

## THE MILLION PAULO FREIRES <sup>1</sup>

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"They don't understand me," he told me during an interview in Sao Paulo back in 1985. "They don't understand what I have said, what I say, what I have written."<sup>1</sup> Mystified by some, demonized by others, misunderstood by many, Paulo Freire often distanced himself from the images about him and his work that came from both theoreticians and practitioners, left wing and right wing, all over the world. Over and over again he demanded his critics -- but he might as well have demanded his followers -- to contextualize his work historically, to acknowledge the evolution of his thought and his self-criticism, and to allow him, in sum, the right to continue thinking, learning and living beyond his books and, in particular, beyond *Education as a Practice of Liberty* (1967) and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1969), two of his most famous books, and where many, admirers and critics, left him virtually suspended. The Paulo Freire of the last two decades, he who died last 2 May, 1997, is just as or even more alive than that of the 60s and 70s, although unfortunately unknown by the majority of the people.<sup>2</sup>

Followers and detractors have often coincided in reducing Freire to a caricature of himself, locking up his thought in a single field (generally, that of adult literacy), reducing it to a number of clichés, and even to a method and a set of related techniques. Around the world, Freire evokes terms such as *literacy, adult education, conscientization, dialogue, banking approach to education, circle of culture, generative word and generative theme, thematic universe, action-reflection-action, praxis, coding and decoding, participatory research, critical knowledge and critical reflection, dialectical relationship, speaking the word, transforming reality, pedagogy of the oppressed, culture of silence, cultural invasion, cultural liberation.*

Some refer to Paulo Freire's *method* (or *methodology*), others to Paulo Freire's *theory*, others to Paulo Freire's *pedagogy*, others to Paulo Freire's *philosophy* (and *philosophical anthropology*), others to Paulo Freire's *program*, others to Paulo Freire's *system*. I asked him once which of those denominations he felt most comfortable with. "None of them", he answered. "I didn't invent a method, or a theory, or a program, or a system, or a pedagogy, or a philosophy. It is people who put names to things."<sup>3</sup>

A citizen of the world, the name of Freire remained closely linked to Latin America. In Europe, North America, Africa and Asia many educators identify Latin America with Paulo Freire just as many others associate it with the *salsa*, the guerrilla, the revolution, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Pelé or Maradona. And yet, it is probably in Latin America, and particularly in Brazil, his own country, where Freire has been the object of both the

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<sup>1</sup> In: *Adult Basic Education and Training Journal*, N° 3, Johannesburg, 1997; *Convergence*, "A Tribute to Paulo Freire", Vol. XXXI, N° 1-2. Toronto: ICAE, 1998; *Adult Education and Development*, N° 53, Bonn: DVV, 1999.

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warmest reception and the hardest criticism. In life and in death, his ideas and positions generated and will continue to generate strong sentiments, passionate adherents and rejecters, very different and even diametrically opposed interpretations. For some, a subversive, a revolutionary, thus confronted to prison and exile, and associated by many to marxism, socialism and even communism. For others, a romantic and an idealist, a lukewarm “humanist and culturalist,” an ideologue of *conscientization* without a clear political base and proposal for social transformation. For some, a complex and advanced educational philosophy, theory and praxis. For others, an incomplete thinking, lacking scientific rigor, and in need of further theoretical elaboration.

Inside and outside of Latin America, many admirers credit Freire insights and developments that form part of the historic legacy of democratic and progressive educational thinking worldwide and in which Freire himself found sources of inspiration. There are thus those who believe to be *original* Freirean contributions issues such as the respect for the learner and his/her knowledge, the acknowledgment of the learner’s reality as the starting point for the teaching-learning process<sup>4</sup>, the importance of dialogue as a pedagogical tool, and even the invention of terms such as *praxis*<sup>5</sup> or *conscientization*<sup>6</sup>. Others, on the other extreme, deny him all originality or else have long claimed to have “surpassed” Freire, either on theoretical, political-ideological or pedagogical grounds, particularly in the field of literacy and adult education. Thus, from the early 70s and up to now many have proclaimed they have surpassed Freire’s literacy *method*, a method seen by some simply as a set of techniques (generative word, dialogue between teachers and learners, coding and decoding of pictures, etc.)<sup>7</sup> and by others as a broad philosophical-ideological framework (conscientization, critical thinking, unity of theory and practice, social transformation, liberation project, etc.)<sup>8</sup>. Also, while most people see Freire as the main initiator and inspirator of the Latin American movement of *educación popular* [popular education], many within the movement see it rooted in a critical approach to Freire’s work.

The generalized perception of Freire is that of somebody linked to adult education; somebody who created an adult literacy method (known indistinctively as *Paulo Freire’s method*, *psychosocial method* or *reflection-criticism method*) that teaches adults to read in a relatively short time not only from the primer but also from reality; who proposed dialogue and horizontal relationship between teachers and learners, and encouraged active learning; who defended education as conscientization and conscientization for the liberation of the illiterate and of the poor.

However, Freire rejected many of those perceptions as false readings of his ideas. Probably surprising for many, Freire never claimed to have created a method -- a literacy method or an educational method in general -- much less elaborated a pedagogy, a theory of teaching and learning. He reiterated that his analysis and his criticism of what he termed ‘*banking education*’ did not refer only to adult education but to education as a whole. Adult literacy -- he always repeated -- was only an entry point that allowed him to look critically at the totality of education. (“*Many people think I have developed some of these issues because I am a specialist in adult literacy. No, no, no. It is not. Of course, adult literacy is something which I studied deeply, but I studied it because of a social*

*necessity in my country, as a challenge. Secondly, I studied adult literacy in the frame of reference of education and in the frame of reference of the theory of knowledge, not as something in itself, because it does not exist as such,*” 1979).<sup>9</sup> He distanced himself from those who, often quoting his work, understand as equivalent *popular education* and *adult education, educational change* and *non-formal education*. (“*Popular education cannot be confused with or restricted to adults. What defines popular education is not the learners’ age but the political option,*” 1985). He emphatically denied to have promoted the idea of non-directive education, where teachers and learners are considered equal and where the role of the teacher is eliminated. (“*The educator who says that he or she is equal to his or her learners is either a demagogue, lies or is incompetent. Education is always directive, and this is already said in the ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’,*” 1985).

Freire has been analyzed in the framework of, and compared to, the great pedagogues and thinkers linked to education. Many associated him to the “active school” movement and to some of its most prominent promoters (Dewey, Decroly, Montessori, Claparède, Freinet). Others put Illich’s and Freire’s names together around Illich’s de-schooling. In both cases, Freire responded differentiating himself both from the “active school” (“*The ‘active school’ brought many important contributions at the methodological level. It criticized the relationship between teachers and learners, and also criticized the fragmentation of traditional schooling, but did not go beyond that criticism. I criticize also the capitalist production mode,*” 1985) and from the de-schooling approach, since Freire’s proposal was never to deny or eliminate the school but rather to transform it (“*The impression one gets when one studies Illich is that the school, as an institution, appears as possessing a demoniac essence, what would mean that it is immutable. It is only when we analyze the ideological force that is behind the school as an institution that we can understand what it is but may be otherwise,*” 1985).

Freire was sensitive to both criticism and self-criticism around his work. In numerous opportunities he acknowledged naïveté, subjectivity, ambiguity, and lack of political-ideological clarity in his early writings, and a margin of personal responsibility in what he perceived as “appropriations” or false interpretations of his ideas. In particular, he referred many times to the naïveté of his initial notion of *conscientization*. (“*I was ideologized as an intellectual petite bourgeois,*” he admitted in 1973. “*I started to worry about the use of the term ‘conscientization’. The corruption that word suffered in Latin America and in Europe was such, that I have not used it for the last five years,*” he said in 1974. “*A less naive reading of the world does not yet imply a commitment with its transformation, much less transformation as such, as idealist thinking might pretend,*” he insisted in 1986, when he received UNESCO’s Education for Peace award in Paris).

### **The validity (or not) of Freire**

The validity (or not) of Freire’s ideas is an issue that has been debated for a while. In the case of Latin America, the field is again divided between those who view Freire’s thought as surpassed and tied to a definite context and historical moment, and those who, on the other side, defend the contemporary relevance of his work. A glance at Latin American

educational production and development over the past three decades throws some light on this issue.

With regards to the specific field of adult literacy and adult education, during the 70s and until the mid 80s, most of the programs and campaigns mentioned Freire and said to be somehow inspired in his ideas. Within the *educación popular* movement Freire was an inevitable reference, whether to adopt him, to adapt him, or to reject him. Within the framework of the acknowledged current “crisis” of this movement and the efforts to “re-found” it, some have proposed to leave Freire behind while others have called for a critical re-reading of Freire’s work, with a contemporary mind<sup>10</sup>.

The increasing impulse gained by child literacy in the region, fueled by renovated theories, approaches and methodologies within the school system and the classroom, reactivated the mention and debate around Freire, and the comparison of Freire’s ideas with authors such as Piaget, Vigotski, or Ferreiro. From this encounter between adult literacy and child literacy some assertions have started to emerge regarding the proximity of some of Freire’s ideas and those from constructivism around issues such as the respect for the world and the experience of the learner, literacy acquisition as a creative process that involves the appropriation of knowledge and not only of reading and writing techniques, and the learning of the written language as inseparable from context.<sup>11</sup>

With respect to education in general, a glance at the intellectual production linked to Latin American education over the last three decades shows that the mention of Freire, abundant in the 70s and until the mid 80s, has sensibly diminished and even disappeared. This *degradée* coincides with that of the ideas that oriented Latin America’s education at that time, namely around objectives of *development, democratization* and *social transformation*. In this context, not only Freire has disappeared but many other thinkers of education -- from fields as varied as Philosophy, Sociology, History, Political Science, Anthropology, or Linguistics -- who have been gradually substituted by the thinking of economists, administrators and policy-makers, multinational literature reviews, macrostudies focused on quantitative research and information, and new actors at the educational international scenario such as the World Bank.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, Freire -- his presence, his ideas, his influence on the ideas of others -- never ceased to be in force. Despite those who froze him in the 70s and walled him within the walls of adult literacy<sup>13</sup>, over these last three decades Freire remained alive, learning and advancing; he left -- obliged -- his natal Brazil in 1964 and came back in 1990, after getting to know the world, ready “to re-learn everything”, as he then said. Between 1989 and 1992 he was Secretary of Education in the Municipality of Sao Paulo, the most populous city in Brazil (30 million people). He lost his first wife -- Elza -- and re-married -- “Nita brought me to life again,” he told me once --, produced many books, participated in numerous associations, groups and committees, and received countless international awards and honors, including the Comenius Medal, awarded by UNESCO, in 1994.

Adult literacy and adult education -- in which most of his followers and critics remained trapped, and to which everyone seemed to push him back inexorably -- remained in the

background. His readings, worries and reflections widened and penetrated the most varied fields, always amassed with his previous work, but in continuous dialogue with the new times and realities. The Freire of the 80s and, especially, that of the 90s, is a Freire that deals with issues of education policy and with diverse aspects of school reform -- finance, curriculum, pedagogy, teacher education, administration -- within a search that always aimed at capturing the totality of the education phenomenon, beyond sectoral or fragmented approaches. Teachers became a central theme in his thoughts and work during the last few years: his last books -- in particular *Profesora sí, tía no: Cartas a quien pretende enseñar* [Letters To Those Who Teach] (1993) and *Pedagogía de la autonomía* [Pedagogy of Autonomy] (1997) -- were devoted to school teachers and teacher issues. Freire convinced the editor to publish 30,000 copies of this last book, his last book, and to sell it at 3 *reales* (3 US dollars) so that teachers could massively access it. The edition, in fact, was sold out in a few days.

As he rectified me during our 1985 interview, we are not faced to a schizophrenic Freire, divided in two: the first Freire, and the latter Freire. It is one single Freire in movement, in permanent state of learning and in continuous reflection over his own work. Mystified and demonized when he was just beginning, too easily and too rapidly converted into a *theory* and into a *method*, apologists and critics denied him in the end the right to err and to rectify, to advance and to perfect, to continue developing his thoughts, as must be allowed to any person, as is required by any serious and honest intellectual.

In fact, re-reading Freire is always finding something new. But to find something new, one must have advanced oneself since the last reading.

### **The many *Paulo Freires***

◇ During a conversation at the airport in Bombay, India, a young Pakistani man reveals me that he decided to become a teacher after reading a book by Paulo Freire.

◇ An account of a literacy program conducted in a prison in St. Lucia, in the English-speaking Caribbean, states: "*We discovered that the Paulo Freire method is nurtured by difficulty, because difficulties were an integral part of the process. Rather than insurmountable obstacles, difficulties were problems to be solved in a situation of dialogue and to be converted as such into inputs for the learning process.*"<sup>14</sup>

◇ A book on educational decentralization in Argentina mentions that School Councils, created in 1988, were inspired in some principles set up by popular education and by Paulo Freire, inasmuch as co-management between parents, students and teachers implies "*returning the people spaces of intervention and decision that were taken away from them when formal school systems were established by national states.*"<sup>15</sup>

◇ A man in a train going from Williamsburg to New York City reads the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The controller, on passing, asks him whether the author of this book is really

a communist. The man explains her that this has been said only to discredit him, that all Freire advocates for is justice and people.

◇ A first grade teacher in Ecuador explains that she uses Paulo Freire's method, which -- she says -- consists of "*having the children speak when they want to and write in their own words.*"

◇ At a panel on adult literacy in Africa it is discussed whether "Paulo Freire's method" is or not adequate for Botswana. A panelist argues it is adequate since "*it contributes to conscientization inasmuch as it operates through dialogue*". The other panelist disagrees, because, as he sees it, "*Freire proposes to change the entire society, and people in rural communities have a limited scope in both thought and action.*"

◇ At an international seminar on education, a European woman says that her 8-year-old daughter has learned to doubt about what is written in books and what she is taught in school. Without knowing it, she says, her daughter is a disciple of Paulo Freire.

◇ In a visit to a literacy center in a marginal neighborhood of El Cairo, one of the literacy coordinators asks me whether I can send her a book from Paulo Freire, of whom she has heard.

◇ During a meeting on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a US academic mentions that a colleague of his is developing a program for adolescents at risk in a public school of the US, inspired in the "method of Paulo Freire".

◇ The headmaster of a rural school in Nepal tells me that he once read a book by Paulo Freire (he does not remember the title) and that he learned there that "*illiterates are not ignorant and deserve respect.*"

◇ In South Africa, in 1993, at a national congress on adult education, many people were surprised to know that Paulo Freire was alive and continued to write. The *apartheid* regime, which had forbidden his writings over many years, had thus achieved its real goal: eradicate not only his books but Freire himself.

◇ An in-service teacher training program in Madhya Pradesh, India, says that the principles of participation and teacher empowerment that are at the base of the program have been inspired, among others, by Paulo Freire and his philosophy on the oppressed.

◇ A Japanese couple, both medical doctors, that assist me with the menu at a downtown restaurant in Tokyo tell me they have read and enjoyed two books of Latin American writers: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez.

Across the world, in the most diverse places and cultures, each person found in Freire essentially what he or she needed and wanted. And here is probably part of the

explanation for the multiplicity of interpretations of his message. Nobody can and will agree on what Freire said or did not say. Freire himself could not have assumed -- maybe even imagined -- the innumerable tailor-made Freires people have been inventing all over the world.

From this perspective, it is irrelevant whether some understood Freire's thoughts better than others. Maybe the greatest contribution of Paulo Freire is having been able to communicate and connect with the most amorous and genuine fibers of so many people - - Babel of ages, races, religious beliefs, economic positions, ideologies, educational backgrounds and professions -- and to help them see that there is something called education and something called poverty and oppression, that there is a relationship between the two, and that this can be one to liberate or one to further oppress. Paulo, the great communicator, the great inspirer, helped millions of people discover and bring to the surface the best of themselves: their human, generous, compassionate side, the inner drive to become a volunteer, an inventor, a hero, a revolutionary. In a world where both wealth and poverty grow uncontrollably, where individualism annihilates common sense and the most basic human solidarity, where it is proclaimed not only the end of ideologies but the end of work, Freire continued to speak, to the very last minute, about hope, liberation and utopia, terms that many have archived as antiquated and obsolete.<sup>16</sup>

This is definitely what crosses his life and the grandness of his work: his message of hope, of struggle, of perseverance, of non-resignation. In life and in death Paulo Freire leaves us a legacy that is much greater, much more important and lasting than any educational theory or any literacy method.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>In: Rosa María Torres, **Educación popular: Un encuentro con Paulo Freire [Popular Education: An Encounter With Paulo Freire]**, CECCA/CEDECO, Quito, 1986.

<sup>2</sup>To assist the reader to follow this trajectory we register here chronologically some of Freire's most important publications (some of them have not been published in English as yet, so titles provided are translations of the originally in Portuguese and/or Spanish; publishing dates correspond to original publications): Education as a Practice of Liberty (1967); Education and Conscientization: Rural Extension (1968); Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1969); ¿Extension or Communication? Conscientization in Rural Areas (1969); Cultural Action for Freedom and Other Writings (1975); Pedagogy in Process: Letters to Guinea-Bissau (1977); The importance of Reading (1982); On Education (Dialogues with Sergio Guimarães) (1982); The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation (1985); Pedagogy of the City (1991); Pedagogy of Hope: Reiviving the 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1993); Letters to Those Who Teach (1993); Letters to Cristina (1994); Pedagogy of Autonomy (1997).

<sup>3</sup>Personal conversation with Paulo Freire in Rio de Janeiro, June 1992.

<sup>4</sup> "Champion of a new teaching method, 'Paulo Freire's method', in which the learner's reality is taken into consideration in the context of the learning activity" (Hans Fuchtnner, Frankfurt, in: M. Gadotti et al. (org.), **Paulo Freire: Uma Biobibliografía**, [Paulo Freire: A BioBibliography] Cortez Editora-UNESCO-Instituto Paulo Freire, Sao Paulo, 1996, p. 51). Our translation from Portuguese.

<sup>5</sup>"*Praxis* is a term coined by Brazilian education theorist Paulo Freire. It means 'the ongoing process of action and reflection of people upon their world in order to transform it'" (in: **Praxis**, The Philabundance Newsletter, Philadelphia, Fall 1994). In reality, *praxis* is a term coined by the ancient Greek, and later developed and profusely used within Marxist theory and field.

<sup>6</sup>*Conscientization* was a term used by the ISEB (Instituto Superior de Estudos Brasileiros) [Institute for High Brazilian Studies], created in 1955, and which gathered renown Brazilian social scientists and thinkers concerned with national development and with the building of an autonomous Brazilian thought. Freire was, however, the person who gave world resonance to the concept.

<sup>7</sup>"Our method -- and here we differ substantially from the mechanics followed by P. Freire -- is 65% based on visual and aural dimensions, and only 15% based on the experience of language" (Operación Uspantán, "Materiales Necesarios", Guatemala, s/f, mimeo). "The development of this new adult literacy methodology (ACTIONAID's Participatory Rural Appraisal -- PRA) arises out of a critique of the Freirean approach which has, ironically, become the new traditional approach to literacy" (**Education Action**, No. 2, ACTIONAID, London, July 1994, p.3).

<sup>8</sup> "The literacy method we are going to use is not only a 'conscientization' method, since consciousness alone does not lead anywhere. It is a 'dynamization' method that aims at dynamizing the action and reflection of the people" (Equipo de Educación de la Coordinadora de Refugiados Salvadoreños en Costa Rica, **Cuaderno de Orientaciones para el Alfabetizador**, San José, 1982).

<sup>9</sup>"To Know and to Be: A Dialogue with Paulo Freire", **Youth Affairs**, New Delhi, June 1979.

<sup>10</sup> On the latter posture, see for example: Rosa María Torres, **Educación popular: Un encuentro con Paulo Freire**, CECCA/CEDECO, Quito, 1986, and "From Criticism to Constructiveness: Popular Education, School and Éducation for All", in: Adult Education and Development, No. 47, IZZ-DVV, Bonn, 1996; Pedro Pontual, "A contribuição de Paulo Freire no debate sobre a refundamentação da Educação Popular", Vitoria, 1996 (mimeo); Raúl Aramendi, "An Uninvited Speaker is Asked to Leave, But He Doesn't Go...", in: Adult Education and Development, No. 47, IZZ-DVV, Bonn, 1996.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example: UNESCO-OREALC, **Alternativas de alfabetización en América Latina y el Caribe** [Alternatives in Literacy in Latin America and the Caribbean] (Seminario Regional, Brasília, 1987), Santiago, 1988; Regina Hara, **Alfabetização de adultos. Ainda um desafio [Adult Literacy: An Ongoing Challenge]**, CEDI, Sao Paulo, 1991; Vera Maria M. Ribeiro *et.al.*, **Metodologia da alfabetização: pesquisas em educação de jovens e adultos [Literacy Methodology: Research with Youth and Adult Education]**, CEDI-Papirus, Sao Paulo, 1992; Fernando Becker, "Da ação a operação: O caminho da aprendizagem: Jean Piaget e Paulo Freire, Universidad de Sao Paulo [From Action to Operation: The Road to Learning: Jean Piaget and Paulo Freire], tesis doctoral, 1983 (mimeo).

<sup>12</sup> Analyses of the education reform processes of the 70s in Latin America usually devote a special chapter to Freire and his influence in that context and moment. (See, for example: Germán Rama (coord.), **Mudanças educacionais na América Latina, Situações e condições [Educational change in Latin America: Situations and Conditions]**, UNESCO-CEPAL-PNUD, Edições Universidade Federal do Ceará, Fortaleza, 1983). Literature on the education reforms in the 90s show an entirely different set of bibliographic entries, without hardly any references to the past.

<sup>13</sup> The literature review on adult literacy prepared by the World Bank (see: Helen Abadzi, **What We Know About Acquisition of Adult Literacy: Is There Hope?**, World Bank Discussion Papers, No. 245, Washington, D.C., 1994) includes in the bibliography Freire's classical *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) and makes a single mention of Freire, within the chapter devoted to Motivation: "*Psychological research suggests that among the very poor, learned helplessness may be a motivational constraint. It is this situation that the famous literacy promoter, Paulo Freire, tried to ameliorate by raising the consciousness of the poor regarding their predicaments and by teaching them how the related words were spelled (for example, 'poverty', 'landlord').*" Both facts -- suspending Freire in the 60s and understanding conscientization in these terms, namely a technique to improve the motivation of the poor towards literacy instruction -- only reveal lack of information and understanding of Freire, his work and his contribution to the field of literacy.

<sup>14</sup> Didacus Jules, "Education as Conscientization: A Case Study of a Prison Literacy Project in St. Lucia", Folk Research Center, St. Lucia, 1978.

<sup>15</sup> In: Guillermina Tiaramonti, "Descentralización educativa en la Argentina: Entre la promesa y el desencanto" [Educational decentralization in Argentina: Between Promise and Disappointment], en: Viola Espínola (ed.), **La construcción de lo local en los sistemas educativos descentralizados: Los casos de Argentina, Brasil, Chile y Colombia [Building the Local in Decentralized Education Systems: The Cases of Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Colombia]**, CIDE, Santiago, 1994, p.95.

<sup>16</sup> "I would like to die leaving a message of fight," he told me in a last interview conducted in 1994. (See: *Novedades Educativas*, No. 79, Buenos Aires, 1997).