

AN UNPUBLISHED INTERVIEW WITH PAULO FREIRE: RADICAL PEDAGOGY & SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION



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Considerare complessivamente le opere di Paulo Freire nel XXI secolo ci mostra come queste siano aggiornate con le attuali tematiche in campo. La maggior parte delle sue opere sono state diffuse in tutto il mondo, come quelle del più grande educatore di tutti i tempi; tuttavia, la sua semplicità e chiarezza è unica e non può essere riprodotta in modo semplice. Questo è forse perché molti scrittori usano le sue citazioni, invece di parafrasare i suoi scritti. Pertanto, questo lavoro rappresenta un altro tentativo di concentrarsi sulla propria voce e sulla sua prospettiva su alcune delle questioni sollevate dagli studenti di tre decenni fa, che non hanno mai raggiunto un ampio pubblico ma sono comunque ancora nelle menti di molti studenti attualmente ancora interessati al suo lavoro. Il documento presenta una breve intervista inedita con Freire nel 1988, quando parla di affiliazione teorica, critiche e obiettivi delle sue opere. In un formato di conversazione l'intervista è un incontro tra Paulo Freire e la sua ex studentessa Carmen de Mattos.

Parole chiave: Paulo Freire, Pedagogia, Pedagogia Radicale, Invasione culturale, Trasformazione sociale.

Abstract

Pulling together the inedited works by Paulo Freire in the XXI century shows us how his works are up-to-date with current issues in the field. Most of his works have been disseminated all over the World, as those of the greatest educator of all times; however, his simplicity and outspoken voice is unique and cannot be reproduce in a simple manner. This is possibly why many writers use his citations, instead of paraphrasing his writings. Therefore, this paper represents another attempt to focus on his own voice and perspective on some of the questions raised by students three decades ago, that had never reach a broad audience but are nevertheless still in the minds of many students who are today interested in his work. The paper presents a short unpublished interview with Freire in 1988, when he talks about theoretical affiliation, critiques and the objectives of his works. In a conversation format the interview is a re-encounter between Paulo Freire and his former student Carmen de Mattos.

Keywords: Paulo Freire, Pedagogy, Radical Pedagogy, Cultural invasion, Social Transformation.

A conversation with Paulo Freire was always an easy task! Joyful, enthusiastic and intelligent, his speech reflected clearly and spontaneously his thoughts and a deep understanding of the world, without, however, losing the dialectical dimension of the object discussed. Thus, amidst the great joy of our reunion, we

talked about: the comparisons between theories attributed to him, combinations between his works and those of some great others authors that like him, influenced at the same time the field of education studies, and about a forthcoming academic visit he intended to do in the United States of America (USA). The interview took place in October, 14 of 1988, it was conducted by myself (Carmen De Mattos) in his residence in São Paulo, Brazil. However, it was never published up to today. The decision to share his words was made due to my belief that it may add to the answers given to Freire's young academic followers' inquiries around his thoughts and objectives, which unfortunately cannot be asked directly today.

I considered Freire more than an academic advisor; he was a mentor and leader for me. I had the opportunity to attend his classes as a master degree student at the Pontific Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC/SP) in 1984¹, shortly after his return from exile, when he was particularly enthusiastic about the cultural experiences he encountered overseas and his return to Brazil. He told us stories about his life in exile, about how he became internationally known and about the people who he believed had a genuine interest in his work. At that time, I had the opportunity not only to be his student, but also to work with him in the field, while he directed a study on working class people in a poor marginal neighborhood in the city. In this sense, I had the privilege of experiencing Freire's pedagogy very closely. I considered him a dear friend and I believe he considered me in the same way.

In 1985 I started my Ph. D in Education at University of Pennsylvania in USA, but as I returned to develop my fieldwork in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, in 1988, it was important for me to visit Freire. Therefore, I joined the same class I mentioned previously, since it was part of his regular classes at PUC's Graduation in Education Program. I spent three weeks there and had the opportunity to film him teaching for hours. I also video-recorded the backstage of an autobiography documentary he was recording for a German TV network for two days, and I interviewed him after the film during an informal conversation which will be transcribed in this paper.

As Freire himself would say, one cannot separate his words from his person and from the way he speaks. Hence, for didactic reasons, the interview was edited in order for it to make sense to the reader, also in relation to the fact that it had been translated from Portuguese to English language. Therefore, some sentences maybe sound awkward, but I made an effort not to misinterpret the contents and logic. The interview was an informal and freely flowing conversation, although it was recorded with Freire's consent to be used for academic purpose. Two theoretical questions were posed: the first on his position in relation to belonging or not to certain schools of thought which have been attributed to him by researchers; the second concerned the purpose of his work, recalling the critique that his work had promoted "cultural invasion", especially with regard to the article titled "The

*The article has been written together by the two authors, sharing some reflections on an experience carried out by the first of two.

¹Freire hold a position as Titular Professor in Education at Pontific Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC/SP).

Linguistic Roots of Cultural Invasion in Paulo Freire's Pedagogy" written by Bowes (1983 p. 947)².

At the end, I asked him if he was available to attend conferences at the University of Pennsylvania in USA and if he could be an examiner for my thesis defense. I knew he was travelling to USA in the following year (1989). The reason to include the last topic is that it shows the non-conventional way he responded to this type of invitations.

Proceeding with the interview contents, he affirmed his affiliation to what was named by Henry Giroux, as "Radical Pedagogy" (Giroux, 1983.) He described the proximities with the theoretical line of work of Karl Marx, Lev Vygotsky, Antonio Gramsci and Karel Kosik, as well as illustrating articulated comments on the concept of social transformation as the main objective of his work.

Hence, this paper transcribes the interview with Freire, including some shadows due to some slight editing of the general content, but with the intention of leaving Freire's voice intact.

The interview

CARMEN – Professor Freire, I have three reasons to be here: the first is to listen to you talk about your work: your pedagogy has influenced my practice a great deal. At the age of 16, I become a teacher and since then, I imaged you as a role

² Freire was accused by Bowers of promoting cultural invasion. This is an interesting accusation because there is no sense in helping people to develop their critical thinking without making them demystify their magical beliefs. If cultural invasion means interfering with peoples' ways of thinking, it is exactly what Freire intended to do. However, most of these criticisms are based on a decontextualization of Freire's words. Bowers (1983) comments about the Letters to Guinea-Bissau. In these letters, Freire writes to the students of the Cultural Circle. Bowers reads the letters out of context. In his understanding, Freire was trying to get the students give information to the government, in a manipulative sense. However, at that time, the new government had committed itself to work with people's participation and Freire's educational purpose was to promote a conscious sense of participation. Bowers presents these letters as if Freire was working against the poor to [[domesticated them] underestimate them according to the order of the government. His comments read as follows;

"Although Freire argues that the students in Guinea-Bissau need to learn their own history, his view of history as a source of control is particularly non-dialectical, which is surprising given his commitment to dialectical thought. Unlike the cultural conservative who recognizes the dialectical tension between the past, present and future, Freire aligns himself with the modernizing ethos that glorifies the individual's right (Freire makes this an ontological necessity) to overturn tradition [...] The purpose of literacy is to enable the learner to "make history." This emphasis on change puts the individual against the authority of tradition, and as the authority of tradition is eroded, subjective feeling becomes the only source of authority [...] the real purpose of literacy - the need to have a literate population that can provide data on their activities to governmental authority, and to be able to follow the policies that the government dictates (Bowers, 1983, p. 947).

This is a demonstration of how Freire's words can be decontextualized and transformed into something completely against his intentions. The reason for that may be that Freire always talks to his audiences directly. The value of his work lies in the thoughts and the flow of the conversation that it opens up among educationists. We realize that even the not so accurate interpretations, as well as decontextualizations of his work stem from the fact that education philosophers do have a tendency of disappointing those who must translate their ideas into practice. Writing this paper has enabled me to think much more deeply about the Brazilian educational context today, besides giving me the opportunity to understand how Freire's work fits with that reality.

model for my work. Of course, now I realized how difficult that is. The second, is an invitation on behalf of Professor Frederick Erickson and the University of Pennsylvania (PENN) to a conference. People there are expecting to listening to you, seeing you closely seems to affect students, therefore they are inviting you to extend your stay in the USA, to give a speech to us; and finally, we are also inviting you to be an examiner on my Ph.D. thesis hearing defense at PENN according to your convenience and time.

Well! I have many questions after hearing you in class this week, and being around you yesterday and today while you were talking about your life and work here, but I will summarize them in two, due to the fact you must be tired after this long journey. The first is – How does the combination of Paulo Freire in Brazil and around the World coexist? I refer to what had been known as Paulo Freire Pedagogy! Let me put it in another way, some concepts such as: Theory of Emancipation, Pedagogy of Liberation, Critical Theory have been used by educators who follows your work, and I am curious to know how you feel about it - Are those concepts all mixed together? How do they fit into your pedagogy?



FREIRE – Look! I think the following: you, we can see differently! Different pedagogical proposals without necessarily doing different educational practices. To that extent, for example, you see pedagogy as a critical and a theoretical effort of educational practice. But, we have different pedagogies that think and talk about those practices. Different educational practices to the extent that the educational practice is always a political practice and the theoretical reflection on this practice is not neutral either, you see? So, roughly, you have, or you may

have, a progressive practice and you may have a traditional, conservative practice that sometimes turns out to be more than conservative, a little more reactionary in a progressive perspective.

On the other hand, there may be a rainbow of hypotheses and impossibilities. You may have a progressive practice, but more focused, self-centered. For example, student creative activity: you may have a very believable and undisputed progressive subject in the somewhat over-exaggerated value of the content. For example, you may have some who feel progressive as democratic, as an open duty of the educator. You may have a progressive guy who puts himself much more dialectically in front of all the components of educational practice. In the same way, you can have a conservative progressive, a liberal conservative, for example. You may have a less liberal, more traditional conservative who is afraid of openness. You can have a lot of people from the right seeing themselves as democratic. What do I mean by that? In front of each of these possibilities one can have: didactic, methodological and procedural nuances. All of this is just an introduction to answer your question: how do I stand before these possibilities of a pedagogy of liberation, a critical pedagogy, a dialectical pedagogy?

Well! To cite three hypotheses. I would say that I consider myself a guy inserted in a pedagogy that I understand and I think or propose a dialectical thought to understand the educational practice which it is based upon. Which is necessarily interested in liberation and social forces, in the radical transformation of social structures. And I stand very well, for example, with the probable differences in a position that has been called today in the United States of a Radical Pedagogy. So, it represents me very well today as a man of a pedagogy of radically, of the radically taken in the critical sense of that word, and not in the naive sense of that word. At the end, radicalizing the pedagogy of teaching has to do with how a critical pedagogy understands history as a possibility.

CARMEN - Still within that question – Does critical pedagogy, critical theory or radical pedagogy necessarily have to be Marxist?

FREIRE – Look! The guy (referring to himself) may even be trying, which I do not find very easy, to go beyond Marx. But I think a critical pedagogy cannot fail to bypass Marx. And why can't you stop going through Marx? Because Marx is a really critical milestone. Where are you going to get your critical thinking without him? Critical thinking that surpasses certain previous positions which in Marx are advanced and have become naive from the balance that Marx provided in his work! I mean, critical thinking is impossible for me without going through Marx, I would not tell you that you are only critical if you are a Marxist. No, I would not say that. But I find it difficult to be critical without going through Marx. This is how... for example, I have no doubt about Giroux's theory. That's for me! Giroux passes through Marx, but he does not necessarily stay in Marx, do you understand?

I mean, I think a critic first need not be afraid to say that one does not necessarily have to follow Marx as a rule, as an orthodox thing, but on the other hand, one does not have to be afraid to say: "Well! but the Old Marx made me critical. " I tell you, I tell you with all openness, Marx taught me to become critical and helped me overcome naivety.

CARMEN – Within theoretical vision, crossing three dimensions of historical theoretical current frameworks such as – Positivist, Interpretivist and Critical, how do you feel? Does one oppose the other? Is one a sequence of the other? Or is one the consequence of the other?

FREIRE - Look! I sometimes, think... Well! in history, in the history of thought, in the history of reflection you have to find one, you find a continuity that discontinues, you understand? Occasionally! That is to say, there is a certain continuity that, from time to time, breaks and causes a new continuity. It is! To me it means that you cannot simply, dogmatically deny, deny like a bag of bad things, everything! For example, I am not positivist! I think positivism leaves much to be desired. But, it is not possible is to say that positivism, in all its dimensions, was a bad thing! No! That is to say, I think one of the things that characterizes critical thinking is to constantly be aware of the possibility, the possibility of the efficacy of previous thinking where the thinking is different. So, I'm a guy constantly open to it! That's why sometimes I'm not too! You know? It is because, for example, it is impossible for me to pretend that someone fits my thoughts inside a cage. This, in general, has also tried to be done it with Man. For me it is extraordinary to think who Marx was, he was a genial man! But, to think about putting Marx's thought inside a cage and chaining it in there, I think it's anti-Marxism!

CARMEN – Let me ask you the second question! One question that some of my American colleagues ask me about your work regards its purpose. So, what are the objective of Paulo Freire's pedagogy? In my opinion, there is no single objective, but a goal-building based on the reality of each one in a certain moment. How would you answer that? Americans students would like to understand the delimitations of your pedagogy.

FREIRE – Yes!... I would tell you that, first of all, all education, no matter what it may be, surrounded by my name or not, every education to this day has goals and purposes. And it is precisely because it is impossible to find educative practices that are completely separable from goals and purposes that I can answer that question. Because every educational practice is first directive, second it is political. That is to say, the impossibility of the neutrality of the educational practice is included in the fact that every educational practice has aims and objectives. The moment a practice is aimed at something it cannot be apolitical, it is not neutral, ever! To the extent that it is turning critically to a certain thing, it is not possible to have an educational practice in which the educator says, "I am here for whatever comes." No, I'm here because I believe it's possible to change the world! Because it is possible to make the world less unjust, less bad, less ugly. That is the goal and I have this goal, I aim for the radical change of the world. The pedagogy for which I work, which I tried to structure, is a pedagogy deliberately aimed at suppressing injustice. This does not mean that every time we are undertaking this pedagogy, we are able to overcome injustice, not at all! But, that is the intentionality that my pedagogy is made of. That is why it's directive.

CARMEN - What my colleagues say to me is that there is an idea, a predetermined purpose, that old conflict of cultural invasion, they say, "but is Freire's goal always to intervene culturally in the lives of the oppressed? ". And I say: "Well! I do not understand it in this way. I understand that in his pedagogy

people recreate things for themselves, it is a dialectical movement within their own culture". Am I right?

FREIRE - Of course, but look! One thing recreates itself not by chance, you know? One thing recreates itself because there is an intention to do something. Now, when one tries to do this, those who try, discover that they have to recreate, but recreation is not the goal. Re-creation takes place as the mediating need to achieve a goal. Isn't?

CARMEN - The goal is transformation!

FREIRE - Exactly, you understand? And that's why it (the pedagogy) is creative. Then there is a misconception among people, increasingly so now, that I am non-directive. This thing led me to a lot of discussions, even internationally, around me and the famous American psychologist?!... Rogers!

CARMEN - Carl Rogers?

FREIRE – Yes! Rogers himself! He wrote a book in which he wrote a chapter all about me. Defending himself from the criticism of what was known as his lack of directivity. He defends himself in the book by dedicating an entire chapter on my work... studying me, it says – "No, I'm just like Freire!" In fact, I think Rogers is like me, in many ways, but at the same time he is different! I'm not sectarian! I think I was more than Rogers! As an educator, I have no doubt that I surpassed Rogers! But as a psychologist I would never be like Rogers, he made a contribution to the field. I think that even when we politically disagree with Rogers, even from the psychological point of view, we have a duty to recognize the indisputable contribution that this man gave to psychology at the End of the Century, there is no doubt of it! In Psychotherapy, the understanding of the self, in the relationship between the psychotherapist and the client. To the question of freedom and creation. There is no doubt that the contribution of Rogers was great! He was non-directive, but... the fact is that - whether or not he was not-directive – he was directive, because he could not fail to be so. And I, realized that we cannot fail to be directive, I was never non-directive! Now what needs to be made clear is that non-directivity, or rather directivity, is not necessarily a conscious act... it does not mean manipulation. Yes, you see! The fact that one is directive, necessarily does not make he or she manipulative. What you cannot fail to be is directive. Because non-directivity simply does not exist!

CARMEN - Speaking of you and Rogers.... there are some researchers from Haiti who work with a group of natives there and they combined what they called "Paulo Freire method" with the notion of "developmental proximal zone" in Lev Vygotsky's work.

FREIRE – Vygotsky! ... ooh! That I would very much like to know! But this is beautiful ... I did not know... ask them to send me this material!

CARMEN - I found this combination very interesting. In their assumptions, Piaget also was mention as part of the equation. I found this combination very interesting. At first, I read the article and it seems a bit misleading in relation to your work, but then I found that it has a lot to do with Vygotsky. What can you say to me about that?

FREIRE - I have no doubt!... in fact, lately I have read a very good number of essays on Vygotsky by a Hungarian teacher from birth and American by adoption. I don't remember her name now. She wrote a wonderful essay on Vygotsky and

Freire. It is published in Harvard Educational Review. She was here at home, she is an extraordinary woman, she understands Vygotsky perfectly and, necessarily, because she understood him, I found it interesting and I started to study Vygotsky more deeply. He died at the age of 33 of tuberculosis, and at that age... I think, he had already overcome Piaget. I mean, imagine if this guy had been alive for 80 years. He was a genius man like Piaget was too. He knew Piaget perfectly at the time, and Piaget knew him. But today it is interesting! At the international level, there is a concern among some scholars with this relation... I have been, for example, in January of this year (1988) with three specialists in Vygotsky in Spain, all three absolutely convinced of the relationship between Vygotsky's thought and mine, completely convinced! Then, I met a PhD student at the University of Geneva who, while conversing with my daughter, asked – "Do you know if your father studied Vygotsky a lot?" I mean, she was, she was taking a course on Vygotsky, you understand? She asked her if it was because she had read me. It happens that I met Vygotsky after writing all the things that I wrote! So, I could not have read him, because I did not know him then. She must have thought, "but why did Paulo Freire not mention this guy?" "Because I had not read him.

In my life, I read three guys who influenced me without knowing it, before reading them... Vygotsky is one of them, Gramsci is another, and Karel Kosik. These guys influenced me when I had not read them yet. It's a strange thing! Vygotsky, when we read, Vygotsky's "Language and Thought" (Vygotsky, 1986) for example, is incredible. It's amazing the relationship between me and him. Nevertheless, there is a difference that I find beautiful... that makes me happy. It is that Vygotsky reaches conclusions A, B, C and D from the scientific research he has done in the field of language. And I come to the same conclusions from philosophical reflection, you see?

CARMEN - And social practice!

FREIRE - And practice! I think about it, you see! So, it's a formidable "thing" that makes me happy!

CARMEN - Another work that is being closely linked to your work comes from the University of Michigan and is a work on the concept of Metacognition (Paris & Oka, 1984), which is, in reality, the way by which one learns how to learn. Is this link already known to you?

FREIRE – Yes!... no..., it is, but, just a little!

CARMEN - And I think they were inspired by your work and recreated other terms. I have learned a lot from all of these studies! This book (Freire, 1985) I brought to you today has a lot to do with the idea of metacognition which I have been reading about!

FREIRE - This book has a series of illustrations at the end. It's incredible this book! ...I was told by the publisher that it had sold a thousand copies in a month!

CARMEN – Yes! The readers really like your photos! They think your hands look fantastic!

FREIRE – Yeah! you know what I'm thinking.... a short time ago I was talking to Vera (his personal secretary) about making an album here at home. It seems a bit too much of vanity... taking photos of me with my hands. Because I find this deeply meaningful! Not just me, a bunch of people, but me too! And I have so

many photos that come... with my hands... Now, for example, two months ago I was in Stockholm and Amsterdam, three months ago in a Congress and one of the photographers discovered this and took about 40 photos of me with my hands. I was left with an urge to ask him for it, huge! But I did not ask for it, I was ashamed!

CARMEN – Professor! Now, could you speak a little bit about your agenda in the USA, do you have an estimated date?

FREIRE - Ah yes, look, tell your professor there that I accept his invitation. Now, we just need to discuss the way when I'm already there. That, first of all, you cannot have any dreams (referring to my invitation to my thesis), I'm going to teach an entire course at Harvard University. So, you can think of spending a week there! Then, if you can?... I'm going to teach a class or two, you know? I might have a day or two to spare, Fridays mostly!

CARMEN – Great! Two days, it is done then!

FREIRE - I do not know, I think, I have the impression that I might feel easier in discussing your work with you, helping you than this! To be part of the thesis committee. Because for me to be part of a committee of a work that discusses me is a bit... kind of difficult, you know? I think... The other day, I was set in an exam of a girl who, analyzed me and advanced criticisms that I found absolutely flawed. And it was boring because I could not be unfair. The girl even told me, it was too... too naive to criticize me... and I was in a difficult position because she said and I thought this and that... Oh! It did not make sense! It seemed an arrogance on my part! So, the answer is NO, but I'm going to work with you, if you can?...

CARMEN - I think this is going to be wonderful!

FREIRE - It's going to be better than being your examiner. We discuss your work. Well, I recognize that for you it has a meaning. I'll do my best to help you.

CARMEN – Many thanks for the talk to me professor!

The interview ends as his recently wed wife asked him to enter for dinner, 6 hours after my arriving.

Final Comments

Sometimes educators forget to recognize that no one gets from one side of the street to the other without crossing it! No one reaches the other side by starting from the same side. One can only reach the other side by starting from the opposite side. The level of my present knowledge is the other side to my students. I have to begin from the opposite side that of the students. My knowledge is my reality, not theirs (Freire, 1985, pp.189).

By concluding this paper with this citation we acknowledge that asking Freire some of the questions we had at that time, is much more difficult than expected. However, the content of the quotation reminds us that even Freire can borrow words from someone else, rephrasing them with a fresh idea and giving them a new sense. We keep reading his books dozens of times and we remember that our trajectory as academics is, in good part, permeated by extraordinary people like Freire.

This interview was not a revisitation determined by chance. Right now, one of us, is in a turning point in her career to become a full professor at the University of

the State of Rio de Janeiro, and is writing a “memorial” as part of the evaluation process. She wishes she could have Freire as her advisor as he was in those days. His reflection on his own work awakened us from our sweet dreams that we make a difference for our students. No! he would say! They are the ones who make a difference in our lives, they recreate our thoughts in a beautiful manner that we would never think of. They see us with different eyes from our own. That is the beauty of teaching.

The present shared reflection has been built inside our research on Student Voice movement (Grion, Cook-Sather, 2013; Grion, De Castro, 2014), that was started some years ago at the Faculty of Education, in Cambridge where we were together Visiting Scholars of the Emeritus Professor John Gray, Jean Rudduck’s³ husband. Our aim has been to rethink Freire’s words hoping we can portray a new sense of his words, letting our students grasp his thoughts as deep as they can and put them into practice.

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³ Professor Jean Rudduck was one of the pioneer of Student Voice movement at the Faculty of Education in Cambridge (UK). Her main research interest has been the transformative potential of student voice, including consultation and participation in relation to students' learning, pupils' identities, teacher-student relationships and school improvement.