method of instruction, problem-posing inquiry instead of “banking pedagogy” memorization, untested feasibility, limit-situations and limit-acts, the culture circle, the teacher-student with students-teachers, the vocabulary universe, the generative theme and the generative word, codification and de-codification, *conscientization* or coming to critical consciousness, hinged themes and the anthropological notion of culture, *praxis* or action/reflection—cyclically theorizing practice so as to evaluate and revise the practice of theory.
- 4) This lexicon of theory and practice evolved as Paulo experimented for 15 years in Brazil before the 1964 coup, working in adult basic literacy education outside formal school systems; later, he would adapt it for the public schools of Sao Paulo; around the world, others would implement and reinvent his methods for schools, colleges, literacy projects, and community education programs.
- 5) Adapted for diverse settings open to critical-democratic practice, this book crossed paths with multicultural and feminist pedagogies also emerging in the 1960s and 1970s with similar orientations towards equality, democracy, and social justice.
- 6) The social justice orientation of this book appeared just when mass movements for justice became global phenomena, in a period famous for “the immense and proliferating criticizability of things, institutions and practices, and discourses,” as Michel Foucault put it, (2003, p. 6) and when student-centered approaches and constructivist methods were on the offensive in educational circles.
- 7) Student-centered, constructivist, and questioning inequality, Freire’s theory and practice proposed that all forms of education were political. No pedagogy can be neutral because all are embedded in the power relations of their society, all develop human subjects and produce consciousness one way or another, depending on the ideology of the contents, the social relations

of discourse, and the learning process of the curriculum. To not question an unequal status quo in schooling was to teach that everything is fine the way it is and that there are no compelling conditions which call for civic intervention by students and teachers.

8) This civic learning process offered appealing moral values based in an ethics of mutuality and human responsibility to build a world less violent and cruel. Freire's preoccupation with humanization and de-humanization launched this concern on the very first page of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The goal of his pedagogy is to invite students and teachers to become more fully human, by which he meant to assert themselves as critical citizens and active subjects who make history with their own hands.

9) Finally, "Chapter 4" is an extraordinary epistle to those who are taking history into their own hands, especially for would-be political leaders, not only for teachers and students. This chapter warns oppositional leaders about the traditional traps awaiting their leadership; Freire cautions those who denounce domination but slide back into the arrogant business-as-usual of authoritarian monologue, abstract exhortation, and propagandizing(not permissible in Freirean dialogue). The practice of mutual dialogue is a protocol for rejecting manipulation and self-promotion, a democratic discipline especially for those in authority.

These points help account for the longevity and impact of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which was not written as a scholastic treatise, but rather grew from Freire's reflection on his practice and experiences. "Thought and study alone did not produce *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*," Freire wrote in "The Preface." This book, he reported, is rooted "in concrete situations [and] describes the reactions of laborers (peasant or urban) and of middle-class persons whom I have observed directly or indirectly during the course of my educative work" (p. 19).

Paulo considered critical education in schools or in social movements intellectually demanding and politically risky. Movements for social justice confront formidable authorities who Paulo called "the power now in power." In schools and colleges, in workplaces and in everyday life, teachers and students make themselves each day but under terms largely dominated from outside and above ("limit-situations" against which critical-democratic pedagogy is a "limit-

act”). Paulo was especially oriented to the critical learning possible inside mass movements (“the power not yet in power”), but found himself appointed Secretary of Education for Sao Paulo’s 643 schools when the Workers Party won control of that city administration in 1989. For Paulo, throughout his life and work, the essential questions of this famous book remained: What kind of society do we live in? Is it just, democratic, and equal? What kind of world do we want? How do we get there from here? These questions were amplified on a global scale when a sad history and a tragic fate forced Paulo Freire to flee Brazil during the best 15 years of his working life, during which he became Brazil’s unintended gift to the world.

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Note

ⁱ A shorter version of this essay appeared as the “Afterword” to the 50th Anniversary edition of *A Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Bloomsbury Publishing, New York, 2018).