

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION, VALUES AND UTOPIA IN THE CRITICAL PEDAGOGY OF PAULO FREIRE

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Abstract

This paper deals with some main issues of Paulo Freire's philosophy of education, namely his relation with the history of education, theology, pedagogy, politics and science, and his perspectives of modernity and post-modernity. The framework of this study is the dialogue between pedagogy and philosophy, opening educational thought and practice to new humanistic and critical approaches. Another issue is the role of ethical values in education, and their relevance in a techno-scientific age.

Keywords: pedagogy, philosophy, post-modernity, ethics, utopia, values

Historicity and actuality of Paulo Freire's pedagogical theory

Paulo Freire's pedagogy relates to actuality, to present times, and dialogues with the history of education, viewed with a critical perspective, and not in a passive way. From the Ancient Greece, Freire takes the concept of *Paideia*, a large notion that includes both culture and formation. Also from ancient Greece and Rome – the classical world -, he takes the role of *humanitas*, of humanistic studies (nowadays more often named as *human sciences*), in the formative process, refusing his limitation to the technoscientific field. From the Christian medieval philosophy, he took a vision of spirituality in education, for him related to the social movements that he integrated, related to the *liberation theology*, but also to the progressive Catholicism developed in the personalistic view of Emmanuel Mounier or Jean Lacroix.

The *contemporary humanism* of Paulo Freire reinvents the Renaissance values, and his view of intellectual's commitment, critical spirit, emancipation, and fight for human rights, relate him with the enlightenment movement. His Marxian references are critical, mainly related to the view of education as *praxis*, because he shared the choice for a open and pluralistic society as a political paradigm, according to the ideas of the philosopher Karl Popper. The concordance between Paulo Freire's ideas and the post-modern views is not programmatic, due to his enlightened vision, but is grounded in his awareness of the incompleteness of our knowledge and the moving apart from any totalizing or static view of educational thought or human being, which conducted him to the path of a opened anthropology and philosophical pedagogy.

Although he was attentive to the historical heritage of pedagogical thinking, that he took as a tool to rethink and reframe, according to the new horizons nowadays opened, Paulo Freire was mainly a pedagogue of the contemporary, focused in his time's problems and in projects to build the future. Temporality and historicity cross all the author's work, shaped by his personal history, by Brazil's history, and by world's history, in the crossing between the personal and the historical, the I and his situation, according to Ortega and Sartre views of the human being as rooted in a society but also as an unfinished project. From the opposition to the military dictatorship in Brazil to the commitment to the transition to democracy, and through travelling or building educational projects in Europe, Latin-America and Africa, were he accomplished many educational formations, being the most famous the alphabetization one

(which was not only a method or technical tool, but also a way of acquiring social and cultural self conscience), his path is today recognized as a builder of programs for implementation of human rights, understood not only as *political* ones, but also as *social, cultural* and *educational* rights.

Pedagogy and Philosophy

Education, in its multiple dimensions, was viewed by Paulo Freire as the constant and main task of his life, both in theoretical and practical approaches, and its starting from this systemic perspective that we can understand his *pedagogy* as a *philosophic* one: not as a simple teaching methodology or technique, but as a *reflective, critical* and *open* pedagogy. This study intends to understand Paulo Freire as a philosopher of education, developing a philosophical pedagogy in which there is both a relation and an interaction between the two dimensions, although keeping their relative autonomy. Differently from being a philosopher in the first place, developing a system of ideas from which the education is viewed as a part, he is after all a pedagogue that starts from his pedagogical experience to reflect upon it and develop philosophical concepts, although sometimes it happens that he appeals to a philosophical frame to set a light upon his educational experience. For instance, Plato's pedagogical thinking rises from his theory of ideas, essences, or models, while in Paulo Freire there is no previous theoretical framework, but some scientific, philosophic, social and religious references that guide his path. Freire intends to think upon education through his practice or experience, although this kind of experience is not empirical, but reflective, rooted concepts, notions and theoretical frames issued and applied to pedagogical practices. This approach allows us to see him as an educator and pedagogue, although considering that reducing him to those competences is simplistic, because he is also a philosopher of the educational experience, in its epistemological, technical, ethical, ontological, aesthetical and social dimensions.

From this interaction between pedagogy and philosophy rises a mutual discovery of new paths: pedagogy acquires a systemic, wider view, including every aspects of personal, social, or ethical life, instead of being a mere teaching skill, while philosophy turns itself a *Paideia* or *Bildung*, rediscovering its formative potential. In Paulo Freire's thought, education includes in its reach all areas of philosophical thought, but they are not separated and organized in a systematic way, with no sharp divisions between methodological, epistemological or ethical dimensions. The freirian dialogue with nowadays philosophy and with its history is direct, with explicit reference to philosophical authors and trends, or indirect, with implicit reference although not direct mentions to philosophers. We will try to follow the paths of this dialogue, in order to understand the grounds of his educational theory and practice, in its multidimensionality and permanent transformation and process of reshaping, along with the growth of his reflective, historical and social experiences.

In his interpretation of freirian thought, Michael Peters develops a anti-essentialist stance, distant from a finished doctrine that could be definitive or closed (Cf. Peters, 2000: 99-108). Instead, Freire set a path of ongoing change, inviting us to follow him, not in a passive mood, but reconstructing his path in the light of our own experience and reflection. Education, such as life, is a work in progress, and our mind frames reconstruct themselves along the path of our life. There is no mind apart from the world trying to understand it – like the Cartesian *cogito* or the Kantian *transcendental mind* – but a person that understands the world from within his world's experience, from his relation to the historicity of a temporal and ever-changing world, with an unfinished meaning. The person is not at the center of history, of knowledge, or of education, but restructures himself in interaction with them, and it's by this network of relations that he understands himself or the world, and acts. The philosophical pedagogy of Paulo Freire isn't individualist nor collectivist, but relational or interpersonal. His no-centered and pluralistic view of the pedagogical rationality presents him with a post-modern sensibility, while his fight for social emancipation places him inside the enlightened

values of modernity. This tension and inter-relation between modern and post-modern views is a keynote of the evolution of his work.

Education in the crossroads of modernity and post-modernity

Becoming a tool for questioning and interrogate the educational concepts and practices, philosophy acquires a heuristic function in the process of building educational knowledge and values, a discovery path, like the Socratic maieutic. This philosophical dimension of pedagogy allow us to view it as a *pedagogy of meaning and values*, building sense(s) of education in an axiological perspective. Our age deals with a crisis that, more than economic, is a crisis of sense and values. The global narratives that ground and legitimate knowledge, culture and society faded, and gave place to a kind of void or fragmentation of meaning: science, reason, history or religion, that grounded the modern discourse and action, are being questioned, no longer being self-evident, and we are entering in an age of uncertainty, age Ilya Prigogine names it. Those narratives did also structure the educational theories, practices and values.

How can we think about the educational problematic, after this turning point or shift known as *post-modernity*, due to its questioning of modernity? Paulo Freire answered to this defy, without falling into a uncritical return to modernity nor into the post-modern relativism. He performed a kind of *inter-critics* of these two trends, accepting some modern and post-modern values, but also criticizing them. Modernity is linked to an idea of autonomy, rationality, emancipation and universality, that he valued, including the heritage of the modern enlightenment in his *pedagogy of autonomy and liberty*, viewing education as a social and cultural project that considers knowledge as a condition to the auto-liberation of the oppressed or excluded. Education is the main tool to acquire that kind of knowledge, which is not only a collection of skills, information, or know-how, but mainly a way of being, of knowing how to live and what values deserve to be developed.

Freire kept the modern trust in the *perfectibility* of the human being, that can change himself and society through the education, From the post-modern critical thinking, he took the refusal of all dogma, absolute system, closed doctrines or one-dimensional ways of thinking, theories or discourses – no matter they claim their roots in enlightened, neo-liberal, or Marxian doctrines. But, like the post-modern trend, he rejects the idea of a unifying or total theory, under the authority of the dialectic reason, foreseeing a end of history in a society without classes, or the same view of a end of history in a market society and reduction of the citizen's role in benefit of the consumer one, or also the idea of holding the key of the meaning or sense of history moving towards a final unity and a “new human being” previously foresee. He moved away from all totalitarian trends or absolute certainties: instead of certainty and unifying trends, we need to face uncertainty e keep plurality, difference and pluralism in education, cultural, political or social life.

Therefore, Paulo Freire's thought moves away from any authoritarian or dogmatic trends of the left wing political movements (even when they rise in the progressive social movements that could be seen as being near to his beliefs), by refusing their hegemonic intent to control the social movements, or to produce an enlightened leadership to hold the sense of history. He made a post-modern critic of Hegel and Marx, referential thinkers of the left, with their idea of a dialectic method to understand and change reality, viewing them as makers of global or total narratives and dogmatic certainties, and recommending that “(...) the Marxists must adopt a humble attitude in dealing with the people, and become, in a post-modern way, persons with less certainties.”(Freire, 1994: 96)

This association between two usually opposite perspectives, arriving to an apparently paradox – a progressive post-modernism -, when the concept of progress is related to the modern enlightenment, while the post-modernity developed its deconstruction, reveals us a Freire that includes critically the contributions of the post-modern social theory in his emancipator discourse, a legacy from the enlightenment, developing a pluralistic theory and

practice of education to tolerance, socio-cultural diversity and political pluralism. He opposes all uniformity and homogeneity that are a landmark of some archaisms in leftwing trends “(...) in their authoritarian distortions, their repulsive totalitarianism, their sectarian blindness, (...) their lack of tolerance towards diversity and difference.” (Freire, 1994:96)

The same way that oppression can show itself in multiple forms and in many dimensions – from economic oppression to cultural or social ones -, the liberation discourses and practices may assume multiple orientations and develop in diverse spaces , from school to mass media , from non-governmental organizations to state structures, syndicates or political movements. Through his work in governmental education projects and in educational interventions in the civil society – the most famous was the project of alphabetization, still implemented nowadays in many countries -, Paulo Freire was a man of thought, such as a man of action. His intervention had a wider range than the academic sphere, reaching the state or civil society educational projects, and his fight was the one of ideas, but also political – in this he follows the enlightened idea of the intellectual’s social commitment: he fought against the military dictatorship and for democracy, and this path shows his work in the light of a *pedagogy of autonomy and liberty*.

In an age of crisis of great or global narratives or meta-discourses that legitimate knowledge, education, and culture, as the philosopher of the *post-modern condition*, Jean-François Lyotard, says (Cf. Lyotard, 1979), is it needed to give up the enlightened discourse and its emancipator project, or it’s suitable to reframe it according to the emergence of new socio-cultural and educational paradigms? Paulo Freire chose the last orientation, rethinking the philosophical-pedagogical discourse of modernity in the light our age spirit of time, while other progressive pedagogues kept their theory and practice unchanged, or renounced to any hope in a social or educational change, falling in conservative positions.

Towards an Inclusive pedagogy

Occidental culture, in its Hellenic roots, was guided by a *totality* and *identity* ideal. The ancient Greeks understood the world and the knowledge as a whole, with limits. Greek cosmology was finite and closed, as Alexandre Koyré says in his work *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Cf. Koyré, 2007). The Universe of Parmenides was viewed as a sphere (Sphairos), being his logic and ontology characterized by the identity: Being is, non-Being isn’t. Negative, oppositional, and changing Heraclito’s logic, set apart from Parmenides identity and stability, and so, from Ancient Greek philosophical mainstream. Those opposite traditions joined in Hegel’s philosophy, which unites the Heraclitian change and negativity to the Parmenidian identity and permanence; the negative’s work doesn’t allow any stability, but changeability conducts to an Absolute Wisdom, with the end of any contradictions or transformations.

Instead of the classical *episteme* (*science*), which viewed knowledge as stability and unity, in opposition to the transformation and multiplicity of the *doxa* (*opinion*), modernity is thinker, which he joined to the modern view: he produced a philosophy of time, contradiction and change, that ended in the stability of the Absolute, in a synthesis between the ancients immutability and the historicity of the moderns. Paulo Freire noticed that this view, at first sight rejected by the theoreticians of modernity – positivists, Marxists or neoliberals – was in fact implicit in their explicit thought. Freire’s ideas mirrors so much the Critical Theory ones, with their statement that *The totality is the non-truth* (Cf. Horkheimer,1983) as the Emmanuel Lévinas philosophy of alterity (Cf. Lévinas,1984).

Positivism ended the classical philosophy and metaphysical Absolute, bounding its reach to the *facts*. However, the three levels of scientific and social development or progress lead to a “disguised Absolute” – the positive level, that closes history and sees in experimental science and reason a replacement of the old metaphysical or religious Absolute. Marx thought that human reality is historical and came from contradiction, such as Hegel, but his dialectics

is no longer idealistic and became materialistic, with contradictions showing themselves in economy and society. All history develops itself as classes fight, and State backs social classes interests; however, in the final level of historical evolution, social classes and State will disappear. And all the contradictions will cease. Liberalism is viewed by Francis Fukuyama as *the end of history* (Cf. Fukuyama,1992:13-35), through a new reading of Hegel, interpreted by Alexandre Kojève and comprehended by Fukuyama in the context of post-cold war. With the communism's implosion, the defeat of Nazism in the second world war, and the fall of military dictatorships that prevailed in Latin America, liberal democracy emerged as the final step in history of mankind, not because time or events cease to occur, but because there were no alternatives to liberalism, which would solve all problems or contradictions. In all those views, we arrive at an homogeneous society and thought, at a kingdom of identity.

Paulo Freire viewed himself as a heir of the dialectical vision of history as a historical process but without the closing stage that both Hegel and Marx saw as an end of history, with a deterministic vision of the future. For him, history is a *work in progress* – a path that is built as long as we walk, and not path already made by Divine Providence, Reason, or any other supreme dimension, and this goes to universal history as well as education history. The dialectics he shared and used as a tool to act and understand history, and to work in the pedagogical theory and practice, is near to the Merleau-Ponty's *hiperdialectics* (Cf. Merleau-Ponty,1979:75.141), a dialectics without an end or reconciliation that would abolish any alterity or contradiction, where the singularity or difference would be suppressed in favor of a totality identified with the truth.

Totality means to Hegel and Marx – although with different views – a rational order that obliges everyone and leaves no room to alterity, difference, plurality, exteriority. In the Ontology of totality there's no place to exteriority: or, such as in Hegel, Being includes in itself all the exteriority, suppressing it as difference, and bringing back the *other* to the *same*, or doesn't recognize it and intends to suppress alterity. This happens in totalitarian trends, as Nazism, that viewed Jews as the *other* and built the holocaust to eliminate them, or, like in former Soviet Union, the dissidents, as others, exterior to the system, where viewed as fools and placed in psychiatric hospitals because, being the system "perfect", unique and homogeneous, anyone who was different or exterior to it should be classified as fool. Any difference should be brought back to the identity, all divergence set back to the norm – this is the totalitarian belief.

Breaking with the ontology and ideology of totality, identity or homogeneity, the freirian pedagogy hosts the *other*, the *excluded* of the system – political, social, educational – the *oppressed*, the one who has no voice, no face in the system. Therefore, we may view it as an *inclusive pedagogy*, for which to include is to give voice, and not to normalize or reduce the other to the same. To a *normalized pedagogy*, Freire opposes a *dialogic pedagogy*, and an education to the respect of difference, autonomy or alterity.

Critical pedagogy and sense of utopia

The enlightened, Hegelian, positivist, or Marxist, ground in trust in a pre-oriented *sense of history*, a inevitable future foreseen from the present, a movement towards a fair, rational and free society, according to the enlightenment, a modern state, which, according to Hegel in his work *Right and State Philosophical Principles* (Cf. Hegel, 1982: 258-341), or to the *positive stage* of Humanity, where all problems will be solved through reason, science or technique, according to Auguste Comte (Cf. Comte,1975), or to a society without classes, in Marx's view (Cf. Marx,1982). None of these philosophies viewed progress as a linear path or absolute necessity, although positivism is the one more closer to this linear vision of a historical necessity. Hegel recognized the possibility of unpredictable events in history; however, viewed from the large history's picture, even the unpredicted events should be

included in a general progressive history's necessary orientation (Cf. Hegel,1982:177-215), and Marx took this hegelian heritage.

Post-modernity represents the end of this historical optimism, or in the trust in the future, grounded in the sense of history. From these great narratives crisis results a disenchantment in face of a present and future without the hope's horizon given by these narratives – religious, scientific, technological, philosophical, or ideological. However he recognized this crisis, ignored by some other left wing pedagogues, that kept themselves tied to established trends, Paulo Freire always worked for a re-enchantment of the world and a renewal of hope.

This renewal can be implemented only through a re-affirmation of the *sense of utopia, dream and imagination*, opening the real to the possible, the being to the becoming, the actual to the virtual, the finite to the infinite, the immanence to the transcendence.

The post-modernity, by renouncing to the great narratives, settled us in the finite, in the immanence of a present or actuality that no longer opens to a future that would transcend them. Modernity kept something of the religious and metaphysical transcendence, while replacing the religious *eschatology* of the ultimate ends for a secularized version: those ultimate ends no longer are fulfilled in a *celestial city*, but in the *terrestrial city* of the utopias or social models shaped in a rational frame. The idea of *progress* lead to a present that should be surpassed, transcended, through the historical dynamics, in order to implement the ultimate ends of reason in the cognitive, social and educational order.

To Marx and Engels, socialism's maturity should only be reached through the transition from the *utopian* socialism to the *scientific* socialism. They viewed the utopia as an escape from reality and a refuge in the dream of a better world – or even a perfect one – without the tools to make it real, effective, rooted in the concrete history. According to the philosopher Karl Popper (Cf. Popper,1980:259-280), utopias are totalitarian models and enemies of the *open society*, because they build false rational models, that they intent to impose to the society, through a *social enginery*. Also, they lead to a closed society because they show themselves as *essences*, eternal structures developed in a previously known future.

Following another path than these Marxist or liberal rejection of utopian thought, Paulo Freire rethinks utopia as a tool for changing the world, path to an opened future, and hope horizon.. Utopias don't represent a history's closing, nor making a "new man" or perfect closed society. On the contrary, it's the conscience of imperfection and unfinished human condition (and of the institutions, systems or societies built by him) that results his *educability* and *perfectibility*. Conservatism establishes a conformity with historical tradition, that must be continued in the present, while progressism denies past traditions but accepts a future pre-oriented. Both close themselves, emptying the critical, creative, or dreaming abilities, which are supposed to guide the educational and social projects, reopening an hope's horizon: "The decomplexification of the future in a mechanistic history's understanding, whether in right or left wing, leads to the death or authoritarian denial of dreaming, utopia, or hope." (Freire,2010:73)

Human history doesn't obey to laws alike the mechanistic Nature's laws, which dominate the scientific paradigms of the Galilean and Newtonian cosmologies as universal and necessary laws: the time that guides human history isn't mechanical, but creative, complex. Human time in education, history, and society, is understood by Paulo Freire as *interpretation, comprehension*, different from the scientific *explanation*, adequate to the natural sciences. *Pedagogical reason* isn't only a logical or technical one, but mainly a *hermeneutical reason*. Understanding and action need an *autonomous* pedagogical agent – teacher or student – structured by his historical-social situation, personality, experience, but also able to be a builder of his own history and driving force of social history, shaping his world and the social one. On the other hand, the pedagogical and social spaces have their relative autonomy, the education's reform isn't enough to reform society, nor social

transformation is enough to transform education, but they are complementary spaces and interact, because education acts also in public sphere, and the city, since Plato, is viewed as *educative city*.

Paulo Freire didn't want a reproductive pedagogy, simply adequate to the social, political or cultural order, nor did think that the social order was established by Nature. As a supporter of a *critical, emancipative, utopian* (not in the vulgar sense of something impossible, but in the sense of opening possibilities beyond the reality, and make dreams or imagination turn real), he recognizes himself as progressive theoretician and practical educator. The ideal of justice guided not only his pedagogy, but also his personal life and social action. His stance could be named as *hypercritical*, like the one Merleau-Ponty used to name his dialectics – *hyperdialectics* –, viewing dialectics as a process that didn't end in a final reconciliation or totality, like Hegel and Marx conceived it, but is a never ending and infinite opened process. Critical thought isn't just a tool to change present knowledge, education, or society, until a new society with justice replaces them, and critics would no longer be needed (or even would be repressed, as happens in authoritarian right or left systems). On the contrary, once democracy is implemented, freedom of expression and critical stance are required, not only in a transitory period, but permanently. Also, freedom must be enlarged, from the academic space to the public one.

As John Dewey, Karl Popper, Jurgen Habermas or Matthew Lipman said, although from different philosophical positions, freedom of critics and discussion characterize democracy and citizenship, as well as scientific research, and education.

In a world crossed by different kinds of determinisms - for instance, the market one, the technological determinism, that even intends to redefine human being – a *pedagogy of autonomy*, such as Paulo Freire's, reintroduces ethical responsibility, capability of choice according to values. For him, education is a utopian project. Education becomes a utopian project when it doesn't limit human being to the *topos*, the present place, what he is, but opens him to the possible, the becoming other than his present configuration. According to Freire, human being as an ontological vocation to grow, to be more, but this potential can only be accomplished through education, a formative process. Formation is not normalization nor homogenization, and the pedagogical formation, to Freire, is so much a scientific and technical matter as an *art*, and we must rely on education's *aesthetical* dimension. In an age were to have is more important than to be, the formation in aesthetical or ethical being is a way for making true a feasible utopia's education, turning the pedagogical dream of ours being growth into reality.

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