Freire and the millennials: Revisiting the triangle of transformation

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Introduction

Paulo Freire passed away on May 2, 1997, at the age of 75. If he were alive today, he would be 95 years old, and he would have had the chance to experience a little bit of the 21st century, with all the good and the ugly. He would have witnessed, for instance, the election of his friend Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva (Lula) to the Presidency of Brazil in 2002. Like many of the participants in Freire's study circles, Lula, the seventh son of illiterate farm workers, had to quit school after second grade to work in order to help his family. In 1980, Freire and Lula were part of a group of workers and intellectuals who founded the Workers' Party. In his acceptance speech, Lula stated: "The majority of the population has given me the opportunity to prove that a mechanic shift worker can do for this country what the elite never managed to do". During his two successful terms as President, he was able to prove it. When he left office in 2010, he had significantly reducing inequality, unemployment, poverty and illiteracy, and was regarded as one of the most popular politicians in the world. In his farewell address in the impoverished northeastern state of Pernambuco (where both he and Freire were born) Lula said with tears in his eyes: "If I failed, it would be the workers' class which would be failing". Had he still been alive, Freire probably would have listened to that speech with emotion. There was his friend, a union leader, a worker born and raised in poverty in a society characterized by inequality, prejudice and discriminatory practices, completing two successful terms as President, something unthinkable to many Brazilians when Freire was alive. Witnessing that moment, Freire probably would have thought how much had changed in Brazil since he started his literacy education programs in the mid-20th century to address the "naïve consciousness" of the masses. Through Lula, the oppressed had found a voice, a mirror, a political expression, a representative and, as importantly, a feeling of pride and political efficacy.

If he were still been alive today, Freire would have witnessed many other events in Brazil and around the world, and experienced the same feelings of happiness, hope, sadness and indignation that he felt throughout his life. Unfortunately, he is no longer with us and, following upon his request, it is our responsibility to keep

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reinventing him, re-writing his ideas to address today's challenges. In this brief piece to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Freire's passing I would like to say a few words about his legacy and about the re-creation of some of his ideas.

1. On Freire's contributions in historical context

It can be argued that twenty years after his death, Freire's ideas on education and society are as relevant, insightful and inspirational as they were in the 20th century. Central concepts in his educational thought, like autonomy, democracy, equality, freedom, participation, respect, justice, critical analysis, love, dialogue, creativity, curiosity and social change are certainly still important in contemporary debates on education policies and programs, especially given the hegemony of the reductionist approach that focuses almost exclusively –and even obsessively- in student achievement in standardized tests and job preparation. Of course, there is nothing wrong with testing or with for-the-job training, but the purpose of education is much more than that. It is also, among other things, about finding meaning in our lives, about improving our understanding of social reality and about finding the ways to create together a better world. Freire's ideas are not only current in educational debates, but also in related fields like social work and community development. In the institutional world, the currency of his ideas can be found in many universities around the world, and particularly in the growing network of Paulo Freire Centers. Indeed, today there are Paulo Freire Institutes in a variety of countries, from Brazil to South Africa, England, Austria, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Canada and the USA.

Freire produced many publications throughout his life, but probably his most impactful work is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published for the first time in Portuguese in 1968 and in English in 1970. This book, with its four chapters, constituted a watershed in educational thinking at that time. The instant popularity of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* when it was published can be largely attributed to its content, but also to that particular historical moment. The late 1960s and early 1970s were years of intense political agitation in which many people (mostly youth) were trying to find explanations for the reproduction of inequalities and for non-violent ways to transform society, including educational interventions. In that sense, as my friend Chris Cavanagh from Toronto likes to say, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was not just a book but also a political event.

Today, half a century after it was written, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is still widely read by new generations of students and educators, and continues to be reprinted

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in different languages. According to a recent study by the London School of Economics (Green 2016), it is among the top three most cited books in the social sciences, a category that includes Anthropology, Economics, Education, Geography, Linguistics, Management, Philosophy, Political Science and Psychology. This strongly suggests that it is becoming a classic, in the sense that it stands the test of time. This is not entirely surprising, because the world that we inhabit today is still characterized by gross inequalities and exploitation, and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* offers an alternative educational model that starts with the experience and knowledge of the learners, who then begin to examine critically the oppressor that they have introjected and start to construct their process of subjectification, constructing their own history of emancipation in communion with others. One of the reasons that may explain why *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* resonated so deeply is that it is nor a practical handbook neither an abstract philosophical essay, but a text in which Freire used different theories and approaches to explain his practice and make sense of this educational experiences.

At the same time, although *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has been widely read, it is pertinent to acknowledge that in some parts of the world it is not part of the theoretical repertoire of educators. For instance, the other day I read a comment written by Fazl Illahi (2016, 1), an educator from Srinagar (India), in which, after arguing convincingly that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* can still enable the oppressed to challenge hegemony and engage in a transformative praxis, he noted:

Coming back to our place and context, the place where we live, Kashmir, the pedagogy of Paulo Freire has wide connotation and application. Every time I read his seminal work I fail to fathom reasons for its not having caught the attention of our educators and social workers. It has wide application in women education in our case, and all those who find themselves in the circumstance of the oppressed.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* we can identify a historical tradition that can be traced to Rousseau in the 18th century and Dewey in the late 19th century and early 20th century (Schugurensky 2002). Rousseau (1712-1778) played a key role in the pedagogical revolution that put the learner at the center of the educational process. Dewey (1859-1841) shared this belief, noting that traditional education, based on the transmission of information, should be replaced by a ‘progressive education’ that awakens curiosity among children and provides relevant learning experiences. He also argued that a more democratic educational experience could eventually

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contribute to nurture a democratic community and social life. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire enriched and deepened those proposals by bringing together literature from variety of disciplines and his own experience as an educator.

Like Rousseau and Dewey, Freire managed to articulate coherently a critique to the limitations of banking education with a proposal for a liberating education. As Freire himself used to say, his philosophy included a moment of denunciation of the existing order and a moment of annunciation of a different order. He warned that an overemphasis in denunciation can lead to hopelessness and paralysis, but an overemphasis in annunciation often lacks a systematic analysis of actual power structures, and can lead to a naive voluntarism.

From my perspective, Freire's original contributions to the ideas of these two predecessors can be summarized in four points. First, Freire led to the conceptualization of a pedagogical model that could be developed both inside and outside schools. With his work in adult literacy, Freire managed to move educational progressivism Freire beyond its fixation with schooling, but without falling into Ivan Illich's mistake of ignoring the potential equalizing role of the school. Second, Freire transcended the liberalism of Rousseau and Dewey (and their understanding of education as a relatively neutral space) and positioned himself explicitly on the side of the oppressed. In this regard, Freire deepened the analysis of power structures of their predecessors (which usually was limited to the teacher-student relationship), and extended it to other social dynamics from an ethical stance of rejection of injustice. Third, Freire expanded Dewey's concept of education as a reorganization of learning experiences, proposing that praxis (understood as action and reflection of men and women upon the world in order to transform) should have a clear orientation towards the critical analysis of unjust social structures and the strengthening of community organizations that aim at social transformation. Fourth, Freire's approach puts a particular emphasis on the notion of dialogue, conceived not only as a form of educational relationship and as a research strategy but also as a generative process to raise critical awareness and encourage collective practices to promote democracy and social change.

Although it is possible to identify some disagreements between Rousseau, Dewey and Freire, it is also possible to find a common thread based on curiosity and active participation as a pedagogical tool, respect for the student as a fundamental ethical principle, and adherence to democratic values __and practices in educational and political action. Through this general thread, it is possible to see how each new contribution contains elements of the previous ones but also deepens, expands and

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radicalized them.

Each of these three thinkers, from the context in which they lived, made a significant contribution to educational thought. Of course, those contributions can still be improved, and should be critically examined. In fact, there is an abundance of critical literature on their ideas from different epistemological, ideological, political and educational positions. This is not the time or place to repeat them. In the context of this tribute to Paulo Freire, twenty years after his death, it is important to remember his request that we do not follow his ideas uncritically but that we reinvent them creatively. Indeed, while Freire continued and deepened the contributions of Rousseau and Dewey, first in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and later in many other publications) the history of educational progressivism does not end with Freire. Just as there is no end of history, there is no end of critical educational thinking and transformative practice. Today, a new generation of educators inspired by Freire's ideas are adapting them to our contemporary realities, but always guided by the vision that a better world is possible, and that education can play a key role in the design and development of that collective utopia.

2. On Freire's triangle of transformation

It can be argued that Freire was a paradigm shifter. In the field of literacy training, his methodological innovations (especially the generative words and themes) opened a new era and improved significantly the efficiency and efficacy of the process. This is no small feat, but his main legacy for 21st century education is not just a literacy method or a set of techniques but a pedagogical approach based on six key pillars: the political nature of education, problem-posing education, democratic teacher-student relations, conscientization through dialogue, recognition of the knowledge and experience of learners and communities, and co-creation of new knowledge. It is an approach that is praxis-oriented and therefore demands a continuous relation between theory and practice, between local pedagogical interventions and emancipatory projects, and between educational change and social change (Farahmandpur 2006, Bhattacharya 2008, Bartlett 2008). As Gadotti (2003) observed, the success of the Freirean literacy process depended less on the specific techniques than on the inclination and capacity of the educator to respect the dignity of the learners and to walk together with them. Contrary to some people's expectations, this approach cannot be downgraded to a method or to step-by-step formulas ready to be applied in any context, mainly because the core of Freire's pedagogy is to nurture personal and social transformation and this

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project is contextual and has different expressions in different social realities and historical moments. More than a method, what Freire's pedagogy provides is an ethical compass, a conceptual framework, and a set of analytical tools and theoretical concepts that can assist educators and learners in explaining and transforming the world. It also provides inspiration, a sense of agency and a feeling hope to embark in that process.

At the risk of simplification, I suggest that it is possible to summarize Freire's proposal for social transformation using three key concepts: education, politics and humanization. In other words, what Freire essentially proposed was a political-pedagogical project aimed at humanization. Expressed in a different way, it is a proposal for a humanistic education guided by an emancipatory project that is political in nature. As I previously noted, Freire became famous in many countries for his method to teach adult literacy, but what he developed was not just a method. It was a political pedagogy predicated on critical reflection and collective transformative action in order to develop a more democratic, just, caring and happier society. The triangle of transformation, then, embraces: a) the direction of Freire's transformative project (humanization), b) the main social activity to move in that direction (education) and c) the recognition of the power dynamics and ideological struggles related to the social forces opposing and supporting those changes (politics).

Fig. 1: Freire's triangle of transformation



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Indeed, exploring his entire corpus, it is possible to argue that Freire's main contribution to education can be found in his broad and deep understanding of education, in his discussions about the political nature of education, and in the development of a humanizing project aimed at liberation from all forms of oppression (Schugurensky 2015). I offer the triangle of transformation as a simple visual tool to help us to navigate the pedagogical, the political and the ethical dimensions of social transformation. Education, Freire tells us, cannot be separated from politics, divorced from the material world and the power that constitutes it. It cannot be thought as an independent activity that occurs in an ideological or political vacuum. It is an arena where certain values, ideals, standards and practices are advanced by dominant groups and become hegemonic, in the Gramscian sense. This hegemony is never complete, and for this reason education is also a place where those values and practices are often confronted with alternative ones. This tension between reproduction and transformation, which come about under concrete historical conditions and larger social dynamics of reproduction and change, constitutes the core of the political nature of education. At the same time, political practices, understood as collective struggles to change the world, are important sources of learning. Hence the double relation between education and politics that is important to consider in any transformative project: education is political, and politics are educational.

At this point we can explore the third element of the triangle, which constitutes its teleological dimension. Freire (1985) argued that humanistic education is a utopian project of the oppressed, one in which they denounce dehumanizing processes and announce a new world. The standpoint of Freire's project is radical democratic humanism and liberation theology. From this perspective, the process of humanization requires hope, human agency, dialogue, love and communion. For him, to be human means to understand the world and take action to change that world. It is in taking that action, in the transit from objects to subjects, where we become full human beings. Freire's philosophy of humanization is rooted in his faith in the capacity of human beings to overcome their limits, define the future collectively, and enact their agency. Whereas the process of dehumanization helps to preserve a social order characterized by alienation and domination, a humanistic education aims at challenging those oppressive structures and dynamics through praxis. In this regard, it is important to clarify that humanization is not about the oppressed replacing the oppressors, but about the collective creation of a more egalitarian society, without exploitation, exclusions or power hierarchies. Indeed, for Freire full human development can only occur in a society based on freedom and

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equality for all, not only for some.

Such project of humanization could be perceived as an abstract ideal, but Freire emphasized that it should be understood instead as a historical challenge that requires critical reflection and concrete transformative actions. Since these actions are not neutral, at some point they are going to be confronted with actions oriented at the perpetuation of the system. In his own words,

It seems important here to emphasize what is most obvious –the interrelationship of dehumanization and humanistic education. Again, both require action from men and women to maintain or modify their respective realities. We emphasize this to overcome idealistic illusions and pipe dreams of an eventual humanistic education for humankind without the necessary transformation of an oppressive and unjust world. (Freire 1985:113)

To summarize, in Freire's triangle humanization is understood as a permanent process of denunciation and annunciation. This implies the double task of denouncing and analyzing a dehumanizing reality while dreaming of a different reality and working collectively towards it by constantly attempting things that had not been tried before (what Freire call 'inédito viable' or untested feasibility). This transformative process is both a pedagogical and a political project.

3. The millennials: Freire's triangle and the generational challenge

Howe and Strauss (2008) coined the term "m**illennials" to refer to those born between** 1982 and 2004. This generation, which today ranges from teenagers to those in their early thirties, is the one that is going to wrestle with the main challenges of the 21st century for the next several decades. In this context, a question arises: is this generation, which can be considered the first post-Freirean generation, going to be interested in Freire's ideas, which were developed in the particular context of the 20th century? In other words, are millennials going to find Freire relevant enough to help them explain the relations between education and society, and insightful enough to assist them develop and implement social and educational policies, programs and practices during the rest of this century?

Although the jury is still out on this, my humble prediction is a qualified yes. As long

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as economic, social and educational inequalities continue to increase, and many people accept this as an unavoidable fatality or justify it with the meritocratic myth, Freire can help millennials to understand this situation. As long as there are social movements interested in creating better society, Freire can be a source of inspiration to dream of the features of that society and to design political-pedagogical strategies to move in that direction. In short, Freire's insights about the connections between education, culture and politics and about the role of education in social change, as well as his proposals to promote critical inquiry, dialogue, democracy and freedom through pedagogical interventions, are as relevant today as they were in the 20th century.

Having said that, and this explains my qualified yes, the relevance of Freire will be enhanced if millennials are able to reinvent him, using his ideas as a springboard to address issues that Freire did not have the opportunity to tackle, or tackled only partially.

One of those issues is the environment. Back to the triangle of transformation, Freire's project of humanization was largely anthropocentric. Most of his texts focused on human liberation from oppression, without paying enough attention to environmental issues. This should not be surprising if we consider the historical context and the circumstances in which he lived and worked. At that time, public awareness about climate change paled in comparison to today, and the same can be said about the sense of urgency regarding its potential catastrophic consequences for the planet, including all living species. *An Inconvenient Truth*, the movie produced by Al Gore that helped to disseminate information on this topic, was released in 2006, a decade after Freire's death. However, in the last years of his life, Freire started to pay some attention to themes that he had not addressed in his earlier books, and one of them was the environment. Interestingly, on April 17, 1997, just a few days before he passed away, Freire was talking about eco-pedagogy. In an interview at the Paulo Freire Institute, he talked of his love for the Earth, animals, and plants: "I want to be remembered as somebody who loved men, women, plants, animals, the Earth", he said. Along the same lines, in one of his last books, Freire (1997) spoke of the pleasure of breathing pure air, the joy of swimming in an unpolluted river, of stepping on grass or the sand on the beach, and criticized the capitalist logic that gives no value to those free pleasures, substituting the happiness of satisfying human needs for satisfying the profit motive. Moreover, in his posthumous publication *Pedagogy of Indignation*, Freire did not separate human needs from the needs of the planet. In that work, he called for including the

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lifeworld in radical progressive politics. He also advocated for the defense of fundamental ethical principles that included respect for the life of human beings, the life of other animals, and the life of rivers and forests. Then, he added:

I don't believe in loving among human beings if we do not become capable of loving the world. Ecology has gained tremendous importance at the end of the century. It must be present in any educational practice of a radical, critical, and liberating nature. (Freire 2004, 47)

Unfortunately, Freire did not live enough years to further develop his preliminary intuitions on ecopedagogy and its connection to his project of humanization. It is now up to 21st century educators to continue that work. The task is not minor. It involves creating the conditions for a successful transition from the anthropocene to ecozoic. The former is a period characterized by the centrality of human interests over the needs of other species and the planet, a period in which human activity is the dominant influence on climate. The latter is a system that puts the environment at the center of all human activity, and is characterized by a respect of non-human life and by a balance between our present needs and the needs of future generations. In the ecozoic, human welfare can only exist in the larger context of Earth welfare. The transit from the anthropocene to the ecozoic requires updating *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with a *Pedagogy of the Earth*, a pedagogy that recognizes that awareness is a necessary but not sufficient condition for transformative action. In his first works, Freire tended to assume that a good understanding of a situation of injustice (achieved through conscientization) would lead to an action to change such situation. Today, many people are very well informed about the causes, impact and future consequences of climate change, but are not willing to make significant changes in their lifestyle. This is partly due to the perception of low self-efficacy vis-à-vis the large scale of the problem, partly due to addictive behaviors, and partly due to other reasons that need to be explored and addressed by environmental educators. Other areas that Freire did not have time to elaborate upon but need further development and refinement are peace education, spiritual education, pedagogy for the privileged, education for participatory democracy, global citizenship education, all in a context marked by the omnipresence of interactive technologies. Let's not forget that Freire lived in the era of Gutenberg, and millennials are growing up in the time of Zuckerberg. This new world poses different challenges and opens new possibilities for learning, teaching, human interaction and collective organizing than the world of the printing

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