

A countercolonial pedagogical tool

Notes on Paulo Freire's educational theory

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Resumo: *Notas sobre a pedagogia de Paulo Freire como ferramenta contracolonial* — Buscamos, com este artigo, compreender como as teorias educacionais de Paulo Freire (1921-1997) não somente são relevantes para pensar uma educação libertadora, crítica e humanista, mas que elas também se colocam como verdadeiras teorias contracoloniais. Diferente do pós-colonialismo e do decolonialismo, o contracolonialismo bate de frente com os estereótipos, racismos, discriminações e preconceitos provenientes da época colonial e que ainda são fortes em nossa estrutura social brasileira. Este artigo parte de uma pesquisa bibliográfica de natureza qualitativo-exploratória para dar conta de nosso objetivo. Os resultados deste texto revelam que as teorias freireanas batem de frente com os preceitos estruturais do colonialismo no Brasil, revelando uma educação não somente política, mas também ética e humanista que pode também lutar criticamente contra as atuais formas de dominação de quaisquer poderes hegemônicos imperialistas.

Palavras-chave: Humanismo; Contracolonialismo; Ética; Contra-hegemonia.

Abstract: *A countercolonial tool. Notes on Paulo Freire's Pedagogy* —* With this paper, we seek to understand how the educational theories of Paulo Freire (1921-1997) are not only relevant to thinking about a liberating, critical and humanist education, but that they also stand as true countercolonial theories. Unlike post-colonialism and decolonialism, countercolonialism goes against stereotypes, racism, discrimination and prejudices originating from the colonial era and which are still strong in our Brazilian social structure. This article is based on a bibliographical research of a qualitative-exploratory nature to achieve our objective. The results of this text reveal that Freire's theories clash with the structural precepts of colonialism in Brazil, revealing an education that is not only political, but also ethical and humanist that can also critically fight against the current forms of domination of any imperialist hegemonic powers.

Keywords: Humanism; Countercolonialism; Ethics; Counter-hegemony.

* This paper was originally written in Portuguese and later translated into English; quotes have also been translated.

Introduction

For several years we have been studying and working with the educational theories and philosophies of Paulo

Reglus Neves Freire (1921-1997), better known as Paulo Freire. Freire believed in education based on the knowledge of vulnerable communities who wanted to become literate and and to keep

going on studying, but not in order to perpetuate the colonizer's culture, but to understand its structural domains and go against that culture.

Furthermore, it reveals our society as unfair, where the oppressor always seeks to make the oppressed even more vulnerable. From this perspective, the oppressed, through education that helps them to free themselves, to recover their sense of humanity and also to make able to ascend socially. In this sense, we understand Freire's pedagogy as libertarian and hopeful.

Therefore, this paper wishes to reveal how Freirean thought can be conceived as countercolonial thought, as it clearly clashes with social structures that are, markedly, legacies of colonial domination. It is worth remembering that even today we perceive a sense of inferiority among Brazilians in relation to countries in the global north, which are socially and economically more developed.

Therefore, in this paper we seek to clarify how Freirean educational theories are, at their base, countercolonial. Not post-colonial or decolonial, but truly countercolonial, as they clash with the foundations of the colonial social structure imposed on us, Brazilians, since the 16th century. Let us remember that the colonies were places solely for the exploitation of wealth for hundreds of years, without enjoying the standards of health, education, housing, etc. that the colonizers enjoyed in their countries of origin. The exploitation of our natural riches (plants, minerals, animals, etc.)

was the basis of European enrichment and led colonized populations to endless suffering.

Freirean theories as countercolonial theories

In this text we work with the educational logic of the Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire as a form of thinking that seeks non-acceptance of the structures of oppression and violence imposed on the most vulnerable people. Let us remember that we cannot speak only of one colonialism, but of several colonialisms, as the colonizers operated violently in all colonies, but in sometimes different ways.

We understand that we cannot change history, as it refers to events that happened in the past, but we can think from history to understand who we are today, today, as individuals and as society, and understand that we are subjects of our own stories, and it is up to us to modify it, obviously, understanding that each person's life circumstances are not the same and may not favor people's integral development. As humanist economist Amartya Sen tells us, we need opportunities and freedom to achieve our best:

What people can positively achieve is influenced by economic opportunities, political freedoms, social powers and by enabling conditions such as health, basic education and incentives [...]. The institutional arrangements that provide these opportunities are

further influenced by the exercise of people's freedoms [...] social choice and public decision-making [...]. (Sen, 2000, p. 19)

Let us think of colonialism and understand that since the 14th century the world has been taken over by European mercantilism and original peoples have been subjugated and oppressed in Asia, Africa and the Americas. Such domination was based on violence against these original peoples, taking from them the most precious asset of a human being: freedom. Ana Mae Barbosa explains our colonial situation in Brazil in relation to education:

The previous years of colonial domination had been very degrading, as, in general, was European colonization. Forbidden from having the press, higher schools and even organized primary and secondary education, we were tamed by the Jesuits and even they ended up being expelled from Brazil by the central power, set up by the Marquis of Pombal. (Barbosa, 1995, p. 59)

Let us consider that, in the case of the Americas, the many people who lived here were indigenous, with different languages, customs, knowledge and practices (even among themselves). Many indigenous peoples were decimated, their cultures and languages disappearing with them. An inestimable loss for the world!

Let us remember that black people brought from Africa to work in the

Americas sometimes revolted and created "quilombos", places of struggle for freedom and against the oppression they had suffered. Paulo Freire comments on "quilombos" that:

Brazilian heritage is colonial, authoritarian in nature. And we have in this heritage the uprising of freedom. But we also have, throughout our history, expressions of struggle against repression, the "Quilombos". In Brazil, we live with repression on one side and quilombos on the other. And I see quilombos as the expression of legitimate anxiety about freedom. (Freire, 1994, p. 8)

Along this path, we understand that there were wars, struggles and battles between indigenous people and Europeans and between enslaved black people and settlers. Such clashes strongly marked the mentality of the colonized, making us to develop a strong mentality against everything that is colonial.

We must understand that colonial structures established their own logic of naturalizing inequalities based on socially created differences (based on the observations of the colonizers themselves), having, at their base, the tripod: sex, race and (social) class. This colonial system was created to oppress the most vulnerable, forcing them to work without pay, dehumanizing them. We, the colonized, were left without a voice and without a place in our own land.

Along this path, Freire establishes an education that educates towards

criticality (against social imposition), towards affection (against violence), towards dialogue (against oppression), towards hope (against slavery). Freire will say:

[...] my statement: the metaphorical expression “political literacy” reveals man’s lack of critical or dialectical understanding when facing his own relationships with the world. And I naturally think that every educator, whatever the field of his specialization, will emphasize and impose on his students either a false consciousness or a critical consciousness. **(Freire, 1997, p. 25)**

It is worth mentioning here that we are talking about non-colonial (but really countercolonial) theories, not post-colonial theories, as several scholars conceived from the 1980s onwards (Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak, Hommi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, etc.), or decolonial theories, which seek to dismantle the colonial remnants in our society through cracks in the structures of oppression and violence. Regarding decoloniality, Walter Mignolo **(2017, p. 12-32)** tells us that:

[...] decoloniality does not consist of a new universal that presents itself as the true one, surpassing all previously existing ones; it is rather another option. Presenting itself as an option, decolonial opens up a new way of thinking that is detached from the chronologies constructed by new epistemes or paradigms (modern, postmodern, altermodern, Newtonian science, quantum theory, relativity theory, etc.). It

is not that epistemes and paradigms are alien to decolonial thinking. They couldn’t be; but they are no longer the reference of epistemic legitimacy. **(Mignolo, 2017, p. 15)**

If decolonial theories are an attempt to break colonial logics through their cracks, Freirean theories are countercolonial, as they establish effective ways of fighting through a critical education that makes people understand their social, labor, educational oppression, in short, of life.

We understand that we need to break a cycle of perpetuating assumptions that the “white colonizer” has power over us. And in a post-industrial world, the imperialism of some economically powerful countries in the global north still seeks to perpetuate a logic based on the same colonial precepts of social domination through differentiation and stereotyping used since the 14th century. Rodrigues **(2014, p. 2)** tells us about stereotypes:

(...) a stereotype (from the Greek: “stereo” = “hard, firm” + “type” = “brand, model”) is a representation that is formed through a model established as a standard, simplifying individualities through specific characteristics of the group. The problem with stereotypes is that they are generally related to prejudice against certain human groups, serving as sources of jokes and not taking into account the specificities of each human being.

We see that this stereotyping mechanism is a strong tool of power of strength and that it depreciates the

oppressed, making the latter believe they are lesser and place themselves in fragile situations. And the fight to educate the oppressed and make them understand that their positions were imposed on them and that oppression should not continue is exactly Freirean.

It is worth remembering that the philosopher Michel Foucault relates power directly to social relations, where power allows itself to be seen, perceived and acted:

When I say “power”, I am absolutely not talking about an instance, a kind of power that would be hidden or visible, it doesn't matter, and that would spread its harmful influence throughout the social body or that would extend its network in a fatal way. This is not a network that would increasingly imprison society and individuals. It's not about this. Power is not a thing. Power is relationships. Power is relationships between individuals, a relationship that means one can direct the conduct of the other, determine the conduct of the other. It is voluntarily determined according to a series of objectives that are yours. (Foucault, s.d. [1981], s/p)

Freire shows us the power that practice based on critical thinking through language (hence the urgent need for literacy among the oppressed) can have in our lives: [...] “only man, as a being who works, who has a thought-language, which acts and is capable of reflecting on itself and its own activity, which separates itself from it, only

it, upon reaching such levels, became a being of praxis” (Freire, 1989, p. 39).

Somehow considering literacy as political agency, Valéria da Hora Bessa informs us that:

[...] the experience of the city of Natal, in 1961, stands out, with the campaign “On the ground you also learn to read”, integrating popular education and school education, with Paulo Freire leading the actions that gave rise to Pedagogy Liberator. Such pedagogy had as its main banner that every educational act is, in itself, a political act. (...) Still in the 1960s, Paulo Freire's ideas were distorted and his Pedagogy was associated with the Marxist and socialist Movements. (...) The Popular Education project promoted by Paulo Freire was definitively paralyzed by the Military Coup of March 31, 1964 (Bessa, 2008, p. 21)

In fact, Freire adheres to the Marxist line of thoughts on education. Clearly, we understand that Freire's thought has a methodological basis in historical-dialectical materialism (by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels), seeking to understand the Brazilian reality based on the great social and historical transformations that have occurred here. Such a theory does not deny history, but understands current reality as something concrete, material, and the support of our historical facts as composers of our reality. Regarding this method of analysis, Marília Freitas de Campos Pires tells us:

The dialectical method that Marx developed, the dialectical historical

materialist method, is a method of interpreting reality, worldview and praxis. The reinterpretation of Hegel's dialectic (placed upside down by Marx) mainly concerns materiality and concreteness. For Marx, Hegel treats dialectics ideally, on the plane of the spirit, of ideas, while the world of men demands their materialization. It is with this concern that Marx gave the material character (men organize themselves in society for the production and reproduction of life) and the historical character (how they have been organizing themselves throughout their history). (Pires, 1997, p. 86)

We also highlight that during his forced exile (1964 to 1980), Freire lived with the ills of colonialism while in capitalist colonizing countries, which left a profound mark on him, as Celso de Rui Beisiegel comments:

When moving to the United States and then to Europe, Paulo Freire began to live more directly with the tensions that agitated the centers of the capitalist world. The Cold War remained as a backdrop that potentiated antagonisms, contributing to accentuate the possible conflictive contents of popular unrest and movements for the emancipation of regions and portions of populations historically discriminated against or subjected to colonial domination. In the United States, reactions against the Vietnam War and collective protests against discrimination, especially against racial intolerance, combined their effects in opening society to progressive or even avant-garde intellectual positions. Europe, in turn,

was experiencing the internal consequences of the liberation struggles of the former colonies. The student movement of 68 in France had caused repercussions in many countries in the Western world. The intellectual criticism of the brutal inequalities produced by the capitalist order and the unacceptable practices denounced in real socialism deepened. Large contingents of Catholicism are progressively involved in ideological disputes. (Beisiegel, 2010, p. 97-98)

We learn to be in the world and act on it. And Freire's thinking allows us to realize that his revolutionary literacy method, based on words that generate the daily lives of vulnerable people, is the gateway to critical and revolutionary thinking. However, here we are not thinking about a national revolution, but a revolution that begins from practice in the individual lives of the subjects. These subjects understand their existential situation in the world and seek to transform it, understanding their current historical condition and their possibility of modifying their lives, starting with education. An education that not only teaches how to read and write, but that questions the world around it, that acts politically in the administration of the subjects' lives.

Regarding criticality, the result of a truly liberating education, and against the most diverse forms of social imposition, Freire tells us:

[...] the more you critically know the concrete, objective conditions of of

the here and now of your reality, the more you will be able to carry out the search, through the transformation of reality. Precisely because its fundamental position is, repeating Marcel, that of “being in a situation”, when reflexively looking at “situationality”, knowing it critically, it inserts itself into it. The more inserted, and not purely adapted to concrete reality, the more it will become subject to modifications, the more it will assert itself as a being of options. (Freire, 1997, p. 12)

In this sense, critical awareness must lead to concrete changes in the lives of subjects, leading to actions and modifications in their lives. Life situations can be part of educational thinking and lead to understanding what happens in life, also leading to actions.

Regarding affection in Education, Freire preaches a philosophy of non-violence and an education that values affections, emotions, sensibilities, etc.:

No true teaching training can be isolated, on the one hand, from the exercise of criticality that implies the promotion of naive curiosity to epistemological curiosity, and on the other, without recognizing the value of emotions, sensitivity, affectivity, intuition or divination. Knowing is not, in fact, guessing, but it has something to do, from time to time, with guessing, with intuiting. The important thing, without a doubt, is not to stop satisfied at the level of institutions, but to subject them to the methodically rigorous analysis of our epistemological curiosity (Freire, 1996, p. 45).

Why are Freirean theories so hated by the Brazilian right? Because they reveal that it is worth fighting for a better and democratic life, without lowering our heads to the Brazilian “colonels” on duty. In Brazil, we realize that the political right’s blows to democracy value the structural inequalities of our society, glorifying entrepreneurship and globalization that makes us unequal. Rodrigues will tell us that “globalization is maintained through the most varied asymmetric power relations” (2021a, p. 47). The same author also tells us:

For Freire, education must value the knowledge and actions of individuals and use them to lead to a new meaning in their lives. From this perspective, the change in views regarding the world that surrounds the student makes them more critical of their social, economic, political, educational conditions, etc. This directly causes conscious and critical people to rebel against injustice, something that, for example, the Brazilian military regime, as an authoritarian regime, did not want to happen. (Rodrigues, 2021b, p. 104)

Thus, Freire’s understanding that the place of pedagogical practice is a place of understanding social situations, fundamentally political and of rising resistance against an entire colonial heritage that has been relegated to us, opens up an understanding that Freire’s theories are, yes, countercolonial, as they deny the right to exist

to racism, stereotypes and prejudices brought to us by European colonizers.

Freire (1980, p. 69) will tell us that: “education is communication, it is dialogue, insofar as it is not the transfer of knowledge, but a meeting of interlocutor subjects who seek the meaning of meanings.”

Some final considerations

This paper sought to dialogue with Paulo Freire's educational theory to demonstrate how it effectively is a countercolonial theory. We tried, through the use of passages from Freire's writings and other authors, to raise points that we believe make this countercolonial approach clear.

Always working in opposition to the structures of colonial thought, still persistent in our current Brazilian society, Freire will show that a truly liberating and critical education must take into account affectivity instead of violence, dialogue instead of the imposition of knowledge, of critical awareness, instead of the banking education desired by the elites for the less favored classes.

We found that Freirean pedagogy constitutes a process of critical awareness in relation to the world and conditions of oppression, always aiming for freedom and valuing people for who they are. This is done through a historical-dialectical materialist method, based on the thoughts of Marx and Engels.

Freire values pedagogical dialogue and the humanization of personal and social relationships, not admitting discrimination in the teaching-learning processes. When the subject understands the wealth of knowledge and practices that each person can bring to the discussion, the more he/she values the “other”, respecting him/her. Hence Freire's pedagogical thought is also an ethical and humanizing tool, but always in confrontation with colonialism, even if he never said so explicitly.

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