

Paulo Freire's relevance 100 years on

di *Peter Mayo*[°]

Abstract

This paper pays tribute to Paulo Freire a hundred years after his birth in September 1921. It outlines a global scenario against which his ideas and insights can be measured: Neoliberalism, a global pandemic, fake news, a still Darwinian world at the heart of a North-South imperial politics, a culture of militarisation, a sense of fatalism where the present highlights the limits of what is possible, the ideology of ideological death and planetary devastation leading to the ever presence of people striving to move from South to South and South to North to eke out a living still, for many, on the margins of society. Freire's never ending politics of hope and the urge to dream the possible dream rooted in one's existential situation, his emphasis on a politics of solidarity and from below through social movements and the ever important pedagogy of the question, problematization, constitute an antidote to what is awry in this 'grand and terrible world'. Praxis (action resulting from reflection on previous action), to be distinguished from mere practice (prassi in Italian – habitual behaviour) and dialectical thinking, lie at the heart of Freire's antidote in these times.

Keywords: hope, praxis, dialectical thinking, social movements, harmony in biodiversity.

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Introduction

2021 was a year of celebration of the life and thinking of Paulo Reglus Neves Freire who was born in Recife in Brazil's impoverished North East

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State of Pernambuco in September 1921, that is a century ago. Having come from a lower middle class family, he suffered a temporary decline in his socio-economic status as a result of the Great Depression which hit hard a dependent economy such as that of Brazil. This made him miss school and suffer temporary hardships, a nightmare from which he would luckily emerge unlike many others in that country. The stark reality of misery that persists till the present day, mitigated under Lula with his *bolsa familia* part of the *fome zero* (zero hunger) programme, is best expressed by a boy who, when urged, by Freire, to dream of an alternative world, responded with something to this effect: I have no dreams only nightmares (Freire 1994, p. 84). This is a recurring statement in Paulo Freire's later books, some I managed to read only after Paulo passed away on 2nd May 1997. As a child, Paulo went on to catch up with his education, having been admitted to a school governed by the father of the person who was to become Freire's second wife, Ana Maria Araújo Freire, better known as Nita. His first wife, Elza had left Paulo a widower in the fall of 1986. Having herself been a teacher, Elza had encouraged Paulo to take up teaching and pedagogy soon after his first forays into law, following his graduation as a lawyer, had left him at odds with the legal profession. His first case taught him only too well that the law tended to favour the powerful at the expense of the powerless. In this case, the powerless was a young dentist crippled by initial debts, incurred as a result of the nature of the profession itself, especially newcomers to the field without any family backup (Freire, 1994). The dentist and the boy, the street *menino* rummaging for clothing and food among the debris along the streets, are two examples of that large category Paulo would call 'los oprimidos' (the Oppressed). Frantz Fanon would similarly call them 'les damnés de la terre' (the wretched of the earth) and Danilo Dolci would refer to them as 'I poveri Cristi' (the poor Christs).

Freire's Brazil, as is well known, is a country of huge contrasts, stark contrasts which leave someone like me, coming from Malta, shocked. I am not 'desensitized' (to survive mentally) to this day to day manifestation of wealth existing cheek by jowl with swathes of misery. I had braced myself for this and had witnessed sheer destitution in North America where I lived, as a foreign student, for a while, on my frequent visits to London at train stations and in the heart of Mexico City and Guadalupe (Mexico). I was yet to visit Egypt and India to add to my view of the global spectacle of abject poverty, but this was enough to shed light on the plight of Brazil, a semi-colony of the US-led and Corporate World. This is a place where these very same wretched of the world are often easily disposed of as a nuisance, where well-to-do people, some even on the left and posing as freirians, employ these very same unfortunate persons to guard their plush dwellings as armed

watchmen against other poor people who pose a threat to the wealthy. Others have no feelings towards impoverished but breathing human lives, including the lives of *meninos popular* (children from the popular classes). Some of these (the most destitute) are disposed of without any qualms and are hardly grieved or remembered. We have heard of the 1993 commissioning of ‘off-duty policemen’ (?) to cleanse the street of destitute children, and homeless adults, huddled next to the landmark Rio church of the Candelária. These off-duty persons deliberately sprayed the homeless children and adults with bullets – ‘the Candelária massacre’. (Bowater, 2013) This is not to overlook the situation mentioned by Freire in *Pedagogia da indignação* (Freire, 2000) where an Indigenous person was set on fire, while sleeping at a bus shed, by ‘wanton boys’ who obviously got a kick out of killing people ‘for their sport’ – to cite Shakespeare’s blinded Gloucester in *King Lear*. This shows clearly how certain categories of people are regarded by some in Brazil as ‘lesser beings’, the Indigenous and street-children (abandoned like stray animals) arguably being the ‘least of all’. One can speak here of a hierarchy of oprimidos, with Indigenous people suffering as a result of the ‘conquistador mentality’ which persists in many ways (Galeano, 2009).

The danger however is that we dismiss Freire as relevant only to this Brazilian scenario and as someone who has little to say to the ‘first world’. In the first place the scene just described, killing poor homeless people as game, is also evident in European societies such as my home country with allegations of a similar fatal shooting safari spree against migrants, in this case a migrant from sub-Saharan Africa (Mayo & Vittoria, 2021). The image such violence evokes, reminiscent of such films as Stanley Kubrik’s rendering on screen of Anthony Burgess’ *Clockwork Orange*, suggests that this applies to the so-called geographically majority and minority worlds. Moreover, Freire deals with oppression in a broader imperial context, a world context, focusing on the roots of these oppressions, macro and micro, which rendered him a spokesperson for a humanity struggling to rise from and reflect on a world that is *feio* (ugly), *malvado* (mean) and *desumano* (inhuman). Oppression, as social movements who are social justice-oriented would underline, comes in different forms, overt, covert, banal and subtle. For Freire, as he and many commentators of his work have shown (Accioly, 2021; Giroux, 2021; Kohan, 2021), the Capitalist system, based on surplus value and the constant search for new markets to be brought within its universe (the ‘universe of capital’), lies at the heart of such oppression. Unbridled capitalism separating the ‘wheat from the chaff’ – who is deemed disposable and who can be allowed to live and be grievable (Butler, 2016) – without any protective safeguards, renders this situation rampant. Freire’s writings on education and beyond target this universe and the different angles

to it. His *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2018) is as powerful an indictment of abuse of power and the ideology (used as obfuscation, mystification of ‘reality’) to support it as is the School of Barbiana’s *Lettera a Una Professoressa* (Letter to a Teacher) (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996). Both texts, synthesising or anticipating, in my view, the best that has come out of critical sociology of education, extend, in the words of Pier Paolo Pasolini, with respect to the *Lettera*, from a critique of education to a critique of an unequal society in general. Pasolini went so far as to denounce post-war Italy as still a ‘new fascist state’, with respect to stipulating, at the US’s behest, who can and cannot partake of government. The same applies to writers such as Henry A. Giroux (2020) who, thirty years or so later, in his commentaries on Freire and writings on critical pedagogy, still refers to the existence of New Fascist states. Foremost among these is the USA and another being the Bolsonaro-led Brazil whose present government, as its preceding interim one, has been striving hard to dislodge Freire from the plinth reserved for the ‘Patron of Brazilian Education’, the title bestowed upon him during the period of PT rule. As Inny Accioly (2020) acutely observes, Paulo Freire still disturbs so many. He is the antidote to all that is wrong with this world from a social justice perspective.

The Global Scenario

I now look at some aspects of the present global scenario against which the relevance of Freire’s writings can be evaluated. Freire was very much alive when the present Neoliberal world with its focus on markets, once public goods as objects of consumption and an individualised sense of *responsibilisation*, had become the staple of everyday life. Freire was in exile at the time of neoliberalism’s ‘trial run’ in Pinochet-led Chile, that very same country where, under a different economic and social regime, Freire sought refuge with other Brazilian emigres and wrote his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in Portuguese (Freire, 2013). He earned the ‘supreme compliment’, many years after he left Chile, by being declared by the Pinochet-led junta, a ‘persona non grata’. For those who would murder to carry out Milton Friedman’s and Arnold Harberge’s monetarist economic theories, Freire and his ideas were anathema, more suited to Salvador Allende’s Unidad Popular-led government. This is perhaps an indication that his writings would serve as an antidote to the Neoliberal stranglehold from which the country might hope to extricate itself now with former Chilean student leader, Gabriel Boric’s rise to the Presidency – a false dawn?

We are also in the face of a global and hardly abating pandemic which Freire did not experience but he witnessed enough of a failed and denuded neoliberal state to highlight the importance of a social state that serves to provide for the have-nots and not simply be content with providing the conditions for the accumulation of capital. He tried hard in this regard when he was Education Secretary in the municipal government of São Paulo despite having to come to terms with a Federal Government with diametrically opposed political leanings. In contrast to a market driven notion of schooling, he helped create community, ‘popular public’ schools which focused on learning starting from the pupil’s existential situation and rendering them responsive and proactive to the communities’ strengths and needs without remaining at that level (Maria del Pilar, Wong & Torres, 1998). In other words, the idea was to move from the existential situation and the opportunities it offers for relevant teaching/learning, what Milani calls the ‘occasional motive’ (*motivo occasionale*), to the profound motive (*motivo profondo*), that is gradually entering into the core disciplines and ‘high order’ knowledge and thinking (Martinelli, in Borg & Mayo, 2007, p. 110). It is a school which, in the spirit of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, sees emancipation as a social and not an individual act, i.e. a school that emphasises harmony within the collective. This is the sort of school or larger educational scenario, non-formal and formal, that fosters that sense of solidarity and relational disposition, including being relational to not only other humans but the rest of nature itself (in which we are immersed and from which we therefore do not stand apart), a quality devoutly to be wished in times such as these. I would reformulate Freire’s concept of ‘Unity in Diversity’ (Freire, 1997) as ‘harmony in biodiversity’, a harmony which preserves individuality within a social entity or milieu – within an ensemble or constellation of social relations. This is also to render the collective dimension of learning, so critical in Freire, Milani and others (kindred spirits), immune to the sense of smothering uniformity which explains why the word ‘masses’ has often had pejorative connotations in the UK (Williams, [1958] 1990), a feature, I would submit, also found in the plays of William Shakespeare. Freire’s use of the collective would also be at the furthest remove from the sense of mass hysteria resulting from easy manipulation, that conceptually different sense of the collective decried by Theodor Adorno in ‘Education after Auschwitz’ (Adorno, 2004).

This brings me to another aspect of contemporary life for which Freire provides a key antidote. It is the widespread manifestation of populism, a kind of variant of this phenomenon at odds with the late fifties and 60s populism of say Latin America, Brazil in particular, which led to advancements by the popular classes, thus conjuring a scenario ripe for social

transformation that was abruptly halted by the coup of 1964 which made Paulo Freire an obvious target. I would argue that this is a different kind of populism we are witnessing these days. This is a period in which fake news, media spin and deliberate falsification help provide particular constructions of realities not held to critical scrutiny. This is the world of what in Freire's Brazil is nowadays called 'negacionismo', negation of that which can be argued on the basis of democratic authority as opposed to authoritarianism, where professionally responsible knowledge, albeit to be viewed critically, is dismissed as 'conspiratorial' and 'fake'. This is the world of Trump and Trumpism, of the 'so what?' world of Bolsonaro and his ilk with its deleterious effects on disposable lives as a result of non-intervention during these pandemic and other times. It is the poor and destitute, who rely wholly on the few, if any, public goods available, who suffer most in these circumstances, being rendered disposable. Indigenous people feature prominently among these. Freire offers a pedagogical antidote, to this sense of bedlam, which has inspired forms of popular education in which critical literacy, based on praxis and therefore reading the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987)¹, includes critical health literacy. It is an approach which encourages people to avoid moving with the flow and to engage critically with all the messages thrown in our midst, testing them through collective and personal reflection on the surrounding community. It would involve opening up critically to what lies within and beyond, and its 'truisms'. These 'truisms' constitute much of our 'common sense' which, as Gramsci instructs us, contains fragments of good sense that are distorted by the presence of contradictory elements. As Gramsci posits, there are fragments of good and bad sense within common sense.

Praxis

Ferretting out these contradictions and rendering our sense more coherent is the staple of Praxis. This involves taking critical distance from the world one thinks one knows, and which sounds familiar, to see it differently and perhaps – there are no guarantees- more critically. This lies at the heart of what Freire and others call *conscientização* (Darder, 2020), the coming into consciousness, a process said by Freire and others to have been widely promoted, before him, by Dom Helder Camara, the Archbishop of Recife (Zachariah, 1986, p. 36, Nita Freire, in Borg & Mayo, 2007, p. 4). Different

¹ For a more thorough personal exposition of praxis see my paper on the subject in *International Critical Thought* (Mayo, 2020).

aspects of life are availed of to provide moments of critical distancing (partial detachment) for greater ‘coming into consciousness’, starting from his codifications and de-codifications² in *Angicos* (Freire, 1973), on exile itself as a form of praxis (see Freire & Faundez, 1989) as are also periods of imprisonment (Betto & Freire, 1986). It is the type of critical engagement deriving from and taken up at community level (Boal, 1979) in drama (Brecht’s *alienation effect*). It constitutes one of the means to read not only the word but also the world, something which media spin prevents us from doing. It is for this reason, among others, that it becomes the target of critical media literacy (Kellner & Share, 2009). All this connects with the well-known Socratic dictum, in Plato’s *Apology*, that an unexamined life is a life not worth living.

Freire’s notion of praxis is located within a dialectical approach that seeks to reconcile what *prima facie* appears to be a non-reconcilable confrontation between oppressor and oppressed. This is in keeping with a Darwinian world predicated on imperialism, militarism and fatalism. It is a world wherein the slave strives to replace the master, keeping the dialectical relationship intact. Not so Freire whose utopian vision is one marked by the quest for humanisation and, by implication, that of reconciling the apparent but still internally related opposites. There can be no oppressor without oppressed and vice-versa. Merely replacing the personnel in the gladiatorial *mors tua vita mea* reproduces and prolongs the Darwinian world – the world of competitive individualism. The Freirean utopian vision which lies at the heart of his proposed action at all levels, including education, is to end the exploitative relation *tout court*. This translates into an educational relationship which realistically still invests the designated educators with authority. The same educators, however, do not allow this authority to degenerate into authoritarianism. What this entails is that designated educators and learners co-investigate the object of knowledge together. They are both students and learners at the same time. In this regard, the oppressor-oppressed relation between teachers and students is undermined, if not completely overcome. Conceptually, it signifies a changing and sharing of roles. The designated teachers relearn what they know through dialogue and interaction with those who are allowed a free rein to express their reconstruction of knowledge in their own minds and that of the rest of the circle with whom they engage in dialogue. Different social locations and backgrounds enrich the process of co-investigation by introducing new

² One must be wary not to make a fetish out of this as every educational experiment, as any social experiment, is context based and has to be ‘reinvented’ and not ‘transplanted’, cargo-cult style. This connects with Don Milani’s statement that the School of Barbiana started and ended at Barbiana, period.

'takes' on what is being studied. As a result, all, the designated educators and cultural circle leaders, relearn what they think they know through openness to dialogue. This is the kind of communication which Freire's pedagogical thought is meant to foster. It echoes John Dewey's view of democracy and education where the former quality must be part and parcel of the educational process itself. It also echoes Don Milani's approach where students do not move to the next stage unless, assuming the role of teachers, they manage to teach what they learn not just to younger ones *in loco magister* but also to students in their age group. Co-investigation, criticality and exchange of views, and learning from the 'other', are characteristics of an education serving as a microcosm for a genuinely democratic life in the larger polis. It is a complete utopian antithesis to a Darwinian politics of persuasion by force and militarism. The latter has increasingly become a feature of the education of youngsters within larger bellicose environments, about which Henry Giroux has been writing. This has been denounced by Don Milani and his students at Barbiana who shared reflections with regard to reading and interpreting history against the grain, culminating in their 'objection of conscience' against military service (Milani, 1965).

At the heart of Paulo Freire's political pedagogical approach is the notion of humans as relational beings. Dialectics is all about relations. It is about being relational to other humans and these include the thousands and thousands of migrants who cross deserts and shores in search of a new life. This is imagined as a better life than that found in contexts ravaged by years of colonial encroachment and planetary degradation, including the worsening of climate conditions caused by corporate emissions and other myopic and self-centred Western policies and actions. These are the new prominent oppressed or *damnes de la terre* or *mere*. Freire drew, across his writings, on his long personal migratory experiences as an errant person in process, transferring from Recife to Jabotão during the Great Depression and throughout Latin America, the USA and Europe, with sorties into Africa when in Switzerland working for the World Council of Churches. (Kohan, 2021) He wrote of his meetings with migrants and the *gastarbeiter* in Switzerland and beyond (Freire, 1994). He would point out that migrants carry with them much more of their subjectivities than mere labour power. Freirean democratic relations would entail engaging with all cultures including those migrants bring with them, what I would call their 'portability of cultures'. The need for authentic dialogue becomes more urgent in this regard.

Freire's call for people to see themselves as relational beings extends beyond the human to the rest of nature in which we are immersed. We do not stand apart from nature as unfortunately is presented in the capitalist

imaginary with the implication being that nature is there to be exploited. On the contrary, we constitute an integral part of what poets such as S.T Coleridge call the ‘one life’ and First Nations people in the Americas call the ‘web of life’ (O’ Sullivan, 1999). All is connected in this universe and we are part of this connection. Freire’s call to dialogue, reflected in the Earth Charter, and in the ‘thematic complexes’ at the basis of his curricular approach in the ‘popular public school’ project in São Paulo is therefore one that extends beyond the social to the rest of the cosmos. It is for this reason that it makes more sense to speak, from a Freirean perspective, of ‘harmony’ rather than ‘unity’ (Freire, 1997) in ‘biodiversity’ rather than simply ‘diversity’ (*Ibid.*). The emphasis on human-earth relations in his later work and that of his legatees (see Gadotti, 2005, 2016) shows us how far his pedagogical philosophy developed from its basis in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with its limited anthropocentric, as well as androcentric, view of the world. In this regard, and with regard to the work of an institute, which now bears his name, the freirean approach provides an antidote with respect to a world in which its cenozoic state, to use O’Sullivan’s (1999) term, is dying and a new ecozoic state is struggling to emerge³. It is the social movements, such as the *Movimento Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra* (MST), the landless peasant movement (Tarlau, 2019), that are fully engaged in the struggle for this state to emerge, that captured his imagination. They play a prominent part in this ‘interregnum’, to adopt Gramsci’s term. Just before he died, Paulo waxed lyrical when viewing, on television, the massive MST march into the Brazilian capital, Brasilia, exclaiming, as reported by his wife Nita, “That’s it, Brazilian people, the country belongs to all of us! Let us build together a democratic country, just and happy!” (Nita Freire, in Borg & Mayo, 2007, p. 3).

This would have been the perfect moment to conclude this essay were it not for the fact that it highlights something worthy of further comment. The enthusiastic tone of the lines he spoke towards his life’s end indicates the man of hope Paulo Freire was. Hope is what drove him forward. His many tribulations – the ruthless suppression of a country roused for transformation, his arrest, banishment into exile, his PT’s subsequent municipal electoral defeat which brought to nought his well thought out reforms in a megalopolis – did not lead him into despair and into cynicism, giving in to what Mark Fisher calls and denounced as ‘Capitalist Realism’ (Fisher, 2009). He continued to dream the possible dream. Hope, the title of a book (Freire,

³ The cenozoic state refers to a life whose underlying values are the technical-industrial ones of Western Eurocentric culture (O’Sullivan, 2002, p. 4). In contrast lies the Ecozoic State which highlights people’s connectedness to the ecosystem by which they are sustained (*ibid.*; O’ Sullivan, 1999).

1994) which is as biographical as it is conceptual, as is *Letters to Cristina* (Freire, 1996), is emblazoned across his image. Social movements such as the MST or the Frente Zapatista in Chiapas, fuelled his hope for a world which is an alternative to what is available. He would not court TINA, there is no alternative – that is to say, he would not accept *what is* as determinant of *what is possible*. TINA smacks of the kind of fatalism he had inveighed against in his early work and continued to do so ever since. There is an emancipatory road to be made by walking, to adopt the title of his book with Myles Horton (Horton & Freire, 1990), derived from Antonio Machado. He has walked and continues to inspire others to make the road, for a world *menos feio* (less ugly), *menos malvado* (less mean), *menos desumano* (less inhuman), by walking. The struggle for democratisation and humanisation continues. Like the struggle for a more democratic education, it is ongoing – *denuncio e anuncio* (denunciation and annunciation).

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