

# Paulo Freire in Context: Past and Present

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**Abstract:** In this text, we develop reflections on some aspects of the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1921-2021) in its original context, as well as relating it to the broader context of current educational scenarios. In our reading, we call attention to the fact that, while considering broader social issues, Paulo Freire has always paid close attention to local matters in the development of his educational work. This positioning allowed him to better understand the different realities of his students and, consequently, provide him with the possibility of developing different ways of building the teaching and learning process according to each with which context he worked. Our paper points to the perspective that, in a world affected by the consequences and results of the COVID-19 pandemic, Paulo Freire's work can aid everyone involved in the educational process to reflect more deeply on their local realities, at the same time that it allows for taking into account broader perspectives on the pedagogical practice. Although his work has not had to deal directly with situations such as teaching via the internet, we can relate his educational perspectives and experiences to this teaching reality so that we can act critically in our educational practices in the multiples educational contexts that we work and reflect upon as teachers.

**Keywords:** Paulo Freire, Education, Teaching, COVID-19

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## 1. Introduction

In his book *Education as Practice of Liberty* (*Educação como prática da liberdade*) [1], written during his exile in Chile between 1964 and 1965, Paulo Freire writes a four-page-clarification note that begins as follows: "There is no education outside human societies and there is no human being in an empty space". In our perception, this excerpt shows Paulo Freire's awareness that, although the experience of his educational work can be taken into every part of the world, at the same time, anyone dealing with education has to take into consideration the fact that every educational experience is particular and unique in its problems and solutions, because different human groups have specific needs and expectations regarding to what education is, what must its aims be and for whom and how it must be implemented [9]. To what concerns Paulo Freire's own experience, it is clear that the Brazilian history and its social, geographical and political environment contributed to his choices and to the development of his methodology, as well as to the maturation of his thought as a thinker of education. Because of this, we

understand that it is very important to bring some historical, sociological, geographical, and political background in order to better access Paulo Freire's work.

## 2. Paulo Freire and the Society He Lived

The Brazilian society of the century in which Paulo Freire lived and produced, the twentieth century, was basically formed by few riches and a great mass of poor people who strived to live around the centres where a feeble Brazilian capitalism was emerging after more than three hundred years of economy based on enslavement. So, it was a society deeply rooted in its own formation. Since its beginning, but mainly from the 17th to the 19th centuries, Brazilian economy was based on the production of farm products as coffee, tobacco, and sugar of which the major part was meant for exportation. With time, the economy also covered goods as cotton, precious metals, cattle breeding, etc. Nonetheless the production of these merchandises, a major part of any lucrative Brazilian activity for this period was based on the fact that it was produced by enslaved peoples, it meant that the rich landowners did not have to pay for their workforce. So, it

is not exaggerated to say that the axis of the Brazilian economy of the 17th to the 19th centuries was the industry of enslavement. But before being workforce, an enslaved black person was a merchandise him/herself, s/he could be sold, rented, pawned, auctioned, exchanged or given away.

Enslaved black peoples started to be brought to Brazil in the middle of the 16th century after the Portuguese failure of attempting to efficiently enslave the native Brazilian indigenous population. Although enslavement of these peoples continued throughout that time, it diminished with the enslavement of black peoples. Without knowledge of the geography and social organisation, because they came from different places in Africa and spoke different languages, the black peoples were much easier to be enslaved. The enslavement of black peoples was intensified in the centuries to come with the development of different economical activities as farm raising and mining.

When the abolition of enslavement was promulgated by the last Brazilian imperial family on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1888, in a process that would cost them their reign, the huge majority of black peoples was abandoned without any program of the State to provide for the social inclusion they deserved. The slavery produced deeply wounds in Brazilian society, much of them impossible to be described or explained in a text as this one. For our purpose, it is important to say that when Paulo Freire started developing his conception of education in the 1940's, he was working in a society whose social configuration was characterised by a great amount of inequality, result of centuries of enslavement, where few people had access to basic education, as reading and writing.

The history of the slavery in Brazil or the social configuration at the time of Paulo Freire is not the only aspect that must be considered when we study his work. Brazil is a huge country with many geographical and climate particularities. The region where Paulo Freire was born and started developing his main educational work is, up to the present day, known as "*sertão*", a very particular kind of deserted area, with limited agricultural productivity and limited possibility of livestock raising, also due to great periods of draught. This happened but mainly because of the exploitation of poverty by the landowners of region, who monopolized all aspects of the political and social life of those societies. Many of these powerful men are called "*coronéis*", a word that we could translate by "*coronels*" into English, but that, in the Northeast of Brazil, nominates a person, generally a great landowner, or who comes from important families in the centre of power, without, necessarily, being a member of a hierarchical military group.

### 3. The Challenge of Educating in a Poor and Draught Region

The region of "*sertão*" was historically characterised by the dominance of these "*coronéis*", who come from rich families who used to produce, mainly, sugar or to develop cattle breeding. The owners of lands, industries, commerce, and

other resources in this specific region also dominate the political scenario and use the particularities of the local geography and climate to subjugate the poor population. One of the most common forms of subjugation is through the lack of education. By preventing people from being educated, the local elite inoculates in the minds of the poorest notions as the one that conveys the idea that being poor is a matter of fate and destiny or the one that blames poverty to the rashness of climate conditions and not to those who control the natural resources or administrate the financial support provided by the federal government.

Throughout his work as a teacher, Paulo Freire perceived the forms in which great part of the people of poor cities were subjugated and we can say, following the perception he constructed, that their suffering, their poorness, their limited mindset made them oppressed people. In this way, discussing about the influence of oppression in the lives of the people who strived to survive in that difficult environment was Paulo Freire's [3] main research in the years to come. Paulo Freire started to work as a teacher while he was still a student in high school. He received a scholarship to study in a private institution, and in return, started working as an assistant teacher. But it was his direct contact with poor and illiterate people that gave him the opportunity to think about the educational process in another level than the simple transmission of knowledge. He considered that the education was an important tool for the process of freedom.

In the core of the educational experience of Paulo Freire was the pursue of a "New Society", as he wrote in his book *The importance of the act of reading (A importância do ato de ler)* [2], this society would be without any kind of exploitation. It would be a place in which neither men nor women, nor any class would exploit the work force of any other human being. It is a society in which there is no privilege to those who work with a pen in relation to those who work in factories or in farms. Everybody would be considered a worker in the service of the common wellbeing.

### 4. The Paulo Freire's Method

Concerned with the illiteracy of a huge number of adults in Brazil, Paulo Freire developed a method (today known as "método Paulo Freire" or, in English "Paulo Freire's method") to teach adults how to read and write. His method started from the simple premise that people would be more interested and able to learn reading and writing with words of their own world. By working with this method, Paulo Freire and his group, before beginning the classes, made a research to know the community, the types of work people were involved in and the words the people used in their daily lives. From this research, they would develop materials to start their work in a dialogical process [11]. He used his methodology in his work as a teacher in his hometown, Recife, but it was in 1962 that he had the opportunity to put his method into practice in a larger scale. It was in the city of Angicos, in an experience that entered History and Education books as "the 40 hours of Angicos" because he and his group of teachers by applying his method, were able to

teach 300 hundred people (all of them from the working class) to read and write in forty hours of lessons [15]. Angicos is an inner city in the “*sertão*”, located at the State of Rio Grande do Norte, in the northeast region of Brazil. The reality then was rash, and the indices of illiterate individuals were very high. Unable to perceive that a development in education could bring also economic development, the local elite at the time called the process as “the Communist plague”. In a similar way, in some places of Brazil (even today) many projects of social transformation were labelled by the local elites as communist or any equivalent label that can represent the expression of threat to their established status quo. But the process brought about good results: all enrolled in the course were able to read and write at the end of the forty hour course. This positive outcome called the attention of the Brazilian central authorities at the time. Even the governor of the State of Rio Grande do Norte, Aloizio Alves, and the president of Brazil, João Goulart (also known as “Jango”), were present at the end of the course [6]. Due to his work at Angicos, in the following year (1963), Paulo Freire was invited by the Brazilian Ministry of Education to create the National Program of Education.

In this initial moment, the work of Paulo Freire was favoured by the emergency of many social and political movements in Brazilian society at the beginning of 1960's which searched for basic reformation in Brazilian structures as education, housing, health, not to mention the pursuit of changes in the structure of a society still based in the patriarchal perspective of constituting everyday life. In different ways, the work of Paulo Freire dealt not only with literacy per se, but also with some anxieties of his time. Education for Freire is a tool for enhancing the perception of the social environment in which one lives. For him [13], education and politics are inextricably linked to education and preparation of citizens to think and act in a democratic society. Many political parties and segments of the Catholic Church followed these ideals at that moment in time. As an example, the City Hall of Recife implemented a Movement of Popular Culture, opening spaces in which people could go to learn reading, writing and other subject matters, as well as, to stay together and express their cultural inheritance as in music, dance, and other arts. The mayor of João Pessoa, an important city of the State of Paraíba, created a campaign called “*De pé no chão também se aprende a ler*” (“With bare feet we can also learn to read”) as many people were so poor that they could not afford buying shoes to go to school, the Catholic Church through the CNBB (National Confederation of Bishops from Brazil) created a movement of popular Education to teach poor people how to read and write [15]. All of these movements, although with their own particularities and methodologies, were very much influenced by the work of Paulo Freire.

## 5. Paulo Freire Exiled from Brazil

Unfortunately, in 1964, the Brazilian government suffered a military coup, in which the president was deposed, and many people were persecuted, put into prison or exiled in order not

to die, as it happened with many Brazilian citizens. In this new scenario, the work of Paulo Freire was perceived as subversive. He was imprisoned and, after that, exiled from Brazil. In the years to come, Paulo Freire worked successfully applying his method in countries as Chile, Bolivia, Switzerland, Guine-Bissau, and others. But the exile was very difficult for him, once he was very much connected to his country and particularly to his hometown, Recife, the capital city of the State of Pernambuco. Accordingly to Ana Freire, in her book about her husband [4], Paulo Freire missed his city as a space of affection. She writes that in exile, he had the constant desire of “go back home”, which involved not only the return to the geographical space of his city, but also the willingness to capture the time lost while being far from the people, the relationships, the spaces he learned to love in his youth.

With Amnesty enacted in Brazil in 1979, Paulo Freire returned to his country in 1980 and settled in the city of São Paulo. There, he joined the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Labour Party), being responsible for the party's literacy program from 1980 to 1986. Between 1989 and 1991, he worked as secretary of education in the municipality of São Paulo. During this time, he developed a new model of management for the education of young people and adults in the municipality. From 1991, he dedicated himself to the Paulo Freire Institute, an organisation created to organize the work and publicize his own ideas about education until his death on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1997.

## 6. What the Work of Paulo Freire Can Offer us in Times of COVID-19 Pandemic

Since the end of 2019, but especially during the year 2020 and until now, the world has been shaken by the pandemic of COVID-19. It is a global crisis in which previously hidden social wounds are being exposed. With the crisis, economic and educational inequalities are visible. Especially, in countries with profound social inequality, only students with access to new technologies and financial resources can continue their studies, having access to teaching platforms on the internet through computers. This division alone is already a factor of disparity that needs to be understood and battled by democratic societies. But even those who can continue to study using computers and other devices need to face major challenges. Students and teachers have to deal with the loss of reference of the presence of their bodies in a common physical space. Their presence now is transmitted (or hidden) by the computer screen. Teachers and students have to deal with narratives made of images [10]. Psychomotor activity takes a huge hit with this new type of mediation. This and other losses of reference that normally involve different pedagogical practices have generated the need to develop other forms of listening among teachers and students which can lead to a wide understanding of the potential and limits of education mediated by new technologies. In this scenario, it seems to us that the work of Paulo Freire, with its libertarian potential and with its educational project based on dialogue, can offer

different reflections on the implications of contemporary forms of education that cover not only what refers to the development of a methodology that considers the idiosyncrasies of each educational context, but one that helps us to reflect on the development of human potential in a context of crisis and what will happen after this crisis, because, certainly, the world will not be the same after the pandemic.

In today's society, the COVID-19 pandemic (but also the insurgence of the new forms of extremisms) has put a great challenge to education. Han [5], for instance, poses the question of whether or not transparency in contemporary society has made education and access to information a more difficult task. In a certain way, Paulo Freire proposed an *avant la lettre* answer to this question when he [3] (p. 46) offers the following perspective:

I have never been a naïve fan of technology: I do not worship it, on the one hand, nor demonize it, on the other. That's why I was always at ease to deal with it. I have no doubt about the enormous potential for stimuli and challenges to curiosity that technology puts at the service of children and adolescents from the so-called privileged social classes. It was not for any other reason that, as the secretary of education of the city of São Paulo, I sent computers to the municipal schools' network. No one better than my grandchildren and granddaughters to tell me about their curiosity instigated by the computers with which they live.

So, the idea is neither to worship nor demonize technology, but to find ways to use it in favour of our teaching processes. The exact answer of how to do it must be worked by everyone involved in a specific educational endeavour [7]. Because of this it is important to consider a critical formation of educators [12], who cannot just repeat teaching practices learnt in their teacher formation, but, as we also pointed in a previous research [8], they need to be researchers of their own practices in order to deal with different demands they have to face in their ever-changing educational practices [8].

## 7. Final Thoughts

Paulo Freire was born on 19<sup>th</sup> September 1921, so this year as we write this paper, we commemorate the centennial of his birth. After so long, it seems to us that his legacy is still important to help us with the endeavours of our times. When dealing with Paulo Freire's writings, we perceive that his ideas go beyond those which could be considered simplistically as a research about education, methodology or pedagogy in his own time. When we read his texts from a broader perspective, we become aware that he was in search of a New Ethics [14]. Not by chance, he is considered a Thinker whose reflection about education, its processes and its scope are, overall, a research about the human condition. But, as Vittoria [16] points out, Paulo Freire was not a man of abstract ideas. His thought was deeply linked to his experience in classroom and with the education of different social extracts and to the reality of his time, his city, his country, his world. He also dealt with language paying attention it's popular configuration in a critic of a classic way of perceiving language [6]. Maybe, because of

this, his work, in overcoming his space and time can, even today, provide new insights about education in different contexts of the world.

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