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Didactics and politics in Paulo Freire's philosophy of education: On the abandonment of the concept of conscientization

The aim of this article is to present Freire's experience in Africa as a process that transformed his teaching and learning method as well as his philosophy of education. His participation in the São Toméan literacy campaign resulted in the abandonment of the category of conscientization that was central to his philosophy. Freire's decision was dictated by the fact that the category's interpretations were threatened by teachers who felt superior to learners. During the São Toméan literacy campaign, Freire came to believe that a necessary condition for the social symmetry in education (and in society in general) was to concentrate on community's practical problems, whose solution is a difficult task both for teachers and students. Thing-centered pedagogy (Hodgson et al., 2017; Biesta, 2010; Latour, 2007) — which seems to be a new paradigm in educational theory — can be derived from Freire's philosophy of education.

Keywords: education, conscientization, popular education, Freire, Lusophone Africa, thing-centered pedagogy

Introduction

Paulo Freire's philosophy of education is of inductive character, which means that its development was influenced by his educational undertakings. In result, his theory can be defined as eclectic, that is inspired by different currents of thinking: liberation theology, humanistic psychology, psychoanalysis, American pragmatism, Marxism, personalism, existentialism, hermeneutics, Kantianism, Hegelianism, postcolonial studies and even neo-positivism. Following Afonso C. Scocuglia, in Freire's philosophy of education four phases can be distinguished (Scocuglia, 2005). The early Freire is more pragmatic and liberal, but he becomes more social and community-oriented in the phase of the pedagogy of the oppressed. During the African phase, he is Marxist and concentrated on material aspects of educational processes. Freire's experience of African literacy campaigns was influenced theoretically by conception of materialist pedagogy by Polish marxist Bogdan

Suchodolski (Mafra, 2010). Finally, he is influenced by the postmodernist turn and the North American critical pedagogy.

English editions of Freire's most important books from the African period, that is *Cartas à Guiné-Bissau*. *Registros de uma experiência em processo* (English: *Pedagogy in Process. The Letters to Guinea-Bissau*) (Freire, 1978a; 2016) and the extended version of *A importância do ato de ler* (English: *Literacy. Reading the Word and the World*) (Freire, 1989; Freire, Macedo, 2005), are still present in the English-speaking scientific world. Freire's participation in the literacy campaigns conducted in African countries is also an important topic of the extended interview which he gave to Antonio Faundez (Freire, Faundez, 1989; 1998). However, analysing the works of American critical pedagogy, one may get the impression that the African phase of Freire's work is not appreciated enough. In *Theory and Resistance in Education* by Henry A. Giroux, Freire's African experiences are side issues, whereas the thoughts resulting from other phases of development of his paradigm are the focus of attention (Giroux, 2001). The introduction written by Giroux to *Literacy. Reading the Word and the World* is similarly problematic because the material context of the processes of emancipatory popular education is omitted and the topics concerning the discursive construction of hegemony are brought to the fore (Freire, Macedo, 2005, pp. 1-18). By contrast, the Latin American perspective is different: appreciating the African phase in Freire's life, Brazilian researchers emphasise the meaning of material aspects of emancipatory education and its processes (Faundez, 1996; Romão, Gadotti, 2012; Torres, 1993; 1996). Among American representatives of critical pedagogy, Peter McLaren (2000) approaches such an attitude, as well as Rich Gibson (1996; 2008) who perceives Freire's theory and practise in materialist dialectic categories. However, critical pedagogy is suffering from long-lasting impasse (Ellsworth, 1989; Mallot, 2017) which has its reasons in neglecting material aspects of human relation, especially in education. This impasse could be solved using Freire's experience from São Toméan basic literacy campaign – experience which was based on some kind of materialist pedagogy. However São Toméan basic literacy campaign was spectacular success, similar educational action in Guinea Bissau by Freire was a failure (Harasim, 1983; Pereira, 1989).

The importance of African experience

Carlos A. Torres (1996, p. 129) underlines Freire's fascination with African decolonisation activists. He also writes that his involvement in the literacy campaigns in African countries allowed him to participate in the "socialist experiment" and use the method of emancipatory popular education on the unprecedented scale, along with the ambitious programme of social reforms (Torres, 1996, pp. 134-135).

Torres states:

Freire proved that programmes of adult education helped to raise revolutionary consciousness in fighters for liberation and those engaged in the process of transition to socialism. Therefore, there is need to join, in a more consistent and systematic way, the literacy process with the production process and productive work – this was one of the greatest weaknesses of the early works by Freire (Torres, 1996, p. 134).

Expressing a similar view, Moacir Gadotti underlines the humanistic dimension of focusing on the material aspects of everyday life of popular classes: "Paulo Freire's African experience transformed his pedagogy. Thrown into the whirl of processes of reconstruction of [African] nations, he became aware of the symbiosis between education and productive forces, including work as the principle of pedagogy" (Romão, Gadotti, 2012, p. 60).

To acknowledge the work process as the principle of pedagogy is indeed a crucial element of transformations of Freire's philosophy of education during the African phase, but what is more important from the perspective of this article is the fact that his experiences in Africa made him abandon the category of conscientization, which was until then the very centre of his philosophy. If Freire decided to renounce the concept that was crucial for his thinking, the African experience must have been of enormous significance for his idea of popular education.

Abandoning the concept of conscientization

According to José E. Romão, the concept of re-Africanisation is analogous to the concept of conscientization in the African phase — this is the last time when the term is used in the way typical of the period of the pedagogy of the oppressed (Romão, Gadotti, 2012, p. 49). For Freire himself, conscientization is automatically associated with education as liberation, an act of cognition, a critique of reality, literacy, a social mobilisation of the oppressed, a political act, a historical commitment, a possible utopia (Romão, Gadotti, 2012, p. 50; Freire, 1979, p. 15). Although in the phase of the pedagogy of the oppressed conscientization formed the core of Freire's theory, he eventually stated:

Look, in the 70s I tried to be intensely preoccupied with this problems at that time, it was closely associated with the word *conscientization*, and it was something incredible: wherever I went, I would find word associated with my project, which was, to a great extent, objectively reactionary, regardless of its sometimes being subjectively naive and sometimes clever. What I mean to say is that sometimes one is objectively reactionary, and yet, naively or cleverly so when one knows oneself to be reactionary (Freire apud Escobar et. al., 1994, p. 46).

Thus, during only a decade, the status of conscientization changed from "the central concept of my educational ideas" (Freire, 1979, p. 15) into the concept threatened with "objectively reactionary" interpretations. Examining Freire's works in Portuguese, it is easy to notice where the borderline lies. In 1979, *Conscientização. Teoria e prática da libertação: uma introdução ao pensamento de Paulo Freire* (*Conscientization. Theory and practice of liberation: An introduction to the thought of Paulo Freire*) was published in Brazil. Two years later, in 1981 (other sources indicate 1982; Gadotti, 1996, p. 270), in the book summarising the São Toméan experience, *A importância do ato de ler* (*The importance of the act of reading*), conscientization was not mentioned at all. The "reactionary" interpretations of conscientization

were caused by the asymmetrical relation between the enlightened and emancipated teacher and the illiterate person who was recognised as a “lost man, blind, almost outside of reality” (Freire, Macedo, 2005, p. 28). The focus on practical undertakings of a community – as it was the case in São Tomé and Príncipe (STP) – eliminates the asymmetry between the teacher and the student, which leads to serious didactic and political consequences.

The literacy campaign in STP: politics and didactics

The islands of STP were discovered and settled by the Portuguese in the second half of the 15th century. From the beginning of the 16th century, they started to play a shameful part in the Atlantic slave trade (Caldeira, 1999, pp. 22-24; Siebert, 1999, pp. 17-21). Before gaining independence, the territory of STP, except state owned area, was divided into 84 plantations (Freire stated, wrongly, that there were 75 plantations) owned by the Portuguese (Pape, Rebelo, 2013, pp. 26-33; Freire, 1989, p. 28). Such an absolute social inequality was reflected in the colonial language politics and the organisation of school systems. In the period of the colonial government in Lusophone Africa, there was a strict rationing of education for Africans; the educated group usually formed a working “middle class” (Torres, 1996, pp. 130-131). In the conditions of Guinea-Bissau in the years 1961–1964, only 16.4% of the cohort was enrolled in primary schools (Torres, 1993, p. 128). The status of *assimilado* (assimilated), which was an official classification of literacy skills confirmed by the colonial administration, was granted to only 1,478 Africans (almost 0.3% of the population) living in Guinea-Bissau in 1951 (Piłaszewicz, Rzewuski, 2005, p. 100; Harasim, 1983, pp. 89-97). Taking into consideration the results of deliberate language and education politics, the level of illiteracy in Lusophone Africa was dramatically high.

In *Cartas aos Animadores e às Animadoras Culturais* (*The letters to cultural animators*), Freire writes: “To enable a large number of our comrades, especially from the village, but not only them, to read and write, which was forbidden during the colonial regime, is our political aim that we are pursuing” (Freire, 1978b, p. 3).

The problem of illiteracy was urgent and the scale of literacy campaign was huge: almost every São Toméan had contact with the literacy programme either as a student or as an educator. As Heinz-Peter Gerhardt (1996, p. 165) underlines, during first four years of the campaign, 72% of adult illiterates finished the course and 55% of them “were not illiterate anymore”.

In STP, Freire placed emphasis on the post-literacy process that complemented the literacy campaign. Its goal was to consolidate the knowledge acquired in the campaign, implement the rudiments of grammar and arithmetic, deepen reading the world through reading texts with more varied subjects and a rich content, develop the capability for critical analysis of the world and oral expression, prepare for technical training that would be free from alienation (Torres, 1996, p. 137). The series *A Luta Continua* (acervo.paulofreire.org) comprises six *Popular Culture Notebooks* and an exercise notebook, *Caderno dos exercisios*. Notebook 1 encompasses the initial literacy process and is accompanied by an exercise notebook. Notebook 2 is designed “for the people to participate effectively as subjects in the reconstruction of their nation” (Freire, 1989,

p. 23; Freire, Macedo, 2005, p. 43). It initiates the post-literacy process and is oriented at various generative subjects. Notebook 3 includes subjects related to arithmetic; Notebook 4 is focused on health issues; Notebook 5 on history and popular culture; Notebook 6 on economy and geography (the last two were created by Antonio Faundez) (Freire, 1978b, p. 57-58; 1989, p. 23).

Analysing the literacy campaign in general and the curricular content of the series *A Luta Continua. Cadernos de Cultura Popular* (*The struggle continues. Popular culture notebooks*) in particular, it is impossible not to allude to the title. The first crucial category is "struggle," which Freire calls a "fundamentally pedagogical event" and a "variation of historical, ideological, cultural, political and social psychoanalysis, in which a coach is replaced with a battlefield" and whose goal is the affirmation of the colonised (Freire, Faundez, 1998, p. 58).

The second crucial category is "popular culture" understood as the culture of popular classes, which in the broader sense means the cultural expression of the oppressed and their ways of life. The concept of the oppressed is indeed ambiguous. Its scope was changed during the transformation process of the Freirean paradigm, yet the point of departure was always a certain form of oppression against a group of people. Thus, in the narrow sense, we deal with the culture of popular classes, those who are oppressed because of their race and social class (still, other forms of oppression should not be forgotten). Searching for the answer to the question what popular culture is, we should listen to the authors of *A Luta Continua*:

The colonialists used to say that only they had culture. They said that before their arrival in Africa we did not have a History. That our History began with their coming. These statements are false. They were necessary to the despoiling practice that the colonialists exercised over us. To prolong our economic exploitation as long as possible, they needed to attempt the destruction of our cultural identity, deny our culture, our History. All People have culture, because they work, because they transform the world, and upon transforming it, they are transformed. The dance of the People is culture. The music of the People is culture, as is the way in which the People cultivate the land. Culture is also the way in which the People walk, smile, talk, and sing, while they work.

The *calulu* is culture, as is the way of making *calulu*, as is our taste for foods. Culture is made of the instruments that People use to produce. Culture is the way in which the People understand and express their world and how the People understand themselves in their relation to their world. Culture is the beat of the drum that sounds in the night. Culture is the beat of the drum. Culture is the swaying of the bodies of the People to the beat of the drums (Freire, Macedo, 2005, p. 60).

To appreciate the culture of popular classes is a solution which has at the same time political, ethical and didactic value. This is, as Faundez notices, "the understanding of cultural struggle as a basic element of political and economic struggle" (Freire, Faundez, 1998, pp. 67-68). What is more important is the issue of recognising popular classes – the concept of recognition can be traced back to Hegel's work – that is reflected by a direct connection between didactic and political processes (Freire, Faundez, 1998, pp. 67-68; Freire, 1989, pp. 13-16):

I always saw teaching adults to read and write as a political act, an act of knowledge, and therefore a creative act. I would find it impossible to be engaged in a work of mechanically memorizing vowel sounds, as in the exercise “ba-be-bi-bo-bu, la-le-li-lo-lu”. Nor could I reduce learning to read and write merely to learning words, syllables, or letters, a process of teaching in which the teacher *fills* the supposedly *empty* heads of learners with his or her words. On the contrary, the student is the subject of the process of learning to read and write as an act of knowing and of creating (Freire, Macedo, 2005, p. 23).

In another part, he states:

From the critical point of view, it is as impossible to deny the political nature of the educational process as it is to deny the educational character of the political act. This does not mean, however, that the political nature of the educational process and the educational character of the political act drain the understanding of that process and this act. Just as a neutral education that claims to be at the service of humanity, of human beings in general, is impossible, so is a political practice devoid of educational meaning. But in this sense, all political parties are also always educators, and, as such, their political purpose is to win or lose souls as they denounce and issue statements. But it is in this sense, as much for the educational process as for the political act, that one of the fundamental questions arises: *in favor of whom and what* (and thus *against whom and what*) do we promote education? And *in favor of whom and what* do we develop political activity? The more we gain this clarity of understanding through practice, the more we perceive the impossibility of separating the inseparable: the education of politics (Freire, Macedo, 2005, p. 25).

Such a question, which is both political and didactic — “in favor of whom and what?” — should be answered with another question: “to recognise whom and what?”. This is both an ethical and political answer that is focused on the material context of everyday life and simultaneously brings didactic consequences. In a letter to the teachers who participated in the São Toméan literacy campaign, Freire (1978b, p. 5) juxtaposed a “revolutionary educator” (*educador revolucionario*) with a “colonial professor” (*professor colonial*):

In the colonial education, educators usually transferred to us “their” knowledge and our role was to absorb it, even though their knowledge distorted our reality, which was good for the interest of the colonisers. Colonial professors [*alfabetizador*] “taught” that this was “b” and that was “a” and together they formed “ba”, which learners had to repeat and remember (Freire, 1978b, p. 6).

The São Toméan literacy campaign was supposed to be completely different. Everything started in Monte Mário, a small fishing village located in the south-east of São Tomé Island. In a letter to teachers, Freire refers to Manuel Pinto da Costa’s speech:

One of the Culture Circles already exists on the beach of Monte Mário. The people who participate in the literacy campaign can guarantee that silence will not return. Objective conditions are created due to which in Culture Circles, through practice and reflection, a permanent dialogue is established that includes generative

concepts consistent with the essence of a particular person who is to liberate himself exploring his potentiality (Pinto da Costa apud: Freire, 1978b, p. 6).

This "new cultural politics" (Freire, 1997, p. 91) was supposed to break the "culture of silence" (Freire, 1979, p. 33-38) as a result of applying the principle of granting privilege to the cognitive perspective of the colonised peoples (Silva, 2005, p. 212).

Conclusion: productivity and symmetry in education

Freire writes that the point of departure for creating the literacy programme and *A Luta Continua* was to determine generative words. They presented a wide array of subjects because learners and educators were immersed in a similar reality (production and ways of life) (Freire, 1978b, p. 12) and were phonetically rich, so that all consonants, vowels and syllables that appeared in Portuguese be introduced with a relatively small number of words (Freire, 1978b, p. 12). In the book, there are 20 such terms, always accompanied by an image: people, beautiful, *matabala* (arrowleaf elephant ear), health, radio, unity, discipline, work, factory, brick, bowl, school, mosquito, cough, wine, plantation, hoe, richness, rice, rain. The combination of a generative word with its written and graphic representation is called the encoding process (Freire, 1978b, pp. 12-13; Freire, Macedo, 2005, p. 24, pp. 45-46).

The discourse of *A Luta Continua* is multimodal: the juxtaposition of images and texts that refer to generative words is supposed to be a challenge to students and teachers during the decoding process that takes place in a form of dialogue between the two parties of the educational process (Freire, 1978b, pp. 13-14; Freire, Macedo, 2005, p. 24). Such a challenge, however, is not only theoretical, but above all practical; in addition, practicality is not limited to a classroom, but applies to students' and teachers' real position in their world. In other words, school is not supposed to be a place where knowledge is distributed, but a Culture Circle, a place where the local community meets, where local and national problems, as well as their solutions, are discussed, which is linguistically represented in encoded generative terms and the decoding process (Freire, 1978b, p. 14). Thus, the learning process is not about practising fictional solutions and scenarios, but holding a dialogue about the "possible dream." In such an educational situation, the unity between theory and praxis, between the educational process and the transformation of the world, occurs, which can be reflected by a programme of ambitious social and economic reforms. Since "productive work is the source of knowledge" (Freire, 1989, p. 28; Freire, Macedo, 2005, p. 48), difficult tasks – understood as assignments located in the zone of proximal development of an individual and a community – will include community's practical undertakings to solve its practical, everyday problems. The symmetry between both sides of educational exchange can be achieved only when teachers and students are faced with difficult tasks.

This is a completely different vision of education than the one which is present in a knowledge-based society, whose foundations – according to Tomasz Szkudlarek – are the strategies to create ignorance by depriving learners of the feeling of competence through making their knowledge meaningless (Szkudlarek,

2016, pp. 74-93). Following Jaques Rancière (1991, p. 7), in such a society education is to be regarded as enforced stultification. Therefore, a gesture to recognise a learner, even an adult illiterate, as competent and try to solve together real social problems — which are equally difficult for learners and teachers — is a political and didactic equality solution, whose results concern both a classroom and a society as a whole. As a global society we have to face two main problems, that is global ecological disaster and global social inequality. Both of these problems are perceived as unsolvable also because perception of the humanity as it was not ready to find and apply solutions. Focusing on discourses without taking to consideration material aspects of everyday life, leads us to impasse of verbosity.

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Streszczenie

Dydaktyka i polityka w filozofii wychowania Paula Freirego: O porzuceniu pojęcia konscientyzacji

Zasadniczym celem tego artykułu jest zaprezentowanie afrykańskich doświadczeń Freirego, doświadczeń, które przekształciły tak jego metodę kształcenia, jak filozofię wychowania. Jego udział w saotomejskiej akcji alfabetyzacyjnej zaowocował porzuceniem kategorii konscientyzacji, która dotychczas była centralnym pojęciem jego filozofii. Taka postawa Freirego wzięła się z tego, że nauczyciele interpretowali konscientyzację, zakładając swoją wyższość względem osób uczących się. W trakcie saotomejskiej akcji alfabetyzacyjnej Freire doszedł do wniosku, że społeczna symetria w edukacji (podobnie jak w ogóle w społeczeństwie) bierze się ze skupienia się procesów komunikacji na praktycznych problemach wspólnoty, które są na równi trudne do rozwiązania dla nauczycieli, jak i uczniów. Wobec czego, pedagogika rzeczy (Hodgson et al., 2017; Biesta, 2010; Latour, 2007) — którą można postrzegać jako nowy paradygmat w teorii edukacji — może być wywiedziona z filozofii Freirego.

Słowa kluczowe: pedagogika, konscientyzacja, edukacja ludowa, Freire, Afryka Luźnoafrykańska, pedagogika rzeczy

Resumo

Didática e política na filosofia de educação de Paulo Freire: sobre o abandono do conceito de conscientização

O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar a experiência de Freire em África como um processo que transformou o seu método de ensino e aprendizagem, bem como sua filosofia de educação. Sua participação na campanha de alfabetização de São Tomé e Príncipe resultou no abandono da categoria de conscientização que era fundamental para sua filosofia. A decisão de Freire foi motivada pelo facto de que as interpretações da categoria eram ameaçadas pelos professores que se sentiam superiores aos alunos. Durante a campanha de alfabetização de São Tomé e Príncipe, Freire passou a acreditar que uma condição necessária para a simetria social na educação (e na sociedade em geral) era concentrar-se nos problemas práticos da comunidade, cuja solução fosse uma tarefa difícil tanto para professores como para estudantes. A pedagogia centrada no objecto (Hodgson et al., 2017; Biesta, 2010; Latour, 2007) — que parece ser um novo paradigma na teoria educacional — pode ser derivada da filosofia de educação de Freire.

Palavras-chave: educação, conscientização, educação popular, Freire, África lusófona, pedagogia do objeto