

Rather than expecting too much of the educator, I do not believe he “expects” anything at all. He never asks his reader to agree with him. He invites the reader to think, to feel, to wonder, and to care for the quality of life, even as he enacts these traits in the very style of his writing. He offers little by way of concrete advice, despite the wealth of techniques and suggestions he had at hand. Instead, he invites people to use their intelligence and imagination in dealing with the concrete situations in which they find themselves, and which nobody knows better than they. I believe his philosophy will strike a chord with anyone who aspires to live fully and to assist others in doing the same.



## Paulo Freire's Politics and Pedagogy

**Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille McCarthy**

Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students.

—Paulo Freire

**SOCIAL HOPE**—hope for a better, more equitable future—is crucial for all teachers, no matter their grade level. For who can teach effectively without a sense of optimism that his or her pupils live in a world that encourages an increase in justice, equality, and collaboration rather than in a world that earmarks these qualities for decline? In our present era—when expanding poverty, ecological damage, and international conflict have left social hope in short supply—Paulo Freire's voice is a treasured one. As we will show, this Brazilian philosopher and educator brings together the two great reformist visions of Western thought—Christianity and Marxism—in a way that demands all instructors' attention. That is, Freire's blend of these two visions can be a source of social hope for all of us as classroom teachers, a source we need if our practice is to be both effective and full-hearted.

We divide our essay into three sections. In the first, we present the intellectual movements that influenced Freire as he developed his politics and pedagogy. In the second, we discuss the influence of Freire's politics on his pedagogy. Finally, we present a brief overview of the worldwide impact of Freire's ideas.

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## INTELLECTUAL MOVEMENTS THAT INFLUENCED FREIRE'S POLITICS

Four historically important intellectual streams circulate through Freire's work: Marxism, neocolonial critique, existentialism, and Christianity. Of these, the strongest is, arguably, Marxism, with its focus on antagonism between the working and owner classes.

### Marxism and Class Antagonisms in Freire's Politics

Paulo Freire was born into a middle-class family in Recife, Brazil, on September 19, 1921. Recife is a port city in northeastern Brazil, one of the poorest regions in the world. In 1960, 75% of this region's population was illiterate, and the life expectancy for men was 28 and for women, 32. The gap between landowners and peasants was enormous, with 50% of the land owned by approximately 3% of the population (Taylor, 1993, p. 17). Although Freire was born middle class, he and his family were seriously affected by the 1929 economic depression. His father lost his job and then died 2 years later, leaving the family in dire economic straits. It was then, as a young child, that Freire experienced firsthand the extreme poverty and intractable class antagonisms that still mark Brazilian society. Although in his early writings, such as *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1969/1996), Freire expressed the belief that Brazil would be able to move gradually and peacefully to a more "open" and democratic society (p. 8), his work takes on a more revolutionary tone after the 1964 military coup in Brazil. This coup leads to Freire's imprisonment, a brief time in solitary confinement, and a 15-year exile.

Freire's most famous post-exile work is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2003), a book that has sold nearly a million copies. In it, Freire's analysis of the ills of contemporary society and its educational institutions reflects the influence of Marx's view of social-class antagonisms. Freire, like Marx, sees class conflict as central to understanding human history, and he forcefully argues that only a fundamental, revolutionary transformation of society will bring about justice and equality for Brazilians. The bourgeois or oppressor class will have to be replaced, he tells us, and it will take the same amount of violence to do this that the oppressors have used to gain and maintain their grip on the poor (p. 56).

### Neocolonial Critique in Freire's Politics

Although Freire's analysis of social and educational ills in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* employs the Marxist concepts of *bourgeoisie* and *proletariat*, his pre-exile years made him very much aware that the contours of these class divisions were often shaped by the legacy of colonialism. Portugal had domi-

nated and exploited Brazil's native population during Brazil's colonial period, and Freire saw this exploitation continue in the decades after independence in the 19th century. Despite Brazil's separation from Portugal in 1822 and transformation into a republic in 1899, large landholders continued in Freire's time to control all aspects of their workers' lives: economic, political, judicial, and educational.

Freire's critique of neocolonialism comes through loud and clear in his writing. He tells us that the oppressed classes have an existence that is "a form of death in life" (1987, p. 147). He argues that many peasants have been so dominated by the large landowners that they have become totally passive. They see themselves as no more capable of influencing their fate than do animals or trees. For example, one peasant tells Freire, "I have no tomorrow that is any different from today that is any different from yesterday" (Freire, 1997/2000, p. 42). Thus, the reformer's task, as Freire sees it, is not simply to organize workers so they can wrest control from their masters. The more fundamental challenge is to help workers and peasants exorcise the attitudes they have bought lock, stock, and barrel from their oppressors. Workers need to overcome the idea that they are inherently inferior, cannot think for themselves, and are unable to do anything about their low station in life.

Thus, Freire's educational work with peasants focuses on helping them see themselves as fully human. He wants them to appreciate the wisdom they already possess by renaming the world in light of their experience of oppression so that they can end oppression. This effort to expunge from the minds of workers the oppressive myths perpetuated by the neocolonial ruling class relies on a method of critical thinking that Freire calls "conscientization." He describes it as the "stripping" down of reality in order to understand "the myths that deceive and perpetuate the dominating structure" (1972a, p. 6). This method of "conscientizing education" requires that teachers enable students to join them as active learners who name and critique their own economic and political circumstances.

During Freire's 15-year exile, he traveled widely, and he came to see Brazilians' neocolonial situation as typical of Third World people all over the globe. By *Third World*, Freire does not have in mind only people in countries that have not industrialized. He has also has in mind people in so-called First World countries, including the United States, who have minimal opportunities to escape their financial and cultural poverty (1970/2003, p. 157). Freire tells us:

The concept of the Third World is ideological and political, not geographic. The so-called First World has within it and against it its own Third World. And the Third World has its First World, represented by the ideology of domination and the power of the ruling class. (1987, pp. 139-140)

Further, Freire came to see neocolonialism as responsible for not only the subjugation of the worker class but also the subjugation of “dependent” nations, among them Brazil, whose loans and trade arrangements are controlled by more industrially and militarily powerful countries. His most scathing social criticisms are directed at what he sees as the moral bankruptcy of the dominant nations, in particular, rich countries’ indifference to the suffering of the world’s poor. He never lets his First World readers forget that the earth only sustains their extravagant standard of living at the cruel expense of the Third World poor. As one example, he points out that the amount it would cost to avert the deaths of 10 million Third World children who die annually is no more than the amount that U.S. cigarette companies spend yearly on advertising (1992/1999, pp. 94–95).

### Existentialism in Freire’s Politics

In addition to Marxian influences and neocolonial critique, existentialist thought plays an important role in Freire’s analysis of the human situation and his ideas for social reform. As he develops his criticisms of the ruling class, Freire sees oppressors’ behavior as not only an attempt to maintain their own interests but also an effort to deny the humanity of the oppressed. This effort, according to Freire, ends up damaging not only the humanity of the workers but also the humanity of the rulers. To explain the oppressor-oppressed relationship, Freire draws upon such key existential concepts as freedom, being, and having. According to Freire, humans have a fundamental desire—what he characterizes as an “ontological need”—to be free. It may be suppressed at times; it may be eclipsed at times. But eventually it comes to the fore. Our need to be free is understood by Freire as a need to create or, more specifically, to name oneself and the world in cooperation with others. As we have already seen, helping people fulfill their “ontological need” to be free is the object of Freire’s educational initiatives with the oppressed class. As people gain their freedom, they become historical agents, reshaping themselves and their environment. Put another way, when we are free, we create what has not yet been. And as we create being, we discover our true nature.<sup>1</sup>

Freire continues to draw upon the existential themes of freedom and being as he analyzes the oppressor’s mentality. In Freire’s view, the colonial landlords and capitalist owners build their lives around “having” as opposed to “being.” The desire to “have” is, for Freire, driven by fear and lack of trust. Oppressors’ fears lead them to dominate things and people. They fear letting others have freedom because they do not trust the world and others. Echoing the work of Erich Fromm, Freire says the oppressor class is “necrophilic” rather than “biophilic” (1970/2003, pp. 59–60). That is, the ruling class, in its obsessive need to protect itself, ends up promoting death rather

than life. Its efforts to control others denies them their right to be free, that is, to *be*, and, in the process, the dominant class destroys its own chances for true freedom and being.

How does Freire believe we can get out of this situation? How do we stop this apparently endless cycle of fear leading to domination leading to the destruction of freedom and our chance to truly be? We have already indicated part of Freire’s answer: critical thinking, or “conscientization,” a method that helps peasants and workers overcome their passivity by becoming conscious about and ridding themselves of myths perpetuated by the ruling class. This approach by Freire is in line with orthodox Marxist thought. But there is more to Freire’s remedy for the poverty and injustice that haunt the modern world than just critical thinking. He wants nothing less than individuals’ total transformation.

### Christianity in Freire’s Politics

Freire (1970/2003) is not naive about the dangers of class revolution. He realizes that simply replacing the tyranny of the capitalist class with a tyranny of the worker class leaves us no better off than we are at present (pp. 44, 57). That is, tyranny and domination by one class—whether bourgeoisie or proletariat—over another leads to profound injustice and inequality. Freire is also aware of how someone like Stalin can betray the oppressed class for which he was, presumably, the standard bearer. As a result, what Freire wants—and what he hopes educational reform can help bring about—is individual as well as social revolution. He wants radical individual transformation as well as radical social transformation. Thus, the Christian idea of death and rebirth is central to Freire’s thinking. He wants peasants to die to their passivity and be reborn as free, creative people. In parallel ways, he wants members of the oppressor class to die to their “having” ways and be reborn in solidarity with the poor (1970/2003, pp. 61, 133). Freire’s belief that individuals can die and be reborn with new commitments—what he calls the Easter experience—reflects his strong Christian orientation. This orientation is also apparent in Freire’s advocacy for the poor, an advocacy that reflects his appreciation of Christ’s deep concern for those at the bottom of the social ladder. Freire’s championing of the poor is seen in his appreciation of peasants’ language, his faith in their wisdom, and his respect for the unique vantage point from which they view the inequities of modern society (1970/2003, p. 45).

In addition, Freire’s Christian roots are evident in his claim that authentic dialogue is necessary if we are to establish a more just, equitable, and democratic society. He argues that such dialogue depends on the virtues of faith, hope, and love (*caritas*) (1970/2003, pp. 89–92). He says that authentic dialogue requires that we trust and put our hopes in others. He says, “Love is at

the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself" (p. 89). This means being present to other persons and loving other persons without putting demands on what sorts of people they should be. Freire says this is important for teachers as well as revolutionary leaders. Only leaders who trust and love the people—who are willing to listen to and learn from the people—have, in Freire's view, truly died to their oppressor ways and been reborn in solidarity with the oppressed. Likewise, only teachers who truly believe they can learn from their students, who trust them, and who give them the freedom to choose what they want to become are effective educators (pp. 68–69).

This Christian-rooted, sympathetic dialogue, with its emphasis on faith, hope, and love, blends with Freire's existential influences, particularly Martin Buber's concept of the I-Thou relationship (Freire, 1970/2003, p. 167). When we are in an I-Thou relationship with others, we treat others as free beings. We use our trust in them, our hope in them, and our charitable love for them, to help them recognize and fulfill their special potential. This sort of relationship respects another's being, and it is in sharp contrast with I-It relationships, in which we use others for our own benefit, treating them not as free beings but as objects.

### THE INFLUENCE OF FREIRE'S POLITICS ON HIS PEDAGOGY

Freire tells his North American audience that he cannot give specific pedagogical advice and that it is up to individual teachers to assess their school situations and experiment accordingly (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 211). However, he dramatically articulates his fundamental teaching approach in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and we believe that it presents useful cautions and guidelines for U.S. teachers. As we discuss Freire's pedagogy, we will show how the influences that shaped his politics also shaped his approach to the classroom.

#### Marxism in Freire's Pedagogy

Influenced by Marxist thought, Freire emphasizes to his readers that teaching is always a political act (Freire, 1987, pp. 188–189). Educational institutions, as Freire sees them, are very much controlled by the ruling class. The dominant group tries to use schools to develop pupil attitudes and beliefs that legitimize the prevailing social structure and help those in power maintain their power. This means, for Freire, that all teachers, whether they like it or not, are involved in politics when they enter the classroom. Even instructors teaching such apparently politically neutral subjects as math and psychology, according to Freire, need to be aware that if they do not discuss the ways in which their students' mathematical and psychological skills will

be used by their prospective employees, teachers, by omission, bolster the status quo. In adopting this stance, Freire follows in principle the attitude reflected in Marx's famous comment about educators in his *Theses on Feuerbach*. In his Third Thesis, Marx writes,

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. (1888/1978, p. 144)

In an important sense, Freire sets out to "educate the educator." He sets out to exorcise a myth fostered by the ruling class that the structure of schools and teachers' subject matter and instructional approaches are politically neutral and without bearing upon the perpetuation or reform of the prevailing social order. He points out that most contemporary classrooms are exemplifications of "banking" education and, thus, serve to perpetuate the status quo. Freire writes,

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (1970/2003, p. 72)

We can see in this passage Freire's effort to educate the educator about the political ramifications of keeping students docile, of viewing instruction as something to be done *to* students rather than something to be done *with* them. This sort of banking approach, according to Freire, plays into the hands of the ruling class, since it keeps students unaware of their own critical abilities and the power of their own language and voice. By contrast, teachers should be "problem-posers." That is, they need to pose problems that they cooperatively explore with students rather than dictate solutions that have been unilaterally derived. Teachers should become co-learners with their pupils, genuinely valuing students' skills and wisdom instead of treating them as empty vessels to be filled. However, since most teachers do not engage in this sort of problem posing, they work, often unintentionally, in the interests of the ruling class. In this situation, Freire tells us, teachers who rely on banking education and students whose docility they promote are in "contradiction," and overcoming this contradiction is the primary task of "libertarian" pedagogy:

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to

know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite. . . . The *raison d'être* of libertarian education, on the other hand, lies in its drive towards reconciliation. Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students. (1970/2003, p. 72)

### Neocolonial Critique in Freire's Pedagogy

Freire further shows how political he believes teaching to be when he compares teachers and clergy in neocolonial, capitalist societies with the police and soldiers in colonial societies. He suggests that whereas the colonial landlord used police and soldiers to keep the natives in check, neocolonial capitalists use teachers and clergy to keep the poor and working class in check (1970/2003, pp. 62–63). In other words, the dominant class tries to use educators to convince students that the social and economic system that provides some people with enormous wealth and others with grinding poverty is a just system. Similarly, the dominant class tries to use clergy to convince the poor that their struggles are either God's punishments or their God-given chances to accept suffering and purify their faith (Freire, 1987, p. 131). Of course, Freire sees these views as oppressive myths that need to be dispelled by teachers and their students through the collaborative use of critical thinking, or conscientization.

### Christianity and Existentialism in Freire's Pedagogy

Why does Freire argue so strongly that these capitalist myths need to be exorcised? Why does he believe that capitalism and its inequities cannot be justified? Freire says that the usual attempt to justify the enormous differences between wealthy and poor on the grounds that, under capitalism, everyone has an equal right to compete for wealth does not hold up. He argues that people with little money and cultural capital cannot compete on an equal footing with those who have great amounts of both. In addition, Freire rejects the view that democracy is primarily about the freedom to earn and keep as much money as one can. To the contrary, he believes that the only just society is one based upon the idea that what matters most is giving people a chance to help one another realize their full potential. Thus, as he notes in the passage from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that we quoted above, educational reform begins by replacing the egoistic, dominating I-It relationships that characterize most classrooms with loving creative, I-Thou relationships. It begins by solving the "teacher-student contradiction."<sup>2</sup>

### FREIRE'S INFLUENCE WORLDWIDE

Freire's philosophy of education has had significant global impact because of the power of his ideas and his exile-enforced international travels. His initial influence was in Brazil, where he helped establish the Movement of Popular Culture in 1960 and then, in 1961, became the first director of the Department of Cultural Extension Service at the University of Recife. These programs had unusual success, with large numbers of rural peasants learning to read and write in just 45 days. Freire employed a phonics and illustrations method that allowed his adult students to write and discuss their own words and sentences. In addition, he focused on words such as *favela* (slum), *trabalho* (work), and *riqueza* (wealth) and illustrations of situations that were important to his students. That is, Freire followed his own dictum that education is always political. Because he began with words and concepts that had social and political meaning for students, instead of decontextualized words such as *tree* and *bird*, pupils were not only more attentive but also more likely to be active and critical learners. Freire's work was so successful in northeastern Brazil that he was asked to direct the National Literacy Program by Brazil's Ministry of Culture and Education in 1963 (Freire, 1969/1996, pp. 41–84).

However, the following year, the Brazilian military staged a successful coup. Because this conservative junta saw Freire's success with adult literacy and his political pedagogy as a threat, he was exiled. After spending 5 years in Chile, where he worked at the Chilean Institute for Land Reform and composed *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire went to Harvard in 1969 and taught there for 10 months. At Harvard, he influenced numerous American scholars who subsequently became important in the education field. These figures include Antonia Darder, Henry Giroux, bell hooks, Peter McLaren, Ira Shor, and Kathleen Weiler.

After his time at Harvard, Freire went to Geneva to become director of education at the World Council of Churches. In this position he had opportunities to discuss his educational philosophy and put it into practice on the international scene. He was especially active in the mid-1970s in helping to rebuild the school systems of former Portuguese colonies in Africa: Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, Mozambique, and Angola. His work with the revered African revolutionary Amílcar Cabral is well documented in Freire's *Pedagogy in Process: Letters to Guinea-Bissau* (1978). Finally, in 1979, after 15 years in exile, Freire was able to return to Brazil, where he could once again exert a direct influence on his own country's educational practices. He did this as adult education supervisor for Brazil's Workers' Party (1980–1986); as minister of education for the city of São Paulo (1988–1991); and as professor of education at the Catholic University of São Paulo, where he taught until he died on May 2, 1997.

Besides taking into account Freire's international travels, we trace his worldwide influence to two features of his work. The first is his ability to blend the two great utopian visions in Western thought: Christian and Marxian. Freire is able to blend these visions, which are often seen as contradictory, because he finds Marx's efforts to build a classless, poverty-free society fully compatible with Christ's goals of equality and justice:

I am convinced that we as Christians have an enormous task to perform, presuming that we are capable of setting aside our idealistic myths and in that way sharing in the revolutionary transformation of society, instead of stubbornly denying the extremely important contribution of Karl Marx. (1972b, p. 11)

In other words, Freire does not see Christians who work for greater earthly justice as mistakenly taking on this-worldly causes that are best left to secular people. Quite the contrary, he believes that those who toil for justice in this world are sharers in God's creative work. They carry on the tradition established by Christ's championing of the poor as reported in the Gospels. As he says, "Christ was no conservative" (1987, p. 139). That is, Freire does not view Third World poverty, as some Christians do, as God's will and its acceptance as a sign of one's renunciation of material pleasures. Rather, he sees poverty and injustice as inimical to living as human beings. Thus, the true work of all of us, for Freire, is the active promotion of greater earthly equality and democracy rather than passive waiting for transcendent eternal bliss. It is this worldly work that, in his view, should unite all Marxists and Christians. His blend of these two visions not only shaped education projects worldwide; it also had a formative influence on one of the most powerful reform movements in the world today, namely, liberation theology (see Berryman, 1987; Cone, 1986; Gutierrez, 1973).<sup>3</sup>

In addition to Freire's powerful blend of Marxism and Christianity, his substantial influence results from his ability to speak for people who have long been silenced. The African American educator bell hooks initially heard Freire lecture when she was a graduate student at the University of California, Santa Cruz. For the first time, hooks explains, she felt that someone was speaking about her and her experience as a member of an oppressed group in an oppressive society (1994, pp. 45–58). In sum, although Freire was writing primarily in the context of neocolonial South America, his work has had far-reaching influence because oppressed people around the world have found their own voice in his language. He has enabled countless people to see and name their world for the first time, and in helping them speak about their world, he has helped them take their first steps toward changing it.

## CONCLUSION

Freire's ability to weave together diverse traditions—Marxist, neocolonial, Christian, and existential—gave him a fruitful, critical perspective on contemporary education. It enabled him to make clear the ways in which the intellectual habits and beliefs of both teachers and students are shaped by the dominant class and an oppressive social structure. Working from this perspective, he was able to contribute to the ongoing efforts of educational reformers to better understand human nature and the conditions that promote intelligent reordering of oneself and one's culture.

Regarding Freire's impact upon politics and social change, his work gave theoretical underpinning to successful revolutions in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Guinea-Bissau as well as reform efforts by liberal factions of South America's Catholic and Protestant churches. However, despite these positive results, Freire, at the end of his life, was not naive about the actual progress that had been made toward his libertarian goals. In his last book, *Pedagogy of the Heart* (1997/2000), he laments the ongoing and pervasive corruption of Brazilian officials and the terrible poverty and illiteracy that still existed in the northeastern province where he was born. Yet while continuing to publicly and courageously denounce this social injustice, he also lauds the steps toward democracy that Brazil had taken since instituting a system of representative, regularly elected government.

Although the specific political and educational advances that can be directly credited to Freire's work are limited, we believe that this fact should not be cause for pessimism. The heavy weight of custom is always on the side of the status quo. This tendency means that while Freire would have us never forget the encompassing, long-term goals of educational reform, he would also remind us not to overlook the small immediate gains that individuals can make in their own classrooms. These, for Freire, often have important positive repercussions. Further, he reminds us that social reform occurs one act at a time and that every classroom, no matter the grade level, is a potential source of social hope.