

# Critical Pedagogy as an Act of Faith, Love, and Courage

## Understanding education: the hopeful and loving ethics of Paulo Freire's work

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Critical pedagogy as part of the General Education—as the science of teaching and learning—emerged in the 1980s from a dialogue on the fundamental differences between the traditional pedagogy and the progressive education. This ethical, political and anthropological understanding of education developed, in part, from the innovative ideas and practices of Paulo Freire since the 1960s. Donaldo Macedo, Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, and naturally, Paulo Freire joined the small and pioneering discussion group that carried this new approach into the context of the United States.

### **Moment I: HIS LIFE**

#### **A brief account of Paulo's character marked by his ethics, hope, love and (advocacy for) the human rights struggle for all.**

My subjectivity as a living partner of Paulo has never allowed me to escape from the rigorous objectivity of the facts. Speaking of Paulo's greatness and personal virtues, I promise not to make mistakes or slippages trying to distort the truth. Unquestionably, his life experiences and his attributes are intrinsically present in every key theoretical concept of his philosophy of education, which encompasses the anthropological, ethical, and political dimensions of education. These virtues have the connotation of his soul, his compassion, and his faith in men and women in their worldliness actions. Moreover, these virtues also have the inference of the transcendental world that the Catholic Church has taught him as a child.

Paulo was a man of sincere faith but decided not to be a practicing Catholic when he moved from the United States to Geneva, because, he said, he perceived the distance between the discourse and the practice of the Church's hierarchy. However, it was his unshakeable faith in Christ that led him to conceive the Witness Church, which has been fighting since the 1960s for the disadvantaged, the despised, and the oppressed.

Therefore, I must begin by speaking of the **congruence[1]** between Paulo's feelings, his thinking, his actions, and his writing; his **prudence** in his **boldness**; his ability to

be **tolerant** and **to respect the different** and even the antagonistic; his perennial **good humor** even in the face of difficulties and adversities. I must tell about his enormous **patience** in his immense **impatience**, his almost boundless generosity in giving himself to his peers, his rigor against the irresponsible and those who practice misdeeds, and his **humility** in not whining or complaining or indulging in self-pity.

Paulo's natural and childlike curiosity became epistemological because he never gave respite to discouragements. He was never satisfied to conform to those intellectuals who said: "it must be so... this and only this truth forever." His **common sense** always challenged the nonsense of those who continually repeated, "It must be so because it has always been that way."

I acknowledge his moral strength that enabled him to understand the **frailty** of men and women almost without condemning them. Paulo deliberately chose **to love and to be in solidarity** with people of all nations, colors, religions, ages and sexual orientations. He displayed intense **passion** in all events and circumstances of his everyday life, which was demonstrated, above all, by his unrestricted and faithful **communion** toward those who suffer because they were dehumanized. He firmly believed that from and with the oppressed, it is possible to build a better world through a process of *conscientization* that helps to overcome the conditions and relations of oppression. Thus, his ethics of life—born out of compassion for those interdicted, excluded and oppressed—moved him to fight for human rights as the primary basis of the authentic condition of human existence.

Paulo Freire--lacking in prejudice, anger, and desire for revenge or vindictiveness--devoted his life to put into practice the *conscientization* process that makes viable men and women transform themselves from being oppressed objects of elitist and authoritarian societies, into those who are indeed the subjects of history. Thus, enabling them to name their world. That is, they can say their word because they have studied, reflected, and by doing this, they have the possibility to insert themselves in society as critical subjects. As they participate in this process, they become more conscious, and by being authentically engaged in the ethical-political struggle, they can contribute to transforming the society that once oppressed them.

Paulo held a degree in Law but taught the Portuguese language before becoming the great educator of our country. Today Paulo is the **Patron of Brazilian Education**. Receiving this title, the most prestigious amongst hundreds of others that Paulo won in life, or post-mortem, the country of Brazil recognizes him as the greatest educator in our history. Moreover, acknowledging him as Patron of Education brings benefits to Brazilian teachers and their practice. We all win. The Brazilian Nation wins! Finally, radicalizing my thinking, I argue and

assert that the virtues of Paulo are not only his qualities but also the critical foundations of his humanist education and his ethics grounded in hope and love.

## **Moment II: Courage: Reading the world from a particular context.**

Paulo understood that to become a good educator, one must cultivate and perfect one's virtues. We are not born with those virtues, but we are born with tendencies towards good or evil. Our genetic heritage, our family environment, our school environment, and other opportunities that society gives or denies us, are what enable us to be what we are, and what we will become. We are not born *determined* to be this or that, but we become *conditioned* for this or that. It is up to us, within **our freedom**, and **our autonomy as subjects**, to make our choices to educate ourselves on the virtues and to perfect them, or not, always conditioned by the educational heritage we have received and the reality that surrounds us.

Courage in Paulo was born out of his love, his compassion, solidarity and complicity with the underprivileged, the despised, and the oppressed. In that sense, he was educated and sought to educate himself according to the principles of Catholicism and the *Greek arête*. This was the ontological **path of courage** he chose to fight for justice and peace inspired by ethical principles and virtues.

Paulo's coherent legacy was that of a humanist educator. He understood that **the act of knowing** does not originate only in the brain, where it says the intelligence of the world is processed – the “house” or the place of the logic of discernment. He used to say, “I do not know only by using my head, or only by using my intelligence. My knowledge comes from the confluence of things emanating from my whole body, without compartmentalization. It originates from the emotions, feelings, and other sentiments that go through my body, and because of my body, and because of my mind. My body tells me about what I must reflect. It is my body that becomes restless, that mobilizes me for the *search of knowledge*. When I repeatedly look at the same thing, when my skin gets the chills, when my breast beats frenetically, my heart almost tells me, ‘pay attention to this or that.’”

It is my body that tells me there is something that needs to be unveiled, to be made known, and to be shared socially. Indeed, there are signs in my body that warn me. “Paulo, focus your reflection on what makes you restless and uneasy.” Thus, it is the **conscious body** that when

instigated, provoked and unsettled, leads to reflections that enable the establishment of an immaterial field of receptivity, where new knowledge can be “housed.” This new knowledge is still intuitive. It becomes possible then, in the light of reflexive reason, to sort out and systematize this *new knowledge*. This is how one produces knowledge—philosophical, scientific, mythical or mystical—new knowledge. The new insights always depart from common sense, **good sense**, as he used to boldly say challenging the mechanistic academics—religious or not—who never understood him. According to Paulo, we do not discern only with the head, but with the whole body and everything it has, everything it processes, and everything it produces—emotions, feelings, experiences, intuitions, fears, terrors, joys, questions, myths, doubts, certainties, and perplexities.

Nobody acquires new knowledge because one has read, repeated and memorized what was read. To know, we have in ourselves our original and own condition of *human existence*, the cognoscibility, i.e. the possibility created by us across thousands of years. Starting from the gesture, the grunt, the cry, we stand up, walk, and the brain says, “I do because I want to, intentionally.” The very act of doing-thinking-doing has made available to us the **conscience of the world**, and the spoken languages, and then the written languages, through which we *communicate today*. In other words--with this millennia-long process--we have created in ourselves the *knowability*, we have created the ability to understand the reality, and thus we can create the romance, the poetry, the arts, the architecture, the religions, the contracts and agreements, the sciences, the philosophies, the Moral, and the ethics. In this process, we recognize our incompleteness and, therefore, we perceive and understand hope as a human ontological condition. By acting intentionally upon our lives, to change it seeking to improve in the sense of worldliness and transcendentalism towards to be-more. We become, therefore, conscious beings and beings of faith. We become beings capable of *knowing*, who continually seek to know more, from the necessity and the curiosity to learn more. True knowledge implies *apprehending* the fact, the phenomenon, and the object so that we *appropriate* what we need to know, what we wish to know.

Another essential condition to know is the presence of one of many *subjectivities* open to what is new, stripped of the *prior “givens,”* and open to the authentic and true act of knowing. We do not learn alone, but *in communion* with others. This knowledge, being historical, is always being replaced by new knowledge, through the dynamism of all sorts of technologies, and the human desires to continually improve their knowledge. The act of knowledge, according to the theoretical understanding of Paulo, requires, therefore, these three elements: the *subject or cognizant subjects*; the knowable *object*; and the *dialectical and dialogical relationship between these items*. It is our cognoscibility, or knowability, built up by us, and within us, across the millennia, which I repeat, allows us to grasp (*apprehend*) the fact, the event, and/or the phenomenon or thing. By *appropriating* the object that was unveiled, then, and only then, we learn what was previously sought.

According to Paulo, **dialogue** is founded in the loving relationship established between *cognizant* subjects, and the real possibility of knowing through questions such as: Why? For what purpose? In favor of what and for whom? Against what and against whom? How? Where? When? These questions and answers successively generate *conscientization*, new issues and new disclosures. It is a similar process to Socratic maieutic, but differing from it because, in the Freirean dialogue, one does not seek only the ready-knowledge that needs only to be “discovered.” The Socratic maieutic is idealistic, and the dialogue denies the Freirean reading of the world. To stress, this is another act of courage of Paulo.

The knowledge, which can be given only objectively between subjectivities in the reading of the world of concrete things, while it provokes and establishes inside us a relationship of dialogue between one another, is, at the same time, and conversely, act in which knowledge is entirely individual and subjective. It occurs in introspection such as the belief and faith.

Understanding the *process of acquisition of knowledge*, Paulo denounced the “*banking*” model education, in which the educator tries to deposit content in the students’ empty minds, an act that precludes objectivity/subjectivity. Instead of theorizing education as “banking,” Paulo proposes the concept of **critical education** – education that is *problem posing, inquisitive, transformative, dialogic, dialectic and liberating*.

Furthermore, according to Paulo, our *critical awareness of the world* tells us that we *know*, and can *know more*. In the continuous dynamic of departing from the practice of what is known, and seeking the theory that explains it, and practicing again, brings with it the learning, the common sense, the institutions, and the emotions. This is what Paulo called “*the right thinking*, the need to think the practice, to practice better, and *to learn more*, and to learn better.”

If for Paulo, all *true knowledge* derives from thinking about the practice of everyday life, both from its common and intuitive sense and the *critical reading of the world*, then we are speaking of the real social, political, anthropological and religious contexts in which one lives, practices and thinks. Thus, we cannot deny the fact that Freirean theory embodies a political, an anthropological, an ethical, and an aesthetic dimension in the act of seeking knowledge, *of reading the world, and of acting in it*. Consequently, education is, for Paulo, a critical-ethical-political-educational act, made possible by the process of *conscientization* that enables engagement in the struggle for political and social participation, and in the critical reading of the world, for the transformation of the world.

### Moment III: Freirean Ethics.

In the era of *neoliberalism*, it is customary to honor intellectuals who are exclusively rational, rationalist or pragmatic. Pragmatics is beholden to a capitalist market economy. However, Paulo was truly a humanist philosopher, an educator with ideas entirely connected to his “Northeastern Brazilian-ness,” influenced by aspects of phenomenology, Marxism, and Personalism. He was a critical humanist who never feared to acknowledge that his knowledge came from his emotions, from his feelings, from his faith, and from his common sense intuitions. This motivated him *to seek the ‘raison d’être’ or ‘reason for being’ of objects* that could be known through reflection. Unlike the neoliberals, Paulo maintained that there is no such thing as *neutrality* in the choices, of options and actions, or in ideologies and practices, be they from the right or the left. Paulo was a critical humanist who embraced the *ethics of life* because he was for the destitute and the oppressed as a result of his belief in Christ.

He was *against* the oppressors, oppressive *conditions*, and oppressive *relations*, which were the focus of his *denunciations*, and replaced with the *announcement* of a new man and a new woman living in a new society, more just, more fraternal and more ethical, a society that respects human rights, and upholds democracy.

In the era of **economic globalization**, which is supported by postmodern philosophies and by the most profound and rapid technological changes that History has known, a new “ethics” was established, an ethics of the market. According to the principles of this ethics, “human values” are dictated by market needs, and, as we know, these adopting values serve the interests of those who have the capital, and not the fundamental human needs.

Today’s ethics has become corrupted by a new and imperative paradigm of a highly technologized world that destroys, *dehumanizes the living conditions and social relations*. This “ethics,” the “ethics of the market” is anti-ethics. It is the kind of ethics responsible for the concentration of income with the few, while the majority experience unemployment, hunger, and all different sorts of miseries that are “globalized” by the ease with which one corrupts and is corrupted, and by the lack of solidarity with, and respect for others. This ethics is responsible for the disparities that increase every day between those who have, know, want, can, desire, aspire and achieve their wishes and those who cannot (or *are not able to*) make any of these things and those who cannot even have the right *to dream*.

The **ethic of life** embedded in Paulo's understanding of the world counteracts the ethics of the market because it has as its ultimate principle the respect for life and aims to dignify life. Thus, it is a fundamental requirement of democracy and faith. The "ethics of the market," which denies the ethics of life is necessarily unethical. It hurts, mistreats, ages the youth, kills children, and steals the humanity of millions of men and women. It promotes death and not life. This "ethics" despises values and virtues that characterize the humanity of men and women, which is contrary to the essence of the **ethic of life**.

Ultimately, the "ethic of the market" in which money becomes a god, prohibits others from accessing and maintaining material goods. It commands, trains, oppresses, and forces people to exploit their brothers and sisters. It supports imperialist countries and those who forged them or joined them. Its "agenda" is conquest, cultural invasion, manipulation, and division, all characteristics of the anti-dialogical pedagogy Paulo described in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It prescribes, domesticates, oppresses and exploits brothers and sisters. Moreover, it sequesters their conscious bodies and souls.

So, we must ask ourselves: do we, or do we not, need to create a new social organization from the *ethics of life*? The *ethics of life* would establish a true humanism capable of making us **real people**, and **true existence**. It would inhibit and dismantle what is destroying the environment and would promote the concern for the planet and all human beings, especially those who, across the millennia, have strived to construct a social life characterized by tolerance, fraternity, and solidarity. "Is the dream over?" Did neoliberalism, by declaring the end of history and the class struggle, ever consider, along with its destructive pathway the possibilities of reinventing a new society more ethical, or better yet, truly ethical? Has Paulo's *feasible dream* as historical possibility been definitively erased by the cynical, selfish, and destructive pragmatism, which carries the distorted truths of those in command, who order, enact, oppress, marginalize and exclude the historical and ontological destiny of the vast majority of the world's population?

The growing interest and adherence to Freirean's praxis by numbers of Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Maoists, tells us that different groups from different faith traditions are seeking to build a new world in which the *ethics of life*—focused on *liberation*—is guiding the world toward a new social behavior of their citizens.

Therefore, Paulo's theory of knowledge is neither merely a progressive ideology nor a simple literacy methodology, as many claims. Paulo's theory is a theory of knowledge that incorporates an ethic that denies the Ethics of Discourse, but especially the ethics of the market. On the contrary, within Paulo's work, there is *an ethic of life* that proposes a *liberating* education—an

emancipatory education—that allows the *autonomy of subjectivities*, grounded in respect for human rights. His vision of education was genially expressed in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

#### **Moment IV:**

#### **Hope and Hopeful Praxis in Paulo Freire.**

The loveliness has the following connotations in the educational theory of Paulo: the educator must create an affective and caring climate in his or her classroom to inspire students with the pursuit of knowledge with joy. The environment should encourage collaboration and avoid competition, stimulating the adventure to create and recreate with epistemological curiosity and scientific rigor; the educator, necessarily, has to love the exercise of the educational act; and finally, the educators should like the content of what they teach. For Paulo, the loveliness does not mean an obligation to love all the students, but to respect them and care for them with equity.

The loveliness, as understood by Paulo in the pedagogical context, is a fundamental element of human rights, because it points not only to the respect and tolerance for the different but also towards the respect for the dignity of others conveyed through a generous welcoming.

Hopeful Praxis as an ontological attitude—desirable and necessary to the quality of life and fulfillment of social tasks—describes the comprehension that to *change is difficult, but possible*, which Paulo repeated tirelessly over the last years of his life. For him, this praxis consisted of engaging in life struggles; trust in oneself and others; being humble, and recognizing the unfinishedness of our being. It is precisely the recognition of human unfinishedness that brings the possibility of perfecting oneself to be more.

**Hope** for Paulo is more than a state of mind or one of the theological virtues. To him, hope reaches beyond these conceptions. It is a result of the incompleteness of human existence. It belongs, therefore, to our ontological nature. From that incompleteness comes the possibility of education. Or, putting it another way, education allows us to constitute ourselves as *human* beings in our *human existence*. Hope is, therefore, an ontological human quality that justifies education. Hopelessness is the contradictory moment of hope, which, dialectically, affirms hope as such.

