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PEDAGOGIA CRÍTICA, PAULO FREIRE E A CORAGEM PARA SER POLÍTICO.

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RESUMO

Em um momento em que a memória está sendo apagada e a relevância política da educação é afastada pelo abraço da linguagem da medição e da quantificação, é ainda mais importante lembrar o legado e a obra de Paulo Freire. Desde os anos 1980, tem havido poucos intelectuais, se é que houve algum, na cena norte-americana educacional, que alcançaram o rigor teórico, a coragem cívica e o sentido de responsabilidade moral de Paulo Freire. Seu exemplo é mais importante agora do que nunca: com as instituições públicas de educação básica e superior, cada vez mais, sob o cerco de uma série de forças neoliberais e conservadoras, é imperativo que os educadores se apropriem do entendimento de Freire sobre empoderamento e o potencial democrático da educação. A linguagem da crítica e a educação da esperança são o seu legado, que está cada vez mais ausente de muitos discursos liberais e conservadores sobre os problemas educacionais atuais e vias adequadas de reforma. Paulo passou a vida guiado pelas crenças de que valia a pena lutar pelos os elementos radicais da democracia, de que a educação crítica é um elemento fundamental para a mudança social progressiva, e de que a forma como pensamos sobre política é inseparável daquela como compreendemos o mundo, o poder e a vida moral a que aspiramos. Paulo acreditava firmemente que a democracia não pode durar sem a cultura formativa que a torna possível. Numa altura em que as instituições públicas de educação básica e superior estão sendo associadas à lógica do mercado, à conformidade, à perda de poder e a modos inflexíveis de punição, conhecer as contribuições significativas da obra e o legado de Paulo Freire é mais importante do que nunca.

Palavras-chave: Paulo Freire. Linguagem da crítica. Pedagogia crítica. Política. Justiça social.

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CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, PAULO FREIRE AND THE COURAGE TO BE POLITICAL

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ABSTRACT

At a time when memory is being erased and the political relevance of education is dismissed in the embrace of the language of measurement and quantification, it is all the more important to remember the legacy and work of Paulo Freire. Since the 1980s, there have been few if any intellectuals on the North American educational scene who have matched Freire's theoretical rigor, civic courage, and sense of moral responsibility. And his example is more important now than ever before: with institutions of public and higher education increasingly under siege by a host of neoliberal and conservative forces, it is imperative for educators to acknowledge Freire's understanding of the empowering and democratic potential of education. The language of critique and educated hope was his legacy, one that is increasingly absent from many liberal and conservative discourses about current educational problems and appropriate avenues of reform. Paulo spent his life guided by the beliefs that the radical elements of democracy were worth struggling for, that critical education was a basic element of progressive social change, and that how we think about politics was inseparable from how we come to understand the world, power, and the moral life we aspire to lead. Paulo strongly believed that democracy could not last without the formative culture that made it possible. At a time when institutions of public and higher education have become associated with market competition, conformity, disempowerment, and uncompromising modes of punishment, making known the significant contributions and legacy of Paulo Freire's work is now more important than ever before.

Keywords: *Paulo Freire. Language of critique. Critical pedagogy. Politics. Social justice.*

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At a time when memory is being erased and the political relevance of education is dismissed in the embrace of the language of measurement and quantification, it is all the more important to remember the legacy and work of Paulo Freire. Paulo Freire was one of the most important educators of the twentieth century. He occupies a hallowed position among the founders of "critical pedagogy"— the educational movement guided by both passion and principle to help students develop a consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, empower the imagination, connect knowledge and truth to power, and learn to read both the word and the world as part of a broader struggle for agency, justice, and democracy. Paulo played a crucial role in developing a highly successful literacy campaign in Brazil before he was jailed by a military junta that came to power in 1964, and then exiled from his country of birth. When Brazil offered once again the possibility of democracy (or at least amnesty) in 1980, Freire returned and from that point onward played a significant role in shaping the country's educational policies until his untimely death in 1997. His groundbreaking book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, has sold more than a million copies and is deservedly being commemorated this year—the 40th anniversary of its appearance in English translation—after having exerted its influence over generations of teachers and intellectuals in the Americas and abroad.

Since the 1980s, there have been few if any intellectuals on the North American educational scene who have matched Freire's theoretical rigor, civic courage, and sense of moral responsibility. And his example is more important now than ever before: with institutions of public and higher education increasingly under siege by a host of neoliberal and conservative forces, it is imperative for educators to acknowledge Freire's understanding of the empowering and democratic potential of education.

Freire believed that education, in the broadest sense, was eminently political because it offered students the conditions for self-reflection, a self-managed life, and critical agency. For Freire, pedagogy was central to a formative culture that makes both critical consciousness and social action possible. Pedagogy in this sense connected learning to social change; it was a project and provocation that challenged students to critically engage with the world so they could act on it. As the sociologist Stanley Aronowitz has noted, Freire's pedagogy helped learners "become aware of the forces that have hitherto ruled their lives and especially shaped their consciousness". What Freire made clear is that pedagogy at its best is not about training in techniques and methods, nor does it involve coercion or political indoctrination. Indeed, far

from a mere method or an *a priori* technique to be imposed on all students, education is a political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to explore for themselves the possibilities of what it means to be engaged citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of a substantive democracy. According to Freire, critical pedagogy afforded students the opportunity to read, write, and learn from a position of agency—to engage in a culture of questioning that demands far more than competency in rote learning and the application of acquired skills. For Freire, pedagogy had to be meaningful in order to be critical and transformative. This meant that personal experience became a valuable resource that gave students the opportunity to relate their own narratives, social relations, and histories to what was being taught. It also signified a resource to help students locate themselves in the concrete conditions of their daily lives while furthering their understanding of the limits often imposed by such conditions. Under such circumstances, experience became a starting point, an object of inquiry that could be affirmed, critically interrogated, and used as resource to engage broader modes of knowledge and understanding. Rather than taking the place of theory, experience worked in tandem with theory in order to dispel the notion that experience provided some form of unambiguous truth or political guarantee. Experience was crucial but it had to take a detour through theory, self-reflection, and critique to become a meaningful pedagogical resource.

Critical pedagogy, for Freire, meant imagining literacy as not simply the mastering of specific skills but also as a mode of intervention, a way of learning about and reading the word as a basis for intervening in the world. Critical thinking was not reducible to an object lesson in test-taking or the task of memorizing so-called facts, decontextualized and unrelated to present conditions. To the contrary, it was about offering a way of thinking beyond the seeming naturalness or inevitability of the current state of things, challenging assumptions validated by "common sense", soaring beyond the immediate confines of one's experiences, entering into a dialogue with history, and imagining a future that would not merely reproduce the present.

By way of illustration, Freirean pedagogy might stage the dynamic interplay of audio, visual, and print texts as part of a broader examination of history itself as a site of struggle, one that might offer some insights into students' own experiences and lives in the contemporary moment. For example, a history class might involve reading and watching films about school desegregation in the 1950s and 60s as part of a broader pedagogical

engagement with the Civil Rights movement and the massive protests that developed over educational access and student rights to literacy. It would also open up opportunities to talk about why these struggles are still part of the experience of many North American youth today, particularly poor black and brown youth who are denied equality of opportunity by virtue of market-based rather than legal segregation. Students could be asked to write short papers that speculate on the meaning and the power of literacy and why it was so central to the Civil Rights movement. These may be read by the entire class with each student elaborating his or her position and offering commentary as a way of entering into a critical discussion of the history of racial exclusion, reflecting on how its ideologies and formations still haunt American society in spite of the triumphal dawn of an allegedly post-racial Obama era. In this pedagogical context, students learn how to expand their own sense of agency, while recognizing that to be voiceless is to be powerless. Central to such a pedagogy is shifting the emphasis from teachers to students and making visible the relationships among knowlege, authority, and power. Giving students the opportunity to be problem-posers and engage in a culture of questioning in the classroom foregrounds the crucial issue of who has control over the conditions of learning and how specific modes of knowledge, identities, and authority are constructed within particular sets of classroom relations. Under such circumstances, knowledge is not simply received by students, but actively transformed, open to be challenged, and related to the self as an essential step towards agency, self-representation, and learning how to govern rather than simply be governed. At the same time, students also learn how to engage others in critical dialogue and be held accountable for their views.

Thus, critical pedagogy insists that one of the fundamental tasks of educators is to make sure that the future points the way to a more socially just world, a world in which critique and possibility—in conjunction with the values of reason, freedom, and equality—function to alter the grounds upon which life is lived. Though it rejects a notion of literacy as the transmission of facts or skills tied to the latest market trends, critical pedagogy is hardly a prescription for political indoctrination as the advocates of standardization and testing often insist. It offers students new ways to think and act creatively and independently while making clear that the educator's task, as Aronowitz points out, "is to encourage human agency, not mold it in the manner of Pygmalion". Critical pedagogy insists that education cannot be neutral. It is always directive in its attempt to enable students to understand the larger world

and their role in it. Moreover, it is inevitably a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge, values, desires, and identities are produced within particular sets of class and social relations. For Freire, pedagogy always presupposes some notion of a more equal and just future; and as such, it should always function in part as a provocation that takes students beyond the world they know in order to expand the range of human possibilities and democratic values.

Central to critical pedagogy is the recognition that the way we educate our youth is related to the future that we hope for and that such a future should offer students a life that leads to the deepening of freedom and social justice. Even within the privileged precincts of higher education, Freire said that educators should nourish those pedagogical practices that promote "a concern with keeping the forever unexhausted and unfulfilled human potential open, fighting back all attempts to foreclose and pre-empt the further unraveling of human possibilities, prodding human society to go on questioning itself and preventing that questioning from ever stalling or being declared finished". The notion of the unfinished human being resonated with Zygmunt Bauman notion that society never reached the limits of justice, thus rejecting any notion of the end of history, ideology, or how we imagine the future. This language of critique and educated hope was his legacy, one that is increasingly absent from many liberal and conservative discourses about current educational problems and appropriate avenues of reform.

When I began teaching, Paulo Freire became an essential influence in helping me to understand the broad contours of my ethical responsibilities as a teacher. Later, his work would help me come to terms with the complexities of my relationship to universities as powerful and privileged institutions that seemed far removed from the daily life of the working-class communities in which I had grown up. I first met Paulo in the early 1980s, just after my tenure as a professor at Boston University had been opposed by the president John Silber. Paulo was giving a talk at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and he came to my house in Boston for dinner. Given Paulo's reputation as a powerful intellectual, I recall initially being astounded by his profound humility. I remember being greeted with such warmth and sincerity that I felt completely at ease with him. I was in a very bad place after being denied tenure and had no idea what the future would hold. On that night, a friendship was forged that would last until Paulo's death. I am convinced that had it not been for Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo—a linguist, translator, and a friend of Paulo's and mine—I might

not have stayed in the field of education. Their passion for education and their profound humanity convinced me that teaching was not a job like any other but a crucial site of struggle, and that ultimately whatever risks had to be taken were well worth it.

I have encountered many intellectuals throughout my career in academe, but Paulo was exceptionally generous, eager to help younger intellectuals publish their work, willing to write letters of support, and always gave as much as possible of himself in the service of others. The early 1980s were exciting years in education studies in the United States, and Paulo was really at the center of it. Together we started a Critical Education and Culture series with Bergin & Garvey Publishers, which brought out the work of more than 60 young authors, many of whom went on to have a significant influence in the university. Jim Bergin became Paulo's patron as his American publisher; Donaldo became his translator and co-author; Ira Shor also played a important role in spreading Paulo's work and wrote a number of brilliant books integrating both theory and practice as part of Paulo's notion of critical pedagogy. Together, and we worked tirelessly to circulate Paulo's work, always with the hope of inviting him back to America so we could meet, talk, drink good wine, and deepen a commitment to critical education that had all marked us in different ways.

Paulo spent his life guided by the beliefs that the radical elements of democracy were worth struggling for, that critical education was a basic element of progressive social change, and that how we think about politics was inseparable from how we come to understand the world, power, and the moral life we aspire to lead. In many ways, he embodied the important but often problematic relationship between the personal and the political. His own life was a testimony not only to his belief in democratic principles but also to the notion that one's life had to come as close as possible to modeling the social relations and experiences that spoke to a more humane and democratic future. At the same time, Paulo never moralized about politics; he never evoked shame or collapsed the political into the personal when talking about social issues. Private problems were always to be understood in relation to larger public issues. For example, Paulo never reduced an understanding of homelessness, poverty, and unemployment to the failing of individual character, laziness, indifference, or a lack of personal responsibility, but instead viewed such issues as complex systemic problems generated by economic and political structures that produced massive amounts of inequality, suffering, and despair—and social problems far beyond the reach of limited individual capacities to cause or redress. His belief in a substantive democracy, as well as his deep and

abiding faith in the ability of people to resist the weight of oppressive institutions and ideologies, was forged in a spirit of struggle tempered by both the grim realities of his own imprisonment and exile and the belief that education and hope are the conditions of social action and political change. Acutely aware that many contemporary versions of hope occupied their own corner in Disneyland, Paulo was passionate about recovering and rearticulating hope through, in his words, an "understanding of history as opportunity and not determinism". Hope was an act of moral imagination that enabled educators and others to think otherwise in order to act otherwise.

Paulo offered no recipes for those in need of instant theoretical and political fixes. I was often amazed at how patient he always was in dealing with people who wanted him to provide menu-like answers to the problems they raised about education, people who did not realize that their demands undermined his own insistence that critical pedagogy is defined by its context and must be approached as a project of individual and social transformation—that it could never be reduced to a mere method. Contexts mattered to Paulo; he was concerned how they mapped in distinctive ways the relationships among knowledge, language, everyday life, and the machineries of power. Any pedagogy that calls itself Freirean must acknowledge this key principle that our current knowledge is contingent on particular historical contexts and political forces. For example, each classroom will be affected by the different experiences students bring to the class, the resources made available for classroom use, the relations of governance bearing down on teacher-student relations, the authority exercised by administrations regarding the boundaries of teacher autonomy, and the theoretical and political discourses used by teachers to read and frame their responses to the diverse historical, economic, and cultural forces informing classroom dialogue. Any understanding of the project and practices that inform critical pedagogy has to begin with recognizing the forces at work in such contexts and which must be confronted by educators and schools everyday. Pedagogy, in this instance, looked for answers to what it meant to connect learning to fulfilling the capacities for self and social determination not outside but within the institutions and social relations in which desires, agency, and identities were shaped and struggled over. The role that education played in connecting truth to reason, learning to social justice, and knowledge to modes of self and social understanding were complex and demanded a refusal on the part of teachers, students, and parents to divorce education from both politics and matters of social responsibility. Responsibility was not a retreat from

politics but a serious embrace of what it meant to both think and act politics as part of a democratic project in which pedagogy becomes a primary consideration for enabling the formative culture and agents that make democratization possible.

Paulo also acknowledged the importance of understanding these particular and local contexts in relation to larger global and transnational forces. Making the pedagogical more political meant moving beyond the celebration of tribal mentalities and developing a praxis that foregrounded "power, history, memory, relational analysis, justice (not just representation), and ethics as the issues central to transnational democratic struggles". Culture and politics mutually informed each other in ways that spoke to histories whose presences and absences had to be narrated as part of a larger struggle over democratic values, relations, and modes of agency. He recognized that it was through the complex production of experience within multilayered registers of power and culture that people recognized, narrated, and transformed their place in the world. Paulo challenged the separation of cultural experiences from politics, pedagogy, and power itself, but he did not make the mistake of many of his contemporaries by conflating cultural experience with a limited notion of identity politics. While he had a profound faith in the ability of ordinary people to shape history and their own destinies, he refused to romanticize individuals and cultures that experienced oppressive social conditions. Of course, he recognized that power privileged certain forms of cultural capital—certain modes of speaking, living, being and acting in the world—but he did not believe that subordinate or oppressed cultures were free of the contaminating effects of oppressive ideological and institutional relations of power. Consequently, culture—as a crucial educational force influencing larger social structures as well as in the most intimate spheres of identity formation—could be viewed as nothing less than an ongoing site of struggle and power in contemporary society.

For critical educators, experience is a fundamental element of teaching and learning, but its distinctive configuration among different groups does not guarantee a particular notion of the truth; as I stated earlier, experience must itself become an object for analysis. How students experience the world and speak to that experience is always a function of unconscious and conscious commitments, of politics, of access to multiple languages and literacies—thus experience always has to take a detour through theory as an object of self-reflection, critique, and possibility. As a result, not only do history and experience become contested sites of struggle but the theory and language that give daily life meaning and action

a political direction must also be constantly subject to critical reflection. Paulo repeatedly challenged as false any attempt to reproduce the binary of theory versus politics. He expressed a deep respect for the work of theory and its contributions, but he never reified it. When he talked about Freud, Fromm, or Marx, one could feel his intense passion for ideas. Yet he never treated theory as an end in itself; it was always a resource whose value lay in understanding, critically engaging, and transforming the world as part of a larger project of freedom and justice.

Vigilant in bearing witness to the individual and collective suffering of others, Paulo shunned the role of the isolated intellectual as an existential hero who struggles alone. He believed that intellectuals must respond to the call for making the pedagogical more political with a continuing effort to build those coalitions, affiliations, and social movements capable of mobilizing real power and promoting substantive social change. Politics was more than a gesture of translation, representation, and dialogue: to be effective, it had to be about creating the conditions for people to become critical agents alive to the responsibilities of democratic public life. Paulo understood keenly that democracy was threatened by a powerful military-industrial complex, the rise of extremists groups, and the increased power of the warfare state. He also recognized the pedagogical force of a corporate and militarized culture that eroded the moral and civic capacities of citizens to think beyond the common sense of official power and the hatemongering of a right-wing media apparatus. Paulo strongly believed that democracy could not last without the formative culture that made it possible. Educational sites both within schools and the broader culture represented some of the most important venues through which to affirm public values, support a critical citizenry, and resist those who would deny the empowering functions of teaching and learning. At a time when institutions of public and higher education have become associated with market competition, conformity, disempowerment, and uncompromising modes of punishment, making known the significant contributions and legacy of Paulo Freire's work is now more important than ever before.

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