

Critical Education in Paulo Freire: Educational Action for Social Transformation

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Pedagogia critica in Paulo Freire: azione educativa per la trasformazione sociale

L'articolo parte dal metodo di alfabetizzazione di Paulo Freire, per approfondire in particolare i seguenti temi: concetto antropologico di cultura; cultura del silenzio; parola generatrice. Riflette, quindi, su tali elementi della filosofia educativa di Paulo Freire in collegamento con principi della pedagogia critica per interrogarsi su come dare vita a una proposta di didattica partecipativa, generatrice di dialogo, coscienza critica e trasformazione sociale.

The article starts from Paulo Freire literacy method and reflects particularly on the following issues: anthropological concept of culture; culture of silence; generative word. It reflects, therefore, on these elements of Paulo Freire's educational philosophy in connection with principles expressed by critical pedagogy. Starting from this reflection, we ask ourselves how to give life to a proposal of participatory didactics, generative of dialogue, critical conscience and social transformation.

Keywords: Didactics; Generative word; Dialogue; Critical consciousness; Hegemony.

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1 Anthropological concept of culture

During his literacy experience, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire projected images through slides and the groups, gathered in a circle, discussed them.

One of the most representative images showed a woman and a man in a rural context. The woman was holding a book, and the man, a hoe. Not very far away was a fragile, recently planted tree. The rest consisted in details of the countryside.

The groups began to talk about the relationship between work and culture with respect to the fact that work is the instrument that can transform social reality and, for this reason, it is, itself, culture. If, on one hand, there is nature, and, on the other, there is human intervention on it, which transforms it, alters it, makes a process of it, that is, culture: in short, each one of us is subject to a transformational process, a creative, re-creative process of reality; therefore, subject to culture, and this dimension contributed to the recuperation of self-esteem and trust in one's own potential.

This perspective led Freire and his group to theorize regarding the anthropological concept of culture". Culture is everything that human beings produce in building their existence. Culture expresses varied forms through which relationships between people are established, as are those between groups and in relation to Earth itself. Culture is interaction, transformation. The literacy process started to consider the fact that the learner has to be part of a transformational process and understands that the use of the word is part of this process. The word becomes a means of representation and transformation of the world, a tool for language work...and thought.

The world-world relationship recalls consciousness and its intentionality. Affirming that consciousness is intentional means considering that it is not self-sufficient, it is not pure it is not — in other words — separate from the world. The conscience tends towards a certain direction, towards reality, and it opens up for this reason. Language is part of this process.

The "anthropological concept of culture" theorized by Freire (2006), started with the discussion in the cultural circles. Theoretically it can evoke an important reflection in which Marx noted the difference between architects and bees (1867/2015, p. 127). In Marx's view, the architect obtains a result that existed in his imagination from the start, therefore, already ideally existent; he carries out a transformation of natural material, he designs his product with it and is aware that he has the power to define it, modifying nature with his disciplined activity. The worker bee, although it is resourceful, carries out its actions instinctively and, even though it transforms nature, it does not have the same possibilities to think about the action or the same scope in the relationship between the project and its realization. In other words, human beings are different from other animal species due to their ability to reflect upon the actions that Marx calls *praxis*. A separate moment is made up of the *conscious act* that may not be a mere reproduction of a biological mechanism of lesser or greater inventiveness. Thinking and reflecting, externalizing one's consciousness, the human being distinguishes himself from other species. Work is expressed, therefore, as the conscious ability to transform existing reality. It presupposes concrete knowledge, although imperfect, be it of objectives or of means. Through work, there is a twofold transformation: on one hand, the human being is transformed by his work and; on the other, the objects and forces of nature are transformed in means, objects of work, in raw materials. Work, therefore, transforms human beings as it does nature. It is in the transformation that social beings create culture. The illiterate peasant, for example, transforming the land, creates culture. For years was led to believe that he was not exposed to culture, to then discover that, in working, he creates culture and that literacy can be a possibility to expand this work: reflection regarding action.

In rural realities, where a block of hegemonic powers had created, in the poorest classes, a sense of an assumed false inferiority, literacy represented, for Paulo Freire, a possibility to raise consciousness (*conscientização*) regarding the actual reality of oppression. "Anthropological concept of culture" (Freire, 2006) means that the oppressed can be subject of history, when he is in a process of *conscientização* about his or her power of transformation of social reality. Critical literacy is a consequence of this process.

2 The culture of silence

Marcos Guerra, Freire collaborator in the Sixties, during an interview, clearly explained what is “anthropological concept of culture” related to what Freire calls “culture of silence” (Freire, 2006):

A contribution to the method is as follows. There was a culture in the illiterate population, a population that, to a large extent, was poor or descended from slaves, which generated a “culture of silence”, made up of submission. It was necessary to break away from this “culture of silence”, with this culture of subservience. This rupture was provoked even before beginning the literacy process, during the first two days, or better, in the first two nights (in Angicos classes were held at night). In the cultural circles, we talked about the “anthropological concept of culture”, commenting on slides that projected images of existential situations. We worked so that people could discover that, if on one hand there is a world that is given to them and where natural things exist, given and created by God or whatever other process, another world was slowly built over this one, a man-made creation (some changes, some improvements, sometimes damage to nature). All this is culture, that is, fruit of man’s intervention... This created conditions in which people could begin to elaborate and get over the “culture of silence” (Vittoria, 2016, p. 22)

What did Freire want to say with the expression *culture of silence*? He examined the theme throughout his work, in particular in *Pedagogia do Oprimido* (2006) and in *Conscientização: teoria e prática da libertação* (2005). The culture of silence is the consequence of dependence on a society or a community that is the inheritor of colonization. The mechanisms of dependence and alienation have repercussions on the relationships that are established within the ex-colonial society.

The culture of silence, which is established in an action in which poor classes submit, does not necessarily mean the inability to express or create culture, but political silence, abnegation, acceptance, social and cultural dependence. It is defined by the dualism that is established in the colonized culture through the attraction and repulsion in relation to the colonizer, the manner in which the colonizing elements can be present in the same colonized reality and not, necessarily, outside it (Memmi, 1985).

Culture of silence is a consequence of historical bloc. The concept of historical bloc in Gramsci, cited in *Quaderni dal carcere* (1975: *Quaderno IV*, pag. 437), examines the relationship between structure and superstructure of society, that is, of the economy and of the juridical and ideological systems as a range of forces in motion. The transformation of the material conditions of economic production determines the legal, political and cultural forms. Consequently, consciousness can be explained from the contradictions of material life, in the conflict between the social forces and the relations of production. The historical bloc is established when there is an organic and complex relationship between structure and superstructure, that is, between the economic base and the sociopolitical institutions, ideological currents and dominating cultures. In Italy, for example, we can observe as the historical bloc was created from an alliance between dominant classes, high finance and organized crime, which determined colonization processes within the country, justified and upheld by ideological disguises present in the distortion media populism in the last decades.

In Latin America, the historical bloc was determined by a similar process, in which large landowners, the financial speculators, and the elite colonials were protagonists, creating oppression on various levels.

Historical bloc can provoke oppression and the culture of silence. When Freire uses the expression “culture of silence” (Freire, 2006) he doesn’t mean a poetic and utopian silence, rather, a silence that pronounces words of domination, resignation. The culture of silence cannot be understood if it is not analyzed as part of a greater and more complex system, which is the political question. Said question must be interpreted in its relational dependence, in which the weaker classes assimilate the cultural myths of the dominant classes.

The culture of silence, therefore, is not absolute, but relative to the submission created by the historical processes of colonization. How many forms of colonization exist? And those of manipulation? In mass communication? In pedagogy? To break the armor of the historical bloc, it is necessary, first to unveil its ideological propagation.

For Freire, “anthropological concept of culture” represents an instrument to surmount the “culture of silence”, that which implicates an awareness of the oppression and a possibility to overcome it. It is a

process that, in its simplicity and its nature, takes on profound social implications, because it opened the spaces of cultural creation, engaging the students in community discovery, valorizing permanent dialogue and exchange.

The words emerged through that which Freire called the discovery of the vocabulary universe, that is, a pathway of knowledge of the community language that was realized through dialogical encounters in which questions connected to work, faith, family, and daily life in a broad sense were discussed. The discovery of the vocabulary universe was not elaborated using pre-established templates or texts, but through a shared action involving the interaction of the educators with the community.

The immediate goal lied in the knowledge of the thematic universe and the words used by the community that was involved in the literacy process. The group of educators, in the discovers stage, lived daily life, got to know the families, the locations and the unions.

Freire insisted that the words of the literacy program come from the vocabulary universe of the communities who were to become literate because, in this way, they could express real language, their preoccupations, anxieties, requests, dreams, and were charged with the existential and political experience of the community and not with those brought by the educator.

The minimum unit of discovery of the vocabulary universe is the word in its profound meaning, related to a world, an idea, an area of reality, its intentions, the history it transmits, its underlying projects, its daily experiences that it narrates and generates.

The “discovery of the vocabulary universe” is a practice that begins with the word and transcends. The word inserts itself in the world through the interpretation we have of it. In the words of Paulo Freire, this concept of literacy “defends the eminently pedagogical character of the revolution” (2006, p. 82). In this case, education is a tool to create alternatives and antagonism, defend social equality and challenge the dominant ideology. This is where popular education arises as a conquest of power by social movements in search of social justice and where the historical meaning of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed lies.

3 The generative words

Starting with the words that emerged from the discovery of the vocabulary universe, the group of educators chose words that they considered most functional in the literacy process, following phonetic (possibility and phonetic richness), semantic (greater or lesser connection between word and meaning for he who pronounces it) and pragmatic (greater or lesser possibility awareness of the word) criteria.

Freire called these words “generative” (Freire, 2006) not only because breaking up the syllables and putting them back together generated another word, but also because the word creates debate and reflection.

A word is generative as is its pausing: silence. Silence gives meaning to the word. A word without silence would be constant noise. Silence is the generator of words. Our manner of experiencing words depends on how we experience silence. Silence can signify submission, abnegation, resignation, but also reflection, poetry, creativity, culture.

Return to the culture of silence: when Freire alerted us to the consequences of the culture of silence, he was not referring to silence itself, but to the culture of acceptance, fatalism, resignation. An imposed culture is noisy: consequence of the clamor of domination, oppression, colonization. Sharing the words of the community means valorizing the experiences they describe. It was with this aim that the learning areas were organized in Cultural Circles, a system that Freire had already experimented in the MCP (Popular Culture Movement).¹

The aim of the Cultural Circles was to go beyond the traditional frontal classroom, giving rise to interaction, facilitating the possibility to express differences, creating conditions in which each person could be a unique original source: to listen to the word, discuss it, open the spaces for political vision, to critically

1. The Popular Culture Movement was founded in Recife in May of 1960, on the initiative of the mayor of the city, Miguel Arraes and the intellectual Germano Coelho: it brought together groups of intellectuals and artists that aimed to valorize the concept of popular culture as a social process that is born from popular classes, overcoming the ancient divides between erudite culture and popular culture. Paulo Freire was one of the intellectuals who underwrote the MCP statute and took on the research area and was part of the Board of Directors. It was in the MCP that he began to experiment with his literacy method.

interpret and reinterpret their reality. These conditions are incompatible with any unidirectional concept of education (dominant education). Freire's experience is similar to that of the COS (Center for Social Orientation) in Italy, created by Aldo Capitini and with experienced dialogue groups, with a maieutic spirit, by Danilo Dolci.

The critical and dialogic perspective adopted by Freire fully considers the social question. The most fitting expression to define the nature of the literacy process was probably used by the same educational philosopher in a book entitled *A importância do ato de ler* (Freire, 1982). Referring again to Gramsci and his political thought regarding hegemony, Freire defined his literacy practice as the critical interpretation of reality and counter-hegemonic action:

The critical reading of reality, whether it is done within a literacy process or not, but provided it is associated above all with certain clearly political practices of mobilisation and organisation, can be an instrument that Gramsci would call a 'counter-hegemonic action' (1982, p. 21).

The concept of hegemony draws attention due to the alliance between the dominating classes in order to form an ideological system of control and manipulation, and, principally of practices and expectations, that is, lifestyles conceived to achieve consent. The hegemonic space is civil society, in which private systems of hegemony, responsible for the dissemination of the dominating thought insert themselves (nowadays, the mass media are the main instruments of this thought, though not the only ones).

This manipulative process eroded the people's cultural and social freedom, and illiteracy was, and still is, useful to hegemony. Literacy (and education in general), on the other hand, was realized, in Paulo Freire, as a movement critical of the complex reality of hegemonic relationships, creating instruments to rediscover and affirm the right to have ideas and opinions, to create thought, open spaces to debate, inserting oneself in the contradictions of power.

The pedagogy proposed by Freire tends to uncover the hidden reality in power, valorizing the contradictory forces to the dominant historical bloc. For this reason, it requires social reflection and critical dialogue.

4 Concientização

The generative words create also generative themes, sociological situations raised up during the group reflections on images or words. Dialogue, critical analysis, social questioning develops through the pedagogy of questions, that is, through a process of problematization of the situation, represented by the word of the image in question.

For example, during the literacy process dialogue about the word *tijolo* (brick) created a generative theme (work) that encouraged a reflection about workers' rights, provoking also a strike.

As Marcos Guerra said:

I remember that, in order to discuss some rights, for example, we read a passage of the Brazilian Constitution and of the Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT – Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho) and we talked about salary, strikes, work, things like that. And they discovered that they had the right to demand a salary.

Some of them were stonemasons in construction work for five or six classrooms that were being built in Angicos. They started to demand a salary and a weekly rest period, which they discovered were their right. The contractor said he would fire everyone and hire people from a nearby city. And that's what he did. He fired them because firing workers without formal employment is very easy. You just say: "There's no work for you". The workers in Angicos blocked the road and stopped the truck that was transporting the other workers. They spoke with them and explained why they were striking, asking for a raise. At a certain point, the Minister of Education received a phone call from the contractor, who said "Look what you did. Now the construction will be delayed". Calazans responded: "If they are demanding fair rights, you cannot deny them. So, what are we going to do?" The constructor was forced to recognize the rights that the workers were demanding. (Vittoria, 2016, p. 15)

A question puts the current reality and our conventions/beliefs in a difficult position: it is a way to get to the bottom of knowledge and reveal its relativity. A seed that brings fruitful dialogue.

Freire does not improvise his educational method, he built it upon readings of political philosophy and philosophy of language. Influences of phenomenology, existentialism, personalism, the initial readings of Marx characterize his political and pedagogical orientation of the literacy process. The dialectics between theory and practice, the relation between thought and language, the community awareness that does not compromise the autonomy of the individual were present in problematizing pedagogy, whose significance of the question went well beyond simple curiosity, becoming an instrument of discovery, reflection, approximation, reflected in consciousness. Problematizing guides the transition, which Freire theorized in his texts, from a naive consciousness, or a consciousness that tends to adapt itself to reality, without examining the *raison d'être* of reality, impermeable to discovery and exposed to massification, to a critical consciousness that observes reality not in its simple appearance, but as a phenomenon of a deeper vital nucleus. If a naive consciousness suffers from superficiality, a critical consciousness acts in depth. Working within the emergency of existing problems, related to daily life, conceiving these questions and proposing different solutions or interpretations, one reflects on the concrete issues and a critical disposition is developed. Ana Maria (Nita) Araújo Freire, pedagogue and Paulo's second wife, in a conversation I had with her, clarified the importance of the question in the process of raising consciousness (*conscientização*):

The conscious-raising methodology created by Paulo entails the discussion of generative themes through question/answer. If you ask someone "why is your life the way it is?" And he responds, "because it's God's will", ask again "why is it God's will. Can it really be that God wanted this?" The educator creates questions from the other person's response and, in this manner, one enters into the process of consciousness raising. You, the educator, do not give answers. You only ask questions about the student's answers. Paulo's pedagogy is not that of giving answers but is the pedagogy of questions. We have to ask the fundamental questions, that in their epistemology are: "how?", "why?", "why is it that way?", "in favor of whom?", "in favor of what?", "against whom?", "against what?", in order to reach the essence of the phenomenon. It is this dynamic that, going to the root of the problem, raises consciousness.

All human beings are able to do this, to practice questions and answers. You do not have to be an intellectual or a university professor to do this. If you create a group of people from the populace, they are able to do this. Anyone is able to, knowing himself as and being, in truth, blinded as an individual, progressively revealing the reality. (Freire & Vittoria, 2007).

5 Conclusions: critical education to cross over neoliberal ideology

The economic system of dependency in Latin America was the background against which Paulo Freire wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. A reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that did not take this context into account would risk being very partial and abstract. Large landholdings, inequality, poverty, destitution and illiteracy were conditions determined by this system of exploitation. Its education was primarily interested in training a privileged elite and excluding the majority of the population, who should be trained as a work force and have only a weak, basic education.

The dualism between intellect and work, elite and proletariat, was a fundamental basis for its proposal, which inherits a post-colonial model of education.

The dominant system of education can be and continues to be the strength of economic system. In the case of Brazil, for example, the dualist school (private/public) really has been fundamental in asserting privileges for the elite, the control of power and the exclusion of poor peoples.

If we take the traditional educational system in Brazil, we will find an educational procedure designed to maintain large landholdings and an extreme concentration of power. The current capitalist system seeks to establish an education that reproduces the dominant neoliberal ideology and is useful for achieving a consensus and meeting the needs of the Financial Market: to produce and consume. Conditions that create isolation, alienation, oppression.

The deep concern of Freire's pedagogy is to analyze the political roots of ideologic dominant system and the potential of pedagogy to emancipate the exploited members, the objectified subject – the person

oppressed. Oppression is set in a complex weave of hegemonic relations and is not something abstract or idealistic.

Oppression is an impossibility to acknowledge and to express that condition. It arises from political circumstances and goes beyond them, involving scenarios of aesthetic and linguistic experiences and ethical relations.

There is a direct relationship between dominant model of education and the “culture of silence”. That means we have the word inside us but do not have the right to utter it, because we follow the prescriptions of those who project their voices on us. As a relational phenomenon, dependence gives rise to different modes of being, thinking and expressing oneself, and is reflected in the relations that take shape within the consciousness.

The critical pedagogy in Freire does not aim towards, nor does it limit itself to, solely intellectual development. Reflection tends continually towards action, encouraging it, improving it, and unsettling it. It expands towards practice. It implicates knowledge that is not simply contemplative, but practical and theoretical procedure that possesses philosophical and political orientations, and changes, moving and reinventing itself in terms of the context in which it acts. It is also a valorization of popular culture in its origins and history. The political meaning of education in Paulo Freire has the intention to reveal the falsification of dominant ideology in contradiction with a historical process of emancipation.

The strategy of starting from particular experiences of dominated classes (described by generative word and generative themes), objectifying them through epistemological analyses of thematic areas, can create reflection on the action (praxis), fueled by a critical detachment that opens the possibilities of a more mature and deep awareness with respect to reality, in a continuous relationship between theory and practice.

This means working from pre-existing knowledge, on that which Freire defined as the “knowledge of experience”, recognizing it, respecting it, valorizing it, transcending it.

The culture of the word is a culture of resistance.

Like image and sound, the word is a political world, a codification of reality. We learn to be subjects of history and culture by being subjects of words, images and sounds, builders and inventors of expressive languages.

Critical education in Freire is a practice that starts with the word and transcends the word.

The meaning is a methodological option that generates critical reflection and practical action, but also focuses the teaching process on central issues that can re-generate reflection and dialogue. In this way, critical education becomes a participatory, relational, social disposition, open to exchange, to dialogue, to the critical reflection and to the action for social transformation.

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