

## CHAPTER 8

# Rethinking Education as the Practice of Freedom

## Paulo Freire and the Promise of Critical Pedagogy

### PAULO FREIRE'S LEGACY

Paulo Freire occupies a hallowed position among the founders of critical pedagogy.<sup>1</sup> The legacy of his work stands as a testimonial to a pedagogical project to which he devoted both his passion and his principles to help students develop a consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, connect knowledge to power and agency, and learn to read both the word and the world as part of a broader struggle for justice and democracy. Not only did he infuse critical pedagogy with his visionary contributions, but he also played a crucial role in developing a highly successful literacy campaign in Brazil before the onslaught of the *junta* in 1964. Once the military took over the government, Freire was imprisoned for a short time for his efforts to advance the educational movement. He was eventually released and went into exile for a number of years, first in Chile and later in Geneva, Switzerland. Once a semblance of democracy returned to Brazil, he went back to his country in 1980 and played a significant role in shaping its educational policies until his untimely death in 1997. His book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is considered one of the classic texts of critical pedagogy and has sold over a million copies, influencing generations of teachers and intellectuals in the United States and abroad. Since the 1980s there has been no intellectual on the North American educational scene who has matched either his theoretical rigor or his moral courage. Indeed, Freire's contribution to a progressive politics of education has become that much more conspicuous in recent years, when many colleges have become dominated by conservative ideologies, hooked on methods, slavishly wedded to instrumentalized accountability measures, and increasingly run by administrators who lack either a broader vision or a critical understanding of education as a force for strengthening the imagination and expanding democratic public life. Within this increasingly oppressive context, critical pedagogy continues to offer the best — perhaps the only — model enabling educators and young

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people to develop and assert a sense of their rights and responsibilities to participate in self-governance despite growing antidemocratic tendencies in educational theory and practice.

Freire's example is more important now than ever before. With institutions of public and higher education increasingly under siege by a host of neoliberal and conservative forces, it is imperative for educators to acknowledge Freire's understanding of the empowering and democratic potential of education. As the market-driven logic of neoliberal capitalism continues to devalue all aspects of the public interest, one consequence is that the educational concern with excellence has been removed from matters of equity, while higher education, once conceptualized as a public good, has been stripped of its collective meaning and reduced to a private good. Universities now largely conform to the corporate demand that they provide the skills, knowledge, and credentials to build a workforce that will enable the United States to compete against blockbuster growth in China and other Southeast Asian markets and maintain its role as the major global economic and military power. On the other hand, public education has increasingly fallen sway to the forces of privatization, commodification, high-stakes testing, and standardization. Public schools largely inhabited by minorities of class and color fare even worse as they are subject to disciplinary ideologies and measures modeled after prisons.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, there is little interest in understanding the pedagogical foundation of either public or higher education as a deeply civic, political, and moral practice — that is, pedagogy as a practice for freedom. As schooling is increasingly defined by a corporate order and a governing-through-crime paradigm, any vestige of critical education is replaced by training, containment, and the promise of economic security. Similarly, the empowering potential of pedagogy is now subordinated to the narrow regime of "teaching to the test" coupled with an often harsh system of disciplinary control exerted upon not only the students but teachers as well. Teachers are increasingly reduced to the status of technicians and denied any control over their classrooms or school governance structures. Teaching to the test and the corporatization of education provide mutual reinforcement as they become a way of "taming" students and invoking modes of corporate governance in which public school teachers become deskilled, while an increasing number of higher education faculty are reduced to part-time positions and now constitute a new subaltern class of academic labor.

But there is more at stake here than a crisis of authority, the exploitation of faculty labor, and economic considerations taking precedence over all else (to the ultimate detriment of the country's social and economic well-being). Too many classrooms at all levels of schooling now resemble a "dead zone" where any vestige of critical thinking, self-reflection, and imagination quickly migrates to sites outside of the school only to be mediated and corrupted by a corporate-driven media culture. The major issue now driving public schooling is not how to foster civic engagement but how to teach test-taking while finding ways to discipline poorly performing students, many of whom

enter the educational system at a disadvantage by virtue of their class or race. Rather than support those students to offset the social factors impacting their educational performance, schools simply try to get rid of any students whose test results may undermine a school district's ranking in what is becoming an ethically sterile and bloodless world of high-stakes testing and empirical score cards.<sup>3</sup> Higher education mimics this logic by reducing its public vision to the interests of capital and redefining itself largely as a credentializing factory for students and as a petri dish for downsizing academic labor. Under such circumstances, rarely do educators ask questions about how schools can prepare students to be informed citizens, nurture their civic imagination, or teach them to be self-reflective about public issues and the world in which they live. As Stanley Aronowitz puts it:

Few even the so-called educators ask the question: What matters beyond the reading, writing, and numeracy that are presumably taught in the elementary and secondary grades? The old questioning of what a kid needs to become an informed "citizen" capable of participating in making the large and small public decisions that affect the larger world as well as everyday life receives honorable mention but not serious consideration. These unasked questions are symptoms of a new regime of educational expectations that privileges job readiness above any other educational values.<sup>4</sup>

There is little interest in understanding the pedagogical foundation of higher education as a deeply civic and political project that provides the conditions for individual autonomy and takes liberation and the practice of freedom as a collective goal.

#### EDUCATION AS THE PROJECT OF FREEDOM

Against this regime of "banking education," "scientific" schooling, and "bare pedagogy" stripped of all critical elements of teaching and learning, Freire believed that education was part of a project of freedom in its broadest sense and eminently political because it offered students the conditions for self-reflection, a self-managed life, and empowering forms of critical agency. Pedagogy in this sense connected learning to social change; it was a project and provocation that challenged students to critically engage with the world so they could act on it. As Aronowitz puts it in his analysis of Freire's work on literacy and critical pedagogy:

Thus, for Freire literacy was not a means to prepare students for the world of subordinated labor or "careers," but a preparation for a self-managed life. And self-management could only occur when people have fulfilled three goals of education: self-reflection, that is, realizing the famous poetic phrase, "know thyself," which is an understanding of the world in which they live, in its economic, political and, equally important, its psychological dimensions.

Specifically, "critical" pedagogy helps the learner become aware of the forces that have hitherto ruled their lives and especially shaped their consciousness. The third goal is to help set the conditions for producing a new life, a new set of arrangements where power has been, at least in tendency, transferred to those who literally make the social world by transforming nature and themselves.<sup>5</sup>

What Freire made clear in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, his most influential work, is that pedagogy at its best is not about training in techniques or methods, nor does it involve coercion or political indoctrination. Indeed, far from being a mere method or an a priori technique to be imposed on all students, pedagogy is a political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to explore the possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of a substantive democracy. Critical thinking for Freire was not an object lesson in test-taking, but a tool for self-determination and civic engagement. Critical pedagogy could afford students the opportunity to read, write, and learn from a position of agency — to engage in a culture of question that demands far more than competency in rote learning. Critical pedagogy, for Freire, was imagining literacy as not simply the mastering of specific skills also a mode of intervention, a way of learning about and reading the word as a basis for intervening in the world. It was not about the task of memorizing so-called facts, decontextualized and unrelated to present conditions. To the contrary, it was about offering a way of thinking beyond the seeming naturalness or inevitability of the current state of things, challenging assumptions validated by "common sense," soaring beyond the immediate confines of one's experiences, entering into a critical dialogue with history, and imagining a future that would not merely reproduce the present.

By way of illustration, Freirean pedagogy might stage the dynamic interplay of audio, visual, and print texts as part of a broader examination of history itself as a site of struggle, one that might offer some insights into students' own experiences and lives in the contemporary moment. For example, a history class might involve reading and watching films about school desegregation in the 1950s and 1960s as part of a broader pedagogical engagement with the civil rights movement and the massive protests that developed over educational access and student rights to literacy. The classroom would also open up opportunities to talk about why these struggles are still part of the experience of many American youth today, particularly those marginalized by class and color who are denied equality of opportunity by virtue of market-based rather than legal segregation. Students could be asked to write short papers that speculate on the meaning and the power of literacy and why it was so central to the civil rights movement. These may be read by the entire class with each student elaborating his or her position and offering commentary as a way of entering into a critical discussion of the history of racial exclusion, reflecting on how its ideologies and formations still haunt American society in spite of the triumphal dawn of an allegedly post-racial Obama era. In this

pedagogical context, students learn how to expand their own sense of agency, while recognizing that to be voiceless is to be powerless.

Central to such a pedagogy is shifting the emphasis from teachers to students and making visible the relationships among knowledge, authority, and power. Giving students the opportunity to be problem-posers and engage in a culture of questioning in the classroom foregrounds the crucial issue of who has control over the conditions of learning and how specific modes of knowledge, identities, and authority are constructed within particular sets of classroom relations. Under such circumstances, knowledge is not simply received by students, but actively transformed, open to be challenged, and related to the self as an essential step towards agency, self-representation, and learning how to govern rather than simply be governed. At the same time, students also learn how to engage others in critical dialogue and be held accountable for their views.

For Freire, critical thinking offered a way of not simply understanding the present but thinking beyond it. Theodor Adorno captures the spirit of Freire's notion of critical thinking by insisting:

Thinking is not the intellectual reproduction of what already exists anyway. As long as it doesn't break off, thinking has a secure hold on possibility. Its insatiable aspect, its aversion to being quickly and easily satisfied, refuses the foolish wisdom of resignation . . . Open thinking points beyond itself.<sup>6</sup>

Like Adorno, Freire rejected those regimes of educational degradation organized around the demands of the market, instrumentalized knowledge, and the priority of training over the pursuit of the imagination, critical thinking, and the teaching of freedom and social responsibility. Rather than assume the mantle of a false impartiality, Freire believed that critical pedagogy involved the recognition of both the ways in which human life is conditioned, though not determined, and the crucial necessity of not only reading the world critically but also intervening in the larger social order as part of the responsibility of an informed citizenry.

Freire argued that the political and moral demands of pedagogy amount to more than the school and classroom being merely the instrument of official power or assuming the role of an apologist for the existing order, as the Obama administration seems to believe — given its willingness to give Bush's reactionary educational policies a new name and a new lease on life. Freire rejected those modes of pedagogy that supported economic models and modes of agency in which freedom is reduced to consumerism and economic activity is freed from any criteria except profitability and the reproduction of a rapidly expanding mass of wasted humans.

### PEDAGOGY AS A PERFORMATIVE PRACTICE

Critical pedagogy attempts to understand how power works through the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge within particular institutional contexts and seeks to constitute students as informed subjects and social agents. In this instance, the issue of how identities, values, and desires are shaped in the classroom becomes the ground of politics. Critical pedagogy is thus invested in both the practice of self-criticism about the values that inform teaching and a critical self-consciousness regarding what it means to equip students with analytical skills to be self-reflective about the knowledge and values they confront in classrooms. Moreover, such a pedagogy attempts not only to provide the conditions for students to understand texts and different modes of intelligibility, but also opens up new avenues for them to make better moral judgments that will enable them to assume some sense of responsibility to the other in light of those judgments. For Freire, pedagogy has to be meaningful in order to be critical and transformative. This means that personal experience becomes a valuable resource that gives students the opportunity to relate their own narratives, social relations, and histories to what is being taught. It also signifies a resource to help students locate themselves in the concrete conditions of their daily lives while furthering their understanding of the limits often imposed by such conditions. Under such circumstances, experience becomes a starting point, an object of inquiry that can be affirmed, critically interrogated, and used as a resource to engage broader modes of knowledge and understanding.

Freire was acutely aware that what makes critical pedagogy so dangerous to ideological fundamentalists, the ruling elites, religious extremists, and right-wing nationalists all over the world is that central to its very definition is the task of educating students to become critical agents who actively question and negotiate the relationships between theory and practice, critical analysis and common sense, and learning and social change. Critical pedagogy opens up a space where students should be able to come to terms with their own power as critically engaged citizens; it provides a sphere where the unconditional freedom to question and assert one's convictions is made central to the purpose of public schooling and higher education, if not democracy itself. And as political and moral practice, a way of knowing, and literate engagement, critical pedagogy attempts to "make evident the multiplicity and complexity of history."<sup>7</sup> History in this sense is engaged as a narrative open to critical dialogue rather than a predefined text to be memorized and accepted unquestioningly. Pedagogy in this instance provides the conditions to cultivate in students a healthy scepticism about power, a "willingness to temper any reverence for authority with a sense of critical awareness."<sup>8</sup> As a performative practice, pedagogy takes as one of its goals the opportunity for students to be able to reflectively frame their own relationship to the ongoing project of an unfinished democracy. It is precisely this relationship between democracy and pedagogy that is so threatening to so many of our educational

leaders and spokespersons today, and it is also the reason why Freire's work on critical pedagogy and literacy is more relevant today than when it was first published.

According to Freire, all forms of pedagogy represent a particular way of understanding society and a specific commitment to the future. Critical pedagogy in particular presupposes a notion of a more equal and just future; and, as such, it always functions as a provocation that takes students beyond the world they know in order to expand the range of human possibilities and democratic values. Unlike dominant modes of teaching, critical pedagogy insists that one of the fundamental tasks of educators is to make sure that the future points the way to a more socially just world, a world in which critique and possibility — in conjunction with the values of reason, freedom, and equality — function to alter, as part of a broader democratic project, the ground upon which life is lived. Though it rejects a notion of literacy as the transmission of facts or skills tied to the latest market trends, critical pedagogy is hardly a prescription for political indoctrination, as the advocates of standardization and testing often insist. It offers students new ways to think and act creatively and independently while making clear that the educator's task, as Aronowitz points out, "is to encourage human agency, not mold it in the manner of Pygmalion."<sup>9</sup>

Critical pedagogy gives education its most valued purpose and meaning, and for this very reason it is a position that threatens right-wing private advocacy groups, neoconservative politicians, and conservative extremists. Such individuals and groups are keenly aware that critical pedagogy with its emphasis on the hard work of critical analysis, moral judgments, and social responsibility goes to the very heart of what it means to address real inequalities of power at the social level and to conceive of education as a project for freedom while at the same time foregrounding a series of important and often ignored questions such as: What is the role of teachers and academics as public intellectuals? Whose interests do public and higher education serve? How might it be possible to understand and engage the diverse contexts in which education takes place? What is the role of education as a public good? How do we make knowledge meaningful in order to make it critical and transformative? How do we democratize governance? Against the right-wing view that equates any suggestion of politics with indoctrination, critical pedagogy is concerned with offering students new ways to think critically and act with authority as independent political agents in the classroom and in larger society. In other words, it is concerned with providing students with the skills and knowledge necessary for them to expand their capacities, first to question the deep-seated assumptions and myths that legitimate the archaic and disempowering social practices structuring every aspect of society and then to take responsibility for intervening in the world they inhabit.

## THE POLITICS OF ACADEMIC LABOR

What critical pedagogy does insist upon is that education cannot be neutral. It is inevitably a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge, values, desires, and identities are produced within particular sets of class and social relations. Moreover, it is always directive in its attempt to teach students to inhabit a particular mode of agency; enable them to understand the larger world and one's role in it in a specific way; define their relationship, if not responsibility, to diverse others; and experience in the classroom some sort of understanding of a more just, imaginative, and democratic life. Pedagogy is by definition directive, but that does not mean it is merely a form of indoctrination. On the contrary, as Freire argued, education as a practice for freedom must expand the capacities necessary for human agency, and hence the possibilities for how academic labor should be configured to ensure such a project that is integral to democracy itself. Foundational to critical pedagogy is the recognition that the way we educate our youth is related to the future that we hope for and that such a future should offer students a life that leads to the deepening of freedom and social justice. Surely this suggests that even within the privileged precincts of higher education, educators should nourish those pedagogical practices that promote "a concern with keeping the forever unexhausted and unfulfilled human potential open, fighting back all attempts to foreclose and pre-empt the further unravelling of human possibilities, prodding human society to go on questioning itself and preventing that questioning from ever stalling or being declared finished."<sup>10</sup> In other words, critical pedagogy forges an expanded notion of politics and agency through a language of scepticism and possibility, and a culture of openness, debate, and engagement — all those elements now at risk because of the recent attacks being waged against public and higher education. This language of critique and educated hope was Paulo Freire's legacy, one that invokes dangerous memories and for this very reason is increasingly absent from any conservative discourse about current educational problems and appropriate avenues of reform. Unfortunately, it is also absent from much of the discussion on the current status of academic labor.

When I began my career teaching high school students, Freire became an essential influence in helping me to understand the broad contours of my ethical responsibilities as a teacher. Later, his work would help me come to terms with the complexities of my relationship to universities as powerful and privileged institutions that seemed far removed from the daily life of the working-class communities in which I had grown up. I first met Paulo in the early 1980s, just after I had been denied tenure by John Silber, then the notorious right-wing President of Boston University. Paulo was giving a talk at the University of Massachusetts and he came to my house in Boston for dinner. Given Paulo's reputation as a powerful intellectual, I recall initially being astounded by his profound humility. I remember being greeted with such warmth and sincerity that I felt completely at ease with him. We

talked for a long time that night about his exile, how I had been attacked by a right-wing university administration, what it meant to be a working-class intellectual, and the risks one had to take to make a difference. I was in a very bad place after being denied tenure and had no idea what the future would hold. On that night, a friendship was forged that would span almost two decades until Paulo's death. I am convinced that had it not been for Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo<sup>11</sup> — a linguist, translator, and a friend of Paulo's and mine — I might not have stayed in the field of education. Their passion for education and their profound humanity convinced me that teaching was not a job like any other job, but a crucial site of struggle. With their examples in mind, I also arrived at the conclusion that ultimately whatever risks had to be taken to defend education as a source of empowerment for teachers and students were well worth it.

I have encountered many intellectuals throughout my career in academe, but Paulo was exceptionally generous, eager to help young intellectuals publish their work, willing to write letters of support, and always gave as much as possible of himself in the service of others. The early 1980s were exciting years in education studies in the United States, and Paulo was really at the center of it. Paulo and I together started a *Critical Education and Culture* series with Bergin & Garvey Publishers, which brought out the work of more than 60 young authors, many of whom went on to have a significant influence in universities. Jim Bergin became Paulo's patron as his American publisher; Donaldo became his translator and co-author; Ira Shor also played an important role in spreading Paulo's work and wrote a number of brilliant books integrating both theory and practice as part of Paulo's notion of critical pedagogy. Together we worked tirelessly to circulate Paulo's work, always with the hope of inviting him back to America so we could meet, talk, drink good wine, and deepen a commitment to critical education that had all marked us in different ways. Of course, it is difficult to write simply about Paulo as a person because who he was and how he entered one's space and the world could never be separated from his politics. Hence, I want to try to provide a broader context for my own understanding of him as well as those ideas that consistently shaped our relationship and his relationship with others.

#### BIOGRAPHY AS THE PEDAGOGY OF HOPE

Paulo, occupying the often difficult space between existing politics and the as yet possible, spent his life guided by the belief that the radical elements of democracy are worth struggling for, that critical education is a basic element of social change, and that how we think about politics is inseparable from how we come to understand the world, power, and the moral life we aspire to lead. In many ways, Paulo embodied the important but often complicated relationship between the personal and the political. His own life was a testament not only to his belief in democratic principles, but also to the notion that one's life had to come as close as possible to modeling the social relations

and experiences that spoke to a more humane and democratic future. At the same time, Paulo never moralized about politics; he never employed the discourse of shame, or collapsed the political into the personal when talking about social issues. For him, private problems were always to be understood in relation to larger public issues. Everything about him suggested that the first order of politics was humility, compassion, and a willingness to fight against human injustices. For example, Paulo never reduced an understanding of homelessness, poverty, and unemployment to the failing of individual character, laziness, indifference, or a lack of personal responsibility, but instead viewed such issues as complex systemic problems generated by economic and political structures that produced massive amounts of inequality, suffering, and despair — and social problems far beyond the reach of limited individual capacities to cause or redress.

Freire's belief in democracy as well as his deep and abiding faith in the ability of people to resist the weight of oppressive institutions and ideologies were forged in a spirit of struggle tempered by the grim realities of his own imprisonment and exile and mediated by both a fierce sense of outrage and the belief that education and hope are the conditions of social action and political change. Acutely aware that many contemporary versions of hope occupied their own corner in Disneyland, Freire fought against such appropriations and was passionate about recovering and rearticulating hope through, in his words, an "understanding of history as opportunity and not determinism."<sup>12</sup> Hope for Freire was a practice of witnessing, an act of moral imagination that enabled progressive educators and others to think otherwise in order to act otherwise. Hope demanded an anchoring in transformative practices, and one of the tasks of the progressive educator was to "unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be."<sup>13</sup> Underlying Freire's politics of hope was a view of radical pedagogy that located itself on the dividing lines where the relations between domination and oppression, power and powerlessness, continued to be produced and reproduced. For Freire, hope as a defining element of politics and pedagogy always meant listening to and working with the poor and other subordinate groups so that they might speak and act in order to alter dominant relations of power. Whenever we talked, Paulo never allowed himself to become cynical. He was always full of life, taking great delight in eating a good meal, listening to music, opening himself up to new experiences, and engaging in dialogue with a passion that both embodied his own politics and confirmed the lived presence of others.

Committed to the specific, the play of context, and the possibility inherent in what he called the unfinished nature of human beings, Freire offered no recipes for those in need of instant theoretical and political fixes. I was often amazed at how patient Paulo always was in dealing with people who wanted him to provide menu-like answers to the problems they raised about education, people who did not realize that their demands undermined his own insistence that critical pedagogy is defined by its context and must be approached as a project of individual and social transformation — that it



could never be reduced to a mere method. Contexts mattered to Paulo. He was concerned with how contexts mapped in distinctive ways the relationships among knowledge, language, everyday life, and the machineries of power. For Freire, pedagogy was strategic and performative: considered as part of a broader political practice for democratic change, critical pedagogy was never viewed as an *a priori* discourse to be asserted or a methodology to be implemented, or for that matter a slavish attachment to forms of knowledge that are deemed to be quantifiable. On the contrary, Freirean pedagogy was a conscientious act arising from a deep awareness of one's situatedness and organized around the "instructive ambivalence of disrupted borders,"<sup>14</sup> a complex practice of bafflement, interruption, understanding, and intervention that emerged from ongoing historical, social, and economic struggles. Paulo's profound patience and wisdom in refusing to provide simple answers and instead articulating and rearticulating these complexities were always instructive for me, and I am convinced that it was only later in my life that I was able to begin to emulate his approach in my own interactions with audiences.

Paulo was a cosmopolitan intellectual who never overlooked the details in everyday life and the connections the latter had to a much broader, global world. He consistently reminded us that political struggles are won and lost in those specific yet hybridized spaces that anchored narratives of everyday experience within the social gravity and material force of institutional power. Any pedagogy that calls itself Freirean must acknowledge this key principle that our current knowledge is contingent on particular historical contexts and political forces. For example, each classroom will be affected by the different experiences students bring to the class, the resources made available for classroom use, the relations of governance bearing down on teacher-student relations, the authority exercised by administrations regarding the boundaries of teacher autonomy, and the theoretical and political discourses used by teachers to read and frame their responses to the diverse historical, economic, and cultural forces informing classroom dialogue. Any understanding of the project and practices that inform critical pedagogy has to begin with recognizing the forces at work in such contexts and which must be confronted by educators and schools everyday. Although Freire was a theoretician of radical contextualism, he also acknowledged the importance of understanding the particular and the local in relation to larger global and transnational forces. For Freire, literacy as a way of reading and changing the world had to be reconceived within a broader understanding of citizenship, democracy, and justice that was global and transnational. Making the pedagogical more political in this case meant moving beyond the celebration of specialized disciplines and developing a praxis that foregrounded "power, history, memory, relational analysis, justice (not just representation), and ethics as the issues central to transnational democratic struggles."<sup>15</sup> Culture and politics mutually informed each other in ways that spoke to histories whose presences and absences had to be narrated as part of a larger struggle over democratic values, relations, and modes of agency.

Freire recognized that it was through the complex production of experience within multilayered registers of power and culture that people recognized, narrated, and transformed their place in the world. Paulo challenged the separation of cultural experiences from politics, pedagogy, and power itself, but he did not make the mistake of many of his contemporaries by conflating cultural experience with a limited notion of identity politics. While he had a profound faith in the ability of ordinary people to shape history and their own destinies, he refused to romanticize individuals and cultures that experienced oppressive social conditions. Of course, he recognized that power privileged certain forms of cultural capital — certain modes of speaking, living, being, and acting in the world — but he did not believe that subordinate or oppressed cultures were free of the contaminating effects of oppressive ideological and institutional relations of power. Consequently, culture — as a crucial educational force influencing larger social structures as well as the most intimate spheres of identity formation — could be viewed as nothing less than an ongoing site of struggle and power in contemporary society.

Freire's insistence that education was about the making and changing of contexts did more than seize upon the political and pedagogic potentialities to be found across a spectrum of social sites and practices in society, which, of course, included but were not limited to the school. He also challenged the separation of culture from the political sphere by calling attention to how diverse technologies of power work pedagogically within governing institutions to produce, regulate, and legitimate particular forms of knowing, belonging, feeling, and desiring. For Freire, political engagement was also about creating the conditions for people to govern rather than just be governed and for individuals to become capable of mobilizing social movements against the oppressive economic, racial, and sexist practices put into place by colonization, global capitalism, and other oppressive structures of power.

Paulo Freire left behind a corpus of work that emerged out of a lifetime of struggle and commitment. Refusing the comfort of master narratives, Freire's work was always unsettled and unsettling, restless yet engaging. Unlike so much of the politically arid and morally vacuous academic and public prose that characterizes contemporary intellectual discourse, Freire's work was consistently fuelled by a healthy moral rage over the needless oppression and suffering he witnessed throughout his life as he travelled all over the globe. Similarly, his work exhibited a vibrant and dynamic quality that allowed it to grow, refuse easy formulas, and open itself to new political realities and projects. Freire's genius was to elaborate a theory of social change and engagement that was neither vanguardist nor populist. Combining theoretical rigor, social relevance, and moral compassion, Freire gave new meaning to the politics of daily life while affirming the importance of theory in opening up the space of critique, possibility, politics, and practice. For the critical educators influenced by Freire's insights, experience is a fundamental element of teaching and learning, but its distinctive configuration among

different groups does not guarantee the legitimacy of particular versions of the truth; rather, experience must itself become an object for analysis. How students experience the world and speak to that experience is always a function of unconscious and conscious commitments, of politics, of access to multiple languages and literacies — thus experience always has to take a detour through theory as an object of self-reflection, critique, and possibility. For Freire, theory and language were sites of struggle and possibility that gave experience, meaning, and action a political direction, and any attempt to reproduce the binarism of theory versus politics was repeatedly condemned by Freire.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, while Paulo loved theory, he never reified it. When he talked about Freud, Marx, or Erich Fromm, one could feel his intense passion for ideas. Yet, he never treated theory as an end in itself; it was always a resource whose value lay in understanding, critically engaging, and transforming the world as part of a larger project of freedom and justice. Not only did history and experience become contested sites of struggle, but theory and language were also constantly subject to critical reflection. To say that Paulo's joy around such matters was infectious is to understate the formidable impact that his presence played in the intellectual and political lives of so many people he met throughout his life.

I had a close personal relationship with Paulo for over 15 years, and I was always moved by the way in which his political courage and intellectual reach were matched by a love of life and generosity of spirit. The political and the personal mutually informed Freire's life and work. He was always the curious student, even as he assumed the role of a critical teacher. As he moved between the private and the public, he revealed an astonishing gift for making everyone he met feel valued. His very presence embodied what it meant to combine political struggle and moral courage, to make hope meaningful and despair unpersuasive. Vigilant in bearing witness to the individual and collective suffering of others, Paulo shunned the role of the isolated intellectual as an existential hero who struggles alone. He believed that intellectuals must respond to the call for making the pedagogical more political with a continuing effort to build those coalitions, affiliations, and social movements capable of mobilizing real power and promoting substantive social change. Politics was more than a gesture of translation, representation, and dialogue: to be effective, it had to be about creating the conditions for people to become critical agents alive to the responsibilities of democratic public life. Paulo understood keenly that democracy was threatened by a powerful military-industrial complex, the rise of extremists groups, and the increased power of the warfare state. He also recognized the pedagogical force of a corporate and militarized culture that eroded the moral and civic capacities of citizens to think beyond the common sense of official power, its legitimating ideologies, and the hatemongering of a right-wing media apparatus. Paulo strongly believed that democracy could not last without providing critical counter-narratives against the dominant pedagogy and restoring the formative culture which made democratic public life possible.

Educational sites within both schools and the broader culture represented some of the most important venues through which to affirm public values, support a critical citizenry, and resist those who would deny the empowering functions of teaching and learning. He never lost sight of Robert Hass' claim that the job of education "is to refresh the idea of justice going dead in us all the time."<sup>17</sup> Against the growing forces of authoritarian pedagogy that are taking hold in the United States and other countries, Freire's work offers both a resource for critique and a language of possibility. His legacy and work stand as a reminder that even in the worst of times, pedagogy is crucial to the meaning of politics because it not only works to create the pedagogical practices that make self and social agency possible, but also recognizes the necessity of enabling students and others to struggle collectively in order to build the formative culture — "a complex of beliefs, values and practices that nurture equality, cooperation and freedom"<sup>18</sup> — necessary to affirm public values, inspire the social imagination, and sustain democratic institutions.

## NOTES

- 1 One of the best sources on the life and work of Paulo Freire is Peter Mayo (2004), *Liberating Praxis: Freire's Legacy for Radical Education and Politics*. New York: Praeger. Two of the best translators of Freire's work to the American context are Donaldo Macedo (1994), *Literacies of Power*. Boulder: Westview; and Ira Shor (1987), *Freire for the Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- 2 I have taken up this issue extensively in Henry A. Giroux (2010), *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?* New York: Palgrave. See also Kenneth Saltman and David Gabbard (eds), *Education as Enforcement: The Militarization and Corporatization of Schools*, 2nd edn. New York: Routledge.
- 3 On the issue of containment and the pedagogy of punishment, see Jenny Fisher, "The Walking Wounded: The Crisis of Youth, School Violence, and Precarious Pedagogy," *Review of Education, Cultural Studies, and Pedagogy* (in press).
- 4 Stanley Aronowitz (2008), *Against Schooling: For an Education That Matters*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, p. xii.
- 5 Stanley Aronowitz (2009), "Forward," in Sheila L. Macrine (ed.), *Critical Pedagogy in Uncertain Times: Hope and Possibilities*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, p. ix.
- 6 Theodor Adorno (1998), "Education after Auschwitz," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 291–2.
- 7 Edward Said (2001), *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 141.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 501.
- 9 Stanley Aronowitz (1998), "Introduction," in Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*. Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 10–11.
- 10 Zygmunt Bauman and Keith Tester (2001), *Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, p. 4.
- 11 See Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1987), *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*. Amherst, MA: Bergin and Garvey.
- 12 Paulo Freire (1994), *Pedagogy of Hope*. New York: Continuum, p. 91.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 14 Cited in Homi Bhabha (1994), "The Enchantment of Art," in Carol Becker and Ann Wiens (eds), *The Artist in Society*. Chicago: New Art Examiner, p. 28.