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THE REVOLUTIONARY LEGACY OF PAULO FREIRE

BY PETER McLAREN AND VALERIE SCATAMBURLO



The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them . . . The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming . . . Hopelessness is itself, in a temporal and factual sense, the most insupportable thing, downright intolerable to human needs.

— Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*

I could never think of education without love and that is why I think I am an educator, first of all because I feel love . . .

— Paulo Freire

Paulo Reglus Neves Freire uttered these words to a friend just days before his untimely death on May 2, 1997. This tragic loss has robbed us of one of the most radical, politically engaged, public intellectuals of our time, but this tragedy cannot rob us of his legacy nor can it diminish the promise and insight's of his life's work. With every line Freire's writings emanate a spirit, a sense of urgency, and an intensity which is as rare as it is refreshing. He was a passionate pedagogue and activist — someone who took the theory/praxis nexus seriously, someone who was engaged in struggle all his life, someone who was much more than an armchair academic.

As a courageous scholar and cultural worker, Freire was able to develop an anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist literacy praxis that served as the foundation for a more broadly based struggle for liberation. Freire's internationally celebrated work with the poor began in the 1940s and continued unabated until 1964 when a right-wing military coup

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overthrew the democratically elected government of President Joao Goulart. Freire was accused of preaching communism and arrested. He was imprisoned by the military government for seventy days and exiled for his work in the national literacy campaign of which he had served as director. According to Moacir Gadotti (1994), the Brazilian military considered Freire an "international subversive," "a traitor to Christ and the Brazilian people," and accused him of developing a teaching method "similar to that of Stalin, Hitler, Peron, and Mussolini." He was further accused of trying to turn Brazil into a "bolshevik" country.

Freire's sixteen years of exile were tumultuous and productive times: a five-year stay in Chile as a UNESCO consultant with the Research and Training Institute for Agrarian Reform; an appointment in 1969 to Harvard University's Center for Studies in Develop-

ment and Social Change; a move to Geneva, Switzerland in 1970 as consultant to the Office of Education of the World Council of Churches where he developed literacy programs for Tanzania and Guinea-Bissau that focused on the re-Africanization of their countries; the development of literacy programs in some post-revolutionary former Portuguese colonies such as Angola and Mozambique; assisting the governments of Peru and Nicaragua with their literacy campaigns; the establishment of the Institute of Cultural Action in Geneva in 1971; a brief return to Chile after Salvador Allende was assassinated in 1973, provoking General Pinochet to declare Freire a dangerous subversive; a summer stint at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in 1975; and his brief visit to Brazil under a political amnesty in 1979 before his final return to Brazil in 1980 to teach at the Pontificia Universidade Natolica Sao Paulo and the Universidade de Campinas in Sao Paulo. These events were accompanied by numerous works, most notably *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *Cultural Action for Freedom and Pedagogy in Process: Letter to Guinea-Bissau*. In more recent years, Freire worked briefly as Secretary of Education of Sao Paulo, continuing his radical agenda of literacy reform for the people of that city. Freire's literacy programs for disempowered peasants are now employed in countries all over the world. In fact, Freire was preparing for a trip to Cuba to receive an award from Fidel Castro for his pedagogical efforts and accomplishments when he passed away.

By linking the categories of history, politics, economics, and class to the

concepts of culture and power, Freire managed to develop both a language of critique and a language of hope that work conjointly and dialectically and which have proven successful in helping generations of disenfranchised peoples to liberate themselves. Although Freire's work is most often taken up in education circles, his inspirational thought provides a depth and richness that should not be restricted to any one discipline or field, and his democratic, socialist vision and revolutionary humanism provide a source of radical hope in an age marked by postmodern despair and Nietzschean nihilism. While postmodern prophets have, for the last two decades or so, been busily proclaiming the implosion of subjects or treating them as mere functions of discourse, as entities which float aimlessly in a sea of ever-proliferating signifiers, Freire reminds us of the living, breathing, and bleeding subjects of history; the children of the damned; the wretched of the earth; the victims of the culture of silence. Unlike those that would have us believe that the cart of history marches forward on its own without the agency and will of embodied social actors, he reminds us that people do in fact make history, although not always in conditions of their choosing. In Freire's narrative, social agents are firmly rooted in historical struggle and never lose their capacity for effecting social transformation. His dialectical posturing, where the world and action are intimately intertwined, reveals the potency of human enterprise and human knowledge as both products of and forces in shaping social and political reality.

Moreover, his dialectical understanding of the subjective and the objective, the culture of everyday life and the broader matrices of capitalist social organization bear mentioning, especially at a time when many seek to bury objective reality beneath the priority of significations, discourses, and texts. Freire, however, reminds us that the polarization of wealth and the rampant poverty, exploitation, alienation, and misery engendered by the ravages of global capitalism are historical realities

Freire reminds us, in short, that in a world where too many do not eat, where too many are denied justice, and where too many are deprived of their humanity, it is still too early to write the obituaries of revolutionary humanism and the project of democratic socialism.



whose material and objective existence can hardly be denied. This is a strand of Freire's work that speaks volumes in an intellectual climate that is, as Kincheloe (1994:217) aptly points out, "blind to the political but hypersensitive to the cultural." Indeed, in the rush to avoid the "theoretically incorrect" sins of totalization and economism, many have elided even a minimalist concern with political economy. As a result, many have replaced the economic reductionism of orthodox Marxism with a new form of reductionism — that of culturalism. The current romance with the cultural and the concomitant ignorance of political and economic conditions has helped to advance the importance of cultural identification, especially for marginalized constituencies, but at the same time has obfuscated the political and economic roots of their marginalization and undermined an exploration of the ways in which difference is actively produced in relation to the history and social organization of capital — inclusive of imperialist and colonialist legacies. Freire's insights become all the more crucial given this context, for he insists upon a deep connection between the culture of everyday life and the machinations of capital. His approach is aimed at transforming the underlying economic structures that produce relations of exploitation.

Finally, at a time when the narrative of humanism has been relegated to the dustbin of history, Freire's revolutionary

humanism (as opposed to bourgeois liberal humanism) provides a constant reminder that the project of humanity remains unrealized in the most profound sense. Freire's commitment to human emancipation and the extension of human dignity, freedom, and social justice to all people — a commitment to realize these values and promises in concrete, practical terms rather than merely giving them lip service in some abstractly delineated discourse of rights — reminds us that one must remain dedicated to the struggle for democratic socialism precisely because (to paraphrase Eagleton, 1996) these values have not yet been universalized. Freire reminds us, in short, that in a world where too many do not eat, where too many are denied justice, and where too many are deprived of their humanity, it is still too early to write the obituaries of revolutionary humanism and the project of democratic socialism. It is now up to progressives everywhere to actively embrace Freire's radical spirit, see his vision through, and above all to keep hope alive.

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