

**For a Critical Pedagogy:
confluences between Peter McLaren's theories and Freirean thought'**

*Por uma Pedagogia Crítica:
confluências entre as teorizações de Peter McLaren e o pensamento freireano*

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Resumo: Ao longo de décadas as obras de Peter McLaren têm se constituído em referentes fundamentais para a solidificação da teoria crítica. No presente ensaio, McLaren apresenta importantes elementos de sua aproximação intelectual com a complexidade dialética e dialógica da obra de Paulo Freire, selada por uma sólida amizade. As narrativas do autor recuperam memórias de encontros com Freire e a importância da teoria freireana para fomentar políticas e práticas educacionais pautadas nas lutas contra-hegemônicas e no enfrentamento das atuais dinâmicas de poder ancoradas em políticas neoliberais e neoconservadoras.

Palavras-chaves: Pedagogia crítica. Teoria Freireana. Dialogicidade.

[1] The text is the base reference of the Conference "The State and Educational Current Policies - Neoliberal State and Democratic Setbacks", given at the X International Symposium on September 21 and 23, 2021 [electronic resource] / general coordination: Maria Vieira Silva; organized by the Graduate Program in Education at the Federal University of Uberlândia, 2021.

Abstract: Over many decades, Peter McLaren's works have become fundamental references for the solidification of critical theory. In this essay, McLaren discusses important elements of his intellectual approach to the dialectical and dialogical complexity of Paulo Freire's work, sealed by their solid friendship. The author's narrative includes memories of meetings with Freire and the importance of Freire's theory to foster educational principles and practices based on counter-hegemonic struggles and on combatting the current dynamics of power, anchored in neoliberal and neoconservative policies.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy. Freirean theory. Dialogicity.

Resumen: Durante décadas, los trabajos de Peter McLaren han constituido referentes fundamentales para la solidificación de la teoría crítica. En este ensayo, McLaren presenta elementos importantes de su acercamiento intelectual a la complejidad dialéctica y dialógica de la obra de Paulo Freire, sellada por una sólida amistad. Las narrativas del autor recuperan recuerdos de encuentros con Freire y la importancia de la teoría de Freire para impulsar políticas y prácticas educativas basadas en luchas contrahegemónicas y en el enfrentamiento a las actuales dinámicas de poder ancladas en políticas neoliberales y neoconservadoras.

Palabras Clave: Pedagogía crítica. Teoría de Freire. Dialogicidad.

Introduction

Well, you know, I am just going to give you some thoughts about Paulo that I've held so dear in my heart for so long. Paulo's work, of course, has been taken up with great enthusiasm in North America, of course and parts of Europe and well basically all over the world. It's been integrated into arts based learning, music education, theatre, dance, visual arts education, theology and the social sciences.

And it's important to see Paulo's work, I think, as widespread as it's become, I think it's important to see it as fundamentally forged in the base communities and favelas of Brazil and South America, where it has influenced countless social movements from the anti-apartheid efforts in South Africa to the landless workers movement in Brazil to student walk outs in Los Angeles and teacher strikes in the streets of Chicago, all in some way or another have been impacted by the work of Paulo Freire.

I first heard Paulo's name spoken in the Halls of the Department of Adult Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, part of the University of Toronto, where I was a student in 1979, and that was the year I began my Doctoral studies. But it wasn't until six years later that I actually met Paulo Freire in person at a conference in 1985 in Chicago where he was the featured speaker, and there was an auditorium that held about 500 people and he filled the auditorium and people came in and sat in the aisles, people who couldn't find seats.

Everyone was eager to hear his story and to listen to his ideas and to meet him in person.

I remember when he walked from room to room afterwards people would stand and clap and I remember Paulo smiling and saying keep going, keep going, you know and he very much appreciated the camaraderie and friendship from the people at this conference. The conference was the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and it's one of the largest education conferences in the world, sometimes as many as 15,000 people actually attend the AERA.

The propagation of Paulo Freire's pedagogical thoughts around the world

Well, you know, given the specific contexts that gave rise to Paulo's work, his work was not easily generalized across many educational settings without sometimes falling prey to misunderstanding and perhaps running afoul of even the political authorities. His work was always vulnerable to different groups who wanted to interpret him differently, and some wanted to reduce his work to kind of platitudes, to say for instance sitting in a circle in a classroom having bland conversations with students over current events or what the students did over the weekend. So there were teachers who I think, were well intentioned but didn't really spend enough time learning about the depth of Paulo's ideas and sometimes they unwittingly and unintentionally would domesticate his ideas of it's political powers, it's strength and direction.

Paulo, I know, was reluctant to have his ideas “exported” across international borders where his work would lose both the nuance and specificity that it contained, so he always encouraged educators to “reinvent” his work rather than simply “transplant” it in geographical and geopolitical contexts outside of Brazil. He used to always tell me that, he'd say Peter, Peter, don't export my work, I'm Brazilian.

I'm a Brazilian man, I think like a Brazilian, right? I eat like a Brazilian. I love like a Brazilian man.

You know, he would smile and say "don't export me but wherever you take my work", Peter, he would say this to everyone, "I hope that people will reinvent it in their own contexts, using their own histories and their own geography and their own geopolitics, to make my work relevant to wherever they happen to be. And in order for that to happen, my work really needs to be reinvented". And so I appreciated that.

His work would need to find trusted educators who could “translate” and adapt his ideas to various national, regional, and local contexts both inside and outside of his native country of Brazil. One example of this was during Nicaragua's National Literacy Crusade, where elements of his methodological and pedagogical approach were adapted to the specific circumstances in Nicaragua. While there was some criticism during the Sandinista revolution that the Nicaraguan Literacy Campaign was too political, Paulo was quoted as saying "no, the *Revista Educação e Políticas em Debate* – v. 11, n. 2, p. 530-538, mai./ago. 2022

campaign was not a pedagogical program with political implications, he said it was a political project with pedagogical implications” and that was the way Paulo defended some of his advice and participation as a consultant in Nicaragua's Literacy Campaign.

I know Paulo was greatly inspired by the 1961 Cuban Literacy Campaign that was responsible for making about 900,000 people able to read and write in less than a year.

I know that Paulo met the architect of the Cuban Literacy Campaign, Raúl Ferrer, in 1965 at the World Conference against Illiteracy in Tehran. They would meet again in 1979 to discuss the role of literacy in the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua and in October of that year Freire was invited to advise on that campaign.

Now it's interesting, in 1987 Paulo was invited to a psychology conference in Cuba, and he asked me to come and I think he made some arrangements so that I could be invited to give a talk. I can't remember the details how that all got worked out, but I do remember that Paulo very graciously invited me to that wonderful conference. I didn't see Paulo when he was there, but I had read that he was meeting with popular educators and officials from the Ministry of Education in the Casa de las Americas.

He was there and I guess that sort of explains why I didn't see him, he was busy when he was there, meeting with officials from Cuba's Ministry of Education.

It was interesting because that was the first time that I had ever spoken outside of North America (excuse me). I was a young scholar and I was just starting out and very, very eager to learn from the likes of a world renowned educator like Paulo Freire.

But I had never really spoken outside of my native Canada or my adopted country of Estado Unido, United States. So going to Cuba was really my first international talk and when I was there I met teachers from Brazil and teachers from Mexico who actually came up to me and they had, very kindheartedly, prepared little gifts for me, because they knew I was going to be at the conference and my reaction and they would give me some souvenirs, you know, from Brazil something like a little gaucho, or from Mexico they gave me a tiny blanket souvenir.

I said "how do you know my work. I don't understand how you know about my work." And they did actually. I was really surprised that people were aware of the work I was doing in North America. So they said to me "Well, Professor McLaren, if we invited you to Brazil or if we invited you to Mexico, would you accept?" And I said "of course I would accept. I would be honoured to be able to come and visit Brazil and visit Mexico. And then I received invitations and for years and years after that I would spend some time visiting and giving talks in Brazil and in Mexico and, of course, later on, Venezuela

and Colombia and Peru and different countries in Latin America. So that kind of started it all and I have to thank Paulo for initiating that.

Dialectical and dialogic complexity of Paulo Freire's works

Now what about Paulo's pedagogy. I want to talk about the dialectical and dialogical complexity of Paulo's work.

I don't think Paulo's work was so much about changing people's minds about their perspectives on the world, from which follows a change of behavior in the learner, that in some way positively affects the environment, because that approach still operates in the pedagogical realm of "banking education" that Freire so famously criticized—depositing information from the teacher into the mind of the learner as one would deposit currency into a bank.

No, I think for Paulo, learning involves a dialectical reading of the word and the world, of learning to recognize opportunities for changing the world that Freire called, and in English it's an interesting term, Freire referred to as "untested feasibilities. Untested possibilities".

The act of knowing for Freire, and for Freire or Paulo, as I like to affectionately call him, does not move in very discreet methodological steps. So, you know, a lot of teachers will ask me "what is Freire's methodology? Give me the steps to become a Paulo Freire educator, and I would say it's not a discreet step by step process, and the students would look at me and they'd say "really?" and I'd say "yes!"

The act of knowing, for Paulo, does not move from an epistemological shift in consciousness, followed by some kind of ontological shift in behavior by the student.

Since for Paulo this leads to a type of bifurcated Cartesian knowledge. It simply repeats the anti-humanism of Western enlightenment thinking, that is grounded in a kind of Cartesian dualism that separates the mind from body, and ignores the contextual specificity surrounding the act of knowing and its concrete materiality. It was the concreteness, the concrete materiality of our lives that so fascinated Paulo, and Paulo referred to this as, of course, engaging the lived experiences of the learner, experiences that are not just, you know, memories in the mind but are bodied forth, they're what I call enfolded, they are made of flesh, they are made of bone, right. They're just not abstract memories.

Where learning occurs not solely in the "mind" but in the bone and in the sinew of everyday joy and hardship, in everyday spaces of strife and struggle in the home, in the school, in the streets, in the churches, in the base communities, in the transformative praxis of everyday life.

So I would say that achieving a critical consciousness, which was so important for Paulo, it is not necessary to have this, you know, great insight on the world by reading all kinds of, you know, famous intellectuals and philosophers that wasn't a precondition for changing the world.

For Paulo, achieving critical consciousness is not a precondition for social transformation, for instance. But it's an outcome of acting in and on the world. In other words, you know, you become critically conscious through action, through engaging the world. But you need to have a certain intention, right? You can't sort of say I'm going to engage the world without having some kind of ethical direction or ethical intentionality and of course, I think, that was a desire, to end needless suffering among vulnerable, marginalized populations, so you just don't say I'm going to go and engage, you have to have some kind of ethical intention or ethical imperative. And, of course, that is very much captured, I think, when Paulo wrote the book 'A Pedagogy Of Love'. That's really important.

And so, this of course, for me, echoes Che Guevara. His famous saying “At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality.”

So we act in and on the world, according to Paulo Freire, out of a love for the world and then reflect on our actions in an attempt to effect a deeper, more critical change in our society, in our social order. His approach has been compared, of course, to different philosophers. His ideas, of course, were influenced by many different thinkers and educators. But essentially Paulo's pedagogy is never complete since it is always in the process of becoming. It's always grounded in the notion that human beings are unfinished. Praxis is never ending, a way of reinscribing people back into the world as critical agents. It goes on forever.

This notion of unfinishedness becomes clearer as we read through Paulo's vast array of books, and not simply by focusing on his most famous book, of course, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. One of the great books in the social sciences, I mean it's one of the most widely read and respected books in social science.

For instance, Paulo's experience of homelessness during his 16 years of exile from Brazil motivated him to “relearn” from his country upon his return. In a way, he had to relearn Brazil, right, after being away and in exile for so many years.

So critical pedagogy as developed by Paulo is essentially a dynamic and recursive process in which the context of every pedagogical encounter invites new challenges and engagements that demand translation, reinvention, re-creation and thus the process itself is continually in the making.

So that's just a little bit about Paulo. I would say that Paulo provides us more than any other educator in the world. By the way, Paulo kind of serves like he's an, yes he's a dialectician. *Revista Educação e Políticas em Debate* – v. 11, n. 2, p. 530-538, mai./ago. 2022

Yes his epistemology was grounded in Marx, which was great, but he was also, I've heard it said, to be a kind of metaphysician of the soul.

Becoming critically conscious: that is the path to humanization

But Paulo's critical consciousness is a type of knowing that occurs by recognizing the world as an arena of struggle and seeking the means to overcome those privileging hierarchies that constitute it—effectively re-writing that world by being in and being with the world, that is, moving outside the fatalism that pervades the technocratic logic of capitalist modernity which traps so many of the oppressed as casualties of history.

So, for Freire, becoming critically conscious is the path to humanization, to our ontological vocation of becoming more fully human. It is a path that creates the conditions of possibility of becoming agents capable of making history rather than simply remaining bearers of history's inexorable inevitability. This is what forms the basis of a Freirean reading of the word and the world—a reading that is cointentional (the student as the educator meets the educator as the student).

So Freire understands that protagonistic or revolutionary agents are not born, they are dialectically produced by circumstances.

To revolutionize society it is necessary to revolutionize our thinking. Yet at the same time to revolutionize thinking it is necessary to revolutionize our society. All human development (including all thought, including speech) for Freire is social activity and has its roots in collective labor.

It is important to understand that for Paulo, process and the outcome become one—which Paulo refers to as critical consciousness. And just to conclude with that, something that is going on, right now, in Brazil, something you are all aware of, because there's tremendous attacks on Paulo. And those attacks are occurring mostly in Brazil at this particular point in time. And by the president of Brazil, Bolsonaro, who has been described as 'The Trump of the Tropics', because he exhibits an authoritarian fascist approach to creating policy and to engaging in politics throughout Brazil and he's been quoted as saying that he wants to take a flame thrower, you know, one of those weapons that were used in the Second World War, that shot fire. He said he wanted to take a flame thrower and wipe out the legacy of Paulo Freire in Brazil. And, of, course, he has called for, you know, Paulo to no longer be the patron of Brazilian education. I think he's going to lose that battle hopefully. But here in the United States we've had a kind of similar reaction to what is called 'Critical Race Theory'.

Now, Critical Race Theory is very much like Critical Pedagogy, only it focuses more specifically on the idea of race and racism. It's a wonderful development of Critical Theory, Critical Race Theory and it attempts to explain the racism against Africans and the existence of slavery during the founding moments of American democracy. So it talks about the history of slavery in the United States and how horrible it was and that students need to know American history, they need to know about imperialist aggression. Students need to understand part of American history that is quite horrible, in order that if students grow up and become politicians or if they become active citizens that they won't let that kind of behaviour repeat itself.

Because of the intensification of racism in the United States and because of the growth of white supremacy and because of the growing hatred against immigrants, especially immigrants from the South, and because white European Americans in the United States fear being replaced by immigrants from Latin America, they have campaigned, and in some States, the Governors have created bills that make it possible to punish teachers who teach about slavery and who teach about racism, because they say this traumatizes white students.

So they want teachers in high school and elementary school to teach only what they call 'patriotic education'. You know, creating a distorted history of the United States that suggests it's all wonderful. Now of course there are wonderful accomplishments that have happened in U.S. history, there's no question about that, but we have to, in some fundamental way, face some of the grave mistakes and horrors that have occurred throughout U.S. history. And this is something that many conservative republican governors don't want. They just want 'Wow, United States, number one. We're the greatest, we're the most important. We've saved the world, we're the saviours of the world'. That kind of stuff.

Well, of course, we're seeing a similar sort of sentiment in Brazil, I think, with Bolsonaro's attack on Paulo and the legacy of Paulo Freire. And so this is something that we need to resist and this is something that is occurring throughout the world, this great overwhelming support pouring out all over the world during this time of 100 years of Paulo Freire. And it's good to see the legacy of, I think, definitely the greatest educator of the 20th century. Perhaps the greatest educator in world history.

Sincere thanks

So thank you for this wonderful opportunity to talk about Paulo. To talk about his influence and impact on Liberation Theology. His impact, you know, on the social sciences,

his impact on the arts and the importance of Paulo's work. We need Paulo now, at this moment, this historical moment, now, more than at any other time.

Because, you know, especially in the United States, with its powerful impact and influence, especially with things like climate change, especially, you know, looking at the crisis of capitalism worldwide, you know, the world and the ongoing danger of nuclear war.

Noam Chomsky keeps warning us, we have elected Fascist governments now appearing throughout the world, authoritarian populist governments like Bolsonaro's regime in Brazil and Orban's in Hungary (to cite only 2 examples) and it looks like many more could easily be elected in the very near future, and we are going to be facing a world crisis. My father fought the fascists in Europe during WWII, he was with the Royal Canadian Engineers in the Canadian Army. My uncle, Terry Goddard, was in the Royal Navy and helped put the first torpedo in the German battleship Bismark. I was born three years after the war ended, in 1948, but many in my family fought Fascism during World War Two, and I never thought I would see a rise in Fascism in my lifetime, to the extent that I have seen now throughout the world. Today we are witnessing a global attack on democracy. We need democracy. We need authentic democracy not bourgeois democracy. But bourgeois democracy is better than no democracy. Socialism does not replace democracy. Socialism extends democracy. Socialism without democracy is not socialism, it is state capitalism. Marx taught us this. And so did Paulo. So we need Paulo, we need his voice, we need his love and we need his wisdom, more than ever before. Thank you

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Revisão de tradução:

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