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Lessons From Paulo Freire

By Henry A. Giroux

Paulo Freire was one of the most important educators of the 20th century. He occupies a hallowed position among the founders of "critical pedagogy"—the educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action. He also played a crucial role in developing a highly successful literacy campaign in Brazil before he was jailed by the military junta that came to power in 1964, and then exiled. When Brazil once again offered the possibility of democracy (or at least amnesty), in 1980, Freire returned and 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 English translation—after influencing generations of teachers and intellectuals in the Americas and abroad.

Since the 1980s, no intellectual on the North American educational scene has matched either Freire's theoretical rigor or his moral courage. And his example is more important now than ever before: With public institutions—including universities—increasingly under siege by conservative forces, it is imperative for educators to acknowledge Freire's understanding of the empowering and democratic potential of education. Critical pedagogy offers the best, perhaps the only, chance for young people to develop and assert a sense of their rights and responsibilities to participate in governing, and not simply to be governed.

Most universities are now dominated by instrumentalist and conservative ideologies, hooked on methods, slavishly wedded to

accountability measures, and run by administrators who lack both a broader vision and an understanding of education as a force for strengthening the imagination and expanding democratic public life. One consequence is that a concern with excellence has been removed from matters of equity, while higher education—once conceptualized as a public good—has been reduced to a private one. Universities are increasingly defined through a corporate demand to provide the skills, knowledge, and credentials to build a work force that will enable the United States to compete against blockbuster growth in Chinese and Southeast Asian markets while maintaining its role as the major global economic and military power. There is little interest in understanding the pedagogical foundation of higher education as a deeply civic and political project that provides the conditions for autonomy and takes liberation and the practice of freedom as a collective goal.

Against the regime of "bare pedagogy," stripped of all critical elements of teaching and learning, Freire believed that education, in the broadest sense, was eminently political because it offered students the conditions for self-reflection and a self-managed life. As the sociologist Stanley Aronowitz has noted, Freire's pedagogy helps 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, education is a political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to explore the possibilities of what it means to be citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of a substantive democracy. According to Freire, critical pedagogy affords students the opportunity to read, write, and learn for themselves—to engage in a culture of questioning that demands far more competence than rote learning and the application of acquired skills. That means personal experience becomes a valuable resource, giving students the opportunity to relate their own narratives, social relations, and histories to what is being taught. It is also 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 those conditions. Experience is a starting point, an object of inquiry that can be affirmed, interrogated, and used to develop broader knowledge and understanding. Critical pedagogy is about offering a way of thinking beyond the seemingly natural or inevitable state of things, about challenging "common sense." It is a mode of intervention.

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 protests that developed over educational access and student rights to literacy. The class could open up opportunities to talk about why those struggles are still part of the experience of many 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. Read aloud, the papers could be responded to by each student, who could elaborate his or her position and offer commentary as a way of entering into a discussion of the history of racial exclusion and reflecting on how its ideologies and formations still haunt American society.

Central to such a pedagogy is shifting the emphasis from teachers to students and making visible the relationships among knowledge, authority, and power. Giving students the opportunity to be problem posers and to engage in a culture of questioning puts in the foreground the crucial issues of who has control over the conditions of learning and how specific modes of knowledge, identity, and authority are constructed within particular classroom relations. Under such circumstances, knowledge is not simply received by students, but actively transformed, as they learn how to engage others in critical dialogue and be held accountable for their own views.

Critical pedagogy also 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. That is hardly a prescription for political indoctrination. It offers students new ways to think and act independently.

Even within the privileged precincts of higher education, Freire said, 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." That language of skepticism and potential was Freire's legacy, one that is increasingly absent from conservative discourse about current educational problems.

I first met Paulo in the early 1980s, just after I was denied tenure as a professor at Boston University by the president, John Silber. Paulo was giving a talk at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and he came to my house for dinner. Given his lofty reputation, I was astounded by his profound humility. I remember being greeted with such warmth and sincerity that I felt completely at ease with him. We talked for a long time that night about his exile, about how I had been attacked by a right-wing university administration, about what it meant to be a working-class intellectual and the risks one had to take to make a difference. 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 him and Donaldo Macedo, a linguist, translator, and a friend of both of ours, I might not have stayed in the field of education. Paulo's and Donaldo's passion for education and their profound humanity convinced me that education was not a job like any other, but a crucial site of struggle, and that whatever risks had to be taken were well worth it.

I have encountered many intellectuals throughout my academic career, but Paulo stands out as exceptionally generous, eager to help younger intellectuals publish their work, to write letters of

support, and to give as much as possible of himself in the service of others. The early 1980s were exciting years in education in the United States, and Paulo was at the center of the activity. He and I started a book series, *Critical Studies in Education and Culture*, with Bergin & Garvey Publishers, which brought out the work of more than 60 young authors, many of whom have gone on to have significant influence in universities. Jim Bergin became Paulo's patron as his American publisher, Donaldo became his translator and a co-author, and we collectively strove to circulate his work, always with the hope of inviting him back to America so we could meet, talk, drink good wine, and recharge the struggles that marked us in different ways.

Occupying the often difficult space between existing politics and the as-yet-possible, Paulo spent most of his life in the belief that the radical elements of democracy are worth struggling for, that critical education is a basic element of progressive social change, and that how we think about politics is inseparable from how we come to understand the world, power, and the moral life we aspire to lead. In many ways, Paulo embodied the often problematic relationship between the personal and the political. His own life was a testimonial 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 speak to a more humane and democratic future.

At the same time, Paulo never moralized about politics, never employed shame or collapsed the political into the personal when talking about social issues. Private problems were to be understood in relation to larger public issues. For example, he never reduced an understanding of homelessness, poverty, and unemployment to a failing of individual character, laziness, indifference, or lack of personal responsibility. They were systemic problems.

His belief in 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 is an act of moral imagination that enables progressive educators and others to think otherwise in order to act otherwise.

Paulo offered no recipes for those who felt 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, not realizing that they were undermining his insistence that pedagogy is defined by its context and must be approached as a project of individual and social transformation—that it can never be reduced to a method.

Contexts indeed mattered to Paulo. Any pedagogy that calls itself Freirean has to acknowledge the key principle that our current knowledge is contingent on particular historical times and political forces. This includes the classroom: Each class will be influenced by the different experiences that students bring, the resources available, teacher-student relations, the authority exercised by administrators over teacher autonomy, and the theoretical and political discourses used by teachers.

Paulo also acknowledged the importance of understanding the particular and local in relation to global and transnational forces. For him, making the pedagogical more political meant moving beyond the celebration of tribal mentalities and developing a praxis that emphasizes "power, history, memory, relational analysis, justice (not just representation), and ethics as the issues central to transnational democratic struggles." Paulo challenged the separation of culture from politics, but he did not make the mistake that many of his contemporaries did by conflating culture with the politics of recognition. Politics is more than a gesture of translation, representation, and dialogue; it is also about creating the conditions for people to govern rather than merely be governed. While he had a profound faith in the ability of ordinary

people to shape history and their own destinies, he refused to romanticize the culture and experiences that produce oppressive social conditions. Of course he believed that power privileges certain forms of cultural capital—ways of speaking, living, being, and acting in the world—but he did not believe that subordinate or oppressed cultures are free of the contaminating effects of oppressive and institutional relations of power.

How students experience the world must become an object of analysis. As a result, not just history, but also the theory and language that give daily life meaning and action a political direction must be constantly subject to critical reflection. Paulo repeatedly challenged any attempt to reproduce the binary of theory versus praxis. He deeply respected theory, but he never reified it. When he talked about Freud, Erich Fromm, or Marx, one could feel his intense passion for ideas. And yet he never treated theory as an end in itself; it was always a resource whose value lay in understanding 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 match their 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. Paulo understood keenly that democracy is threatened by a powerful military-industrial complex, the rise of extremist groups, and the increased power of the warfare state. He also recognized the pedagogical force of a corporate and militarized culture that erodes the moral and civic capacities of citizens to think beyond the common sense of official power. But he strongly believed that educational sites represent the most important venues in 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 public institutions and education have become places of conformity, disempowerment, and political repression,

the legacy of Paulo Freire's work is more important than ever.

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