

PAULO FREIRE'S LEGACY AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN DARK TIMES

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As democracy trembles on the edge, its foundations battered across the globe, education rises as the heart of the struggle - a pulse that beats with the promise of freedom and the resilience of knowledge and empowerment. It is no coincidence that education, both within schools and through the powerful currents of culture, serves as a seedbed for fostering engaged citizens, cultivating critical thought, and sowing the hopes of a more just and compassionate future. Democracy breathes through the presence of such citizens - a radical notion, particularly in a world where manufactured ignorance shores up authoritarian might. To think freely has become an act of defiance and danger, and the very spaces that sustain this freedom are besieged by the relentless advances of fascist forces. In these dark times, we are called to draw deeply from the wellspring of history, reclaiming its legacy of struggle and its audacious visions of hope. This call brings us back to the enduring work of Paulo Freire, one of the most prophetic educators of the last century, whose teachings remain a beacon for those who dare to imagine and build a world beyond oppression.

Paulo Freire, the radical Brazilian educator, was not just an academic but a revolutionary, a fierce advocate for the oppressed, whose lifelong struggle for economic, educational, and social justice has left an indelible mark on generations of teachers, students, and cultural workers worldwide. His seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), written under the brutal political repression of 1960s Brazil, resonates even more today amid the global rise of authoritarianism and attacks on critical thought. Freire understood that education is never neutral; it is inherently a political act. It either liberates or domesticates, empowers or subjugates.

Born in 1921 in Recife, Brazil, Freire's experiences of poverty and inequality shaped his commitment to the oppressed. Deeply influenced by liberation theology, he pioneered an emancipatory pedagogy rooted in critical literacy - a tool not only for understanding the world but for transforming it. After the military coup in Brazil in 1964, Freire was imprisoned for 70 days and exiled

for nearly two decades. Even upon his return to Brazil in 1980, his activism persisted, making him a tireless voice for the marginalized until his death on 2 May 1997. As a close friend and collaborator of Paulo for fifteen years, starting in 1980, I saw firsthand his steadfast belief that democratizing education is at the heart of political resistance. Today, as neoliberal and authoritarian regimes worldwide seek to suppress critical thought and destroy public and higher education as a crucial public good, Freire's ideas have become more vital than ever. In these perilous times, his work is not merely relevant - it is a radical call to action. As fascism resurges globally and civic culture collapses under the weight of manufactured ignorance, merely remembering Freire is insufficient. We must reclaim his legacy as a rallying cry for resistance and rebellion (Giroux and DiMaggio, 2024).

Freire understood that education and politics are inseparable; teaching critically is an act of defiance and a direct challenge to oppression. He envisioned pedagogy as a practice of freedom - one that is deeply egalitarian and aims to overthrow capitalism, not simply reform it (Freire, 2000). He opposed not only the repressive pedagogies of his time but also the broader political and economic systems that imposed authoritarian ideologies on society. Freire's vision of pedagogy as a practice of freedom embraced dissent as a fundamental right, challenging dominant norms while promoting social and economic equality and human liberation (Aronowitz, 2008).

Freire's pedagogy is a living project of freedom, not a sterile method or a simple set of classroom techniques. He saw critical pedagogy as a deeply theoretical, intellectual, and ethical project, intertwined with larger struggles for educational, economic, and political transformation. Unlike many critics who reduced Freire's approach to a method, his vision extends far beyond technical skills. It is rooted in a radical democratic humanism where the process of education aligns with the broader goal of achieving equality, justice, and freedom. He believed that genuine transformation requires democratic practices, involving participatory engagement between teachers and students. This perspective contrasts sharply with dominant educational models that prioritise hierarchical relationships, banking forms of education, teaching for the test, and repressive forms of discipline. Freire's notion of pedagogy was not only egalitarian, it took

matters of history, contexts, and the voices of the oppressed as a starting point for a liberatory pedagogy (Leonard and McLaren, 2015).

Freire's early work in Brazil's rural northeast region exemplified his belief in the capacity of semi-literate people to possess meaningful knowledge, rather than be trained in methods. Rejecting an unquestioning notion of teacher authority, he developed a model where the teacher was not an authoritarian figure but a co-investigator alongside students. This model emphasised a dialectical relationship between teacher and student, where both parties contributed to the production of knowledge. The teacher brought theoretical and philosophical insights, while students offered rich insights from their lived experiences. Freire argued that education, in this sense, is a dialogic process that involves a reciprocal exchange of ideas aimed at uncovering and challenging the socio-political conditions that maintain inequality and diverse forms of oppression.

In the realm of critical pedagogy, Freire demanded that educators do far more than transmit knowledge; they must ignite a fire of critical consciousness in students, a passion for confronting the urgent social injustices of their time, and a readiness to become active, fearless agents of change. Freire's vision was revolutionary - empowering students to see through the veils of power that shape their lives and to seize this awareness as a weapon to reshape their own realities. He championed informed dialogue and critical consciousness as the very essence of liberation, rejecting the suffocating dictates of top-down education, where knowledge is imposed upon allegedly passive minds. For Freire, the classroom was a space where knowledge is collectively constructed and where students learn to question the ideologies that sustain their oppression.

Freire was more than an intellectual - he was a revolutionary whose work provides both a profound analysis and a concrete path to liberation. He recognised that justice requires informed action and that education, inherently political, is the key to empowering individuals to reflect, take control of their lives, and critically engage in the struggle for power, agency, and a more just world. Freire's message was unequivocal: an informed, critically engaged populace is the most formidable force against tyranny, with education serving as the bedrock of this transformative power. He believed that radical change must be both

democratic and participatory, recognising that subjectivity, identity, and consciousness are central to any meaningful political and economic transformation.

For Freire, education was a vital aspect of politics because it addressed how people think, what they value, and the desires and knowledge that shape their actions. He believed that education was always political because it was not only a battle over ideas, knowledge, social relations and a particular conception of the future, it was also a battle over agency, identity, and how students came to narrate themselves - tell their own stories. Freire observed that education in the broadest sense was eminently political because it offered students the vision, language, and practices for self-reflection, a self-managed life, and particular notions of critical agency. He understood that politics follows culture, emphasising the need for educators to engage with how individual and collective needs are shaped, legitimised, and lived within specific economic, political, and everyday contexts. Freire saw culture as a form of power - an influential pedagogical force and a potent machinery of persuasion and belief.

Paulo Freire claimed that informed citizens are essential to the pursuit of justice. He rejected the notion of education as mere training or neutral transmission of knowledge. Instead, he saw pedagogy as a political and moral practice that equips students to become critical citizens, deepening their engagement with democracy. Freire's vision was radical because he knew that only an informed populace could act in the name of economic and justice. An often overlooked aspect of Freire's pedagogy is its emphasis on subjectivity and the crucial role it plays in social transformation. Drawing on thinkers like Erich Fromm, Freire recognised that people's willingness to challenge oppression is often constrained by deeply rooted fears and desires for material security (Fromm, 1994). He believed that without confronting these internal barriers, revolutionary efforts would remain superficial, unable to effect real change. This understanding shaped his pedagogical approach, which emphasised the interplay between individual consciousness and the material conditions of society - how a critical awareness of these mutually informing forces can both shape and be shaped by the world.

For Freire, education, civic literacy, and critical pedagogy were valuable only when they directly improved lives, inspired a sense of possibility, and built a path toward a more just, empowering, and socialist future. He argued that true social emancipation requires not only a reshaping of economic and institutional structures, but also a meaningful transformation in people's attitudes, consciousness, and ways of living. Freire believed that critical education could equip the oppressed and young people to challenge injustice, take bold risks, and envision a future of genuine hope and possibility. His radical faith in education's power was not merely a conviction - it was a commitment to restructuring society, grounded in the inseparable connection between identity, power, and the political struggle for liberation. Freire understood that theory is born out of real struggles, not the other way around. He insisted on starting with the concrete problems people face in their everyday lives, using theory as a tool for addressing and solving those problems. For Freire, theory was never an abstract exercise; it was a weapon for liberation, drawn from the lived experiences of those in struggle. By linking the transformation of individual consciousness to collective resistance, Freire's pedagogy becomes a blueprint for genuine social change (Patton, 1995: 227).

In the current historical moment, education is under siege by the forces of fascism. Right-wing politicians and authoritarian regimes are not merely attacking the classroom - they are waging an all-out war on critical education. They seek to ban books, erase history, and crush dissent. These forces understand, as Freire did, that whoever controls education holds the power to shape the future. That's why the battle for education is inseparable from the larger struggle for democracy and social justice. Education is not simply a path to individual advancement - it is the foundation of collective liberation. Freire's pedagogy is a rallying cry against authoritarianism. He exposes the ways in which those in power seek to turn education into a weapon of oppression. In contrast, Freire teaches that education must be a practice of freedom - a dynamic space where students and educators engage in critical dialogue, question power structures, and dare to imagine a world beyond the chains of domination. His work compels us to see education not as passive consumption but as an active, revolutionary process - one that involves critically reading both the word and the world and taking collective action to dismantle the conditions of oppression (Shor and Freire, 1986).

The rise of fascist politics across the globe has revealed the latest stage of gangster capitalism in all its brutality, which includes systemic inequality, a culture of cruelty, white nationalism, and assaults on the environment. It has also laid bare a toxic anti-intellectualism that derides critical education - an education that teaches individuals to think critically, engage in dialogue, learn from history, and hold power accountable (Giroux, 2020). At the same time, the failures of global capitalism - its broken promises of upward social mobility, endless wars, and staggering concentrations of wealth - have become impossible to ignore. It is worth repeating that it is hard to imagine a more urgent moment for taking seriously Freire's ongoing attempts to make education central to politics. At stake for Freire was the notion that education was a social concept rooted in the goal of emancipation for all people. This is a pedagogy that calls us beyond ourselves, and engages the ethical imperative to care for others, dismantle structures of domination, and to become subjects rather than objects of history, politics, and power.

This was a political project infused with a language of critique and possibility while simultaneously addressing the notion that there is no democracy without knowledgeable and civically literate citizens. Such a language is necessary to enable the conditions to forge a collective international resistance among educators, youth, artists, and other cultural workers in defence of public goods. Such a movement is important to resist and overcome the tyrannical fascist nightmares that have descended upon the United States, Hungary, Turkey, Argentina, and several other countries plagued by the rise of right-wing populist movements. In an age of social isolation, information overflow, a culture of immediacy, consumer glut, and spectacularised violence, it is all the more crucial to take seriously the notion that a democracy cannot exist or be defended without civically literate, informed and critically engaged citizens.

Education both in its symbolic and institutional forms has a central role to play in fighting the resurgence of anti-democratic cultures, mythic historical narratives, and the emerging ideologies of white supremacy and white nationalism. Moreover, as far-right extremists across the globe are disseminating toxic racist and ultra-nationalist images of the past, it is essential to reclaim

education and critical pedagogy through the lens of historical consciousness and moral witnessing. This is especially true at a time when historical and social amnesia have become a national pastime matched only by the masculinisation of the public sphere and the increasing normalisation of a fascist politics that thrives on ignorance, fear, the suppression of dissent, and hate. Education as a form of cultural work extends far beyond the classroom and its pedagogical influence, though often imperceptible, is crucial to challenging and resisting the rise of fascist pedagogical formations and their rehabilitation of fascist principles and ideas (Mayer, 2019).

Cultural politics since the 1970s has turned toxic as ruling elites increasingly gained control of commanding cultural apparatuses turning them into pedagogical disimagination machines that serve the forces of ethical tranquilisation by producing and legitimating endless degrading and humiliating images of the poor, immigrants, refugees, Muslims, and others considered excess, dismissed as wasted lives doomed to terminal exclusion. The geographies of moral and political decadence have become the organising standard of the dream worlds of consumption, privatisation, surveillance, and deregulation. Within this increasingly fascist landscape, public spheres are replaced by zones of social abandonment and thrive on the energies of the walking dead who are the embodiment of a culture of manufactured ignorance, cruelty, and misery.

Under a global gangster capitalism, the destruction of the public good is matched by a toxic merging of inequality, greed, and the nativist language of borders, walls, and camps. It is crucial for educators to remember that language is not simply an instrument of fear, violence, and intimidation, it is also a vehicle for critique, civic courage, resistance, and engaged and informed agency. We live at a time when the language of democracy has been pillaged, stripped of its promises and hopes. Paulo was right in insisting that if right-wing populism and authoritarianism are to be defeated, there is a need to make education an organising principle of politics and, in part, this can be done with a language, form of critical literacy, and pedagogy that exposes and unravels falsehoods, systems of oppression, and corrupt relations of power while making clear that an alternative future is possible. Language is a powerful tool in the search for truth and the condemnation of falsehoods and injustices. Moreover, it is through

language that the history of fascism can be remembered and the lessons of the conditions that created the plague of genocide can provide the recognition that fascism does not reside solely in the past and that its traces are always dormant, even in the strongest democracies. Paulo was keenly aware of Primo Levi's warning that 'Every age has its own fascism, and we see the warning signs wherever the concentration of power denies citizens the possibility and the means of expressing and acting on their own free will' (Levi, 2005: 34).

James Baldwin was certainly right in issuing the stern warning in *No Name in the Street* that 'Ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have' (Morrison, 1998: 437). Thinking is now viewed as an act of stupidity, and thoughtlessness is considered a virtue. All traces of critical thought appear only at the margins of the culture. Ignorance is not innocent, especially when it labels thinking dangerous while exhibiting a disdain for truth, scientific evidence, and rational judgments. However, there is more at stake here than the production of a toxic form of illiteracy celebrated as commonsense, the normalisation of fake news, and the shrinking of political horizons. There is also the closing of the horizons of the political and pedagogical coupled with explicit expressions of cruelty and a 'widely sanctioned ruthlessness' (Mishra, 2018).

Under such circumstances, there is a full-scale attack on thoughtful reasoning, empathy, collective resistance, and the compassionate imagination. As Toni Morrison has noted we live at a time when language is censored, reduced to a kind of narcotic narcissism, and cannot tolerate new or critical ideas (Morrison, 1993). As a tool of domination, it becomes a dead language that erases history, used to promote menace, subjugation, and violence. For one current example, think about how the mainstream media undermines or ignores language in support of Palestinian freedom has been censored, disabled, and hollowed out under the claim of being antisemitic.

Given the current crisis of politics engulfed in a tsunami of disimagination machines, educators need a new political and pedagogical language for addressing the changing contexts and issues facing a world in which capital draws upon an unprecedented convergence of resources - financial, cultural, political, economic, scientific, military, and technological - to exercise powerful

and diverse forms of control. If educators and others are to counter global capitalism's increased ability to separate the traditional sphere of politics from the now transnational reach of power, it is crucial to develop educational approaches that reject a collapse of the distinction between market liberties and civil liberties, a market economy and a market society. Resistance does not begin with reforming capitalism but abolishing it.

In this instance, critical pedagogy becomes a political and moral practice in the fight to revive civic literacy, civic culture, and a notion of shared citizenship. Politics loses its emancipatory possibilities if it cannot provide the educational conditions for enabling students and others to think critically, realise themselves as informed and engaged citizens willing to fight for social change in the name of a socialist democracy. There is no radical politics without a pedagogy capable of awakening consciousness, challenging common sense, and creating modes of analysis in which people discover a moment of recognition that enables them to rethink the conditions that shape their lives.

Freire was clear in arguing that as a rule, educators should do more than create the conditions for critical thinking and nourishing a sense of hope for their students. They also should assume the role of civic educators within broader social contexts and be willing to share their ideas with other educators and the wider public by making use of new media technologies. Communicating to a variety of public audiences suggests using opportunities for writing, public talks, and media interviews offered by the radio, Internet, alternative magazines, and teaching young people and adults in alternative schools to name only a few. Capitalising on their role as public intellectuals, faculty can speak to more general audiences in a language that is clear, accessible, and rigorous. More importantly, as teachers organise to assert both the importance of their role as citizen-educators and that of education in a democracy, they can forge new alliances and connections to develop social movements that include and expand beyond working with unions.

In the current historical moment, it is all the more crucial to embrace critical pedagogy as a political and moral practice as well as a crucial site of power in the modern world. If teachers are truly concerned about safeguarding

education, they will, as Paulo suggested, have to take seriously how pedagogy functions on local and global levels. Critical pedagogy has an important role to play in both understanding and challenging how power, knowledge, and values are deployed, affirmed, and resisted within and outside of traditional discourses and cultural spheres. In a local context, critical pedagogy becomes an important theoretical tool for understanding the institutional conditions that place constraints on the production of knowledge, learning, academic labour, social relations, and democracy itself.

One of the most serious challenges facing teachers, artists, journalists, writers, and other cultural workers is the task of developing a language, discourse and pedagogical practices that connect a critical reading of both the word and the world in ways that enhance the creative capacities of young people and provide the conditions for them to become critical agents. In part this means educating them to become aware of the conditions that shape their lives, learn from history, learn how to overcome the forms of oppression that bear down on them, and learn how to think comprehensively by translating private troubles into broader systemic considerations.

In taking up this project, educators and others should attempt to create the conditions that give students the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, values, and civic courage that enable them to struggle in order to make desolation and cynicism unconvincing and hope practical. Hope in this instance is educational, removed from the fantasy of an idealism that is unaware of the constraints facing the struggle for a radical democratic society. Educated hope is not a call to overlook the difficult conditions that shape both schools and the larger social order nor is it a blueprint removed from specific contexts and struggles. On the contrary, it is the precondition for imagining a future that does not replicate the nightmares of the present, for not making the present the future. As Freire noted, educated hope at best is a form of active social hope that dignifies the labour of teachers, offers up critical knowledge linked to democratic social change, affirms shared responsibilities, and encourages teachers and students to recognise ambivalence and uncertainty as fundamental dimensions of learning. Such hope offers the possibility of thinking beyond the given. Without hope, even in dire times, there is no possibility for resistance, dissent, and struggle. Agency is the

condition of struggle, and hope is the condition of agency. Hope expands the space of the possible and becomes a way of recognising and naming the incomplete nature of the present.

For Freire, the merging of politics and pedagogy is rooted in the dream of a collective consciousness and imagination fueled by the struggle for new forms of individual and collective identity that affirm the value of the social, economic equality, the social contract, and democratic values and social relations. Democracy should be a way of thinking about education, one that thrives on connecting pedagogy to the practice of freedom, learning to ethics, and identity to the imperatives of social responsibility and the public good (Giroux, 2022). For Paulo, education was not just a tool for defending democracy, it also enabled it. The fact remains that without hope there is no agency and without collective agents, there is no hope of resistance. In the age of nascent fascism, it is not enough to connect education with the defence of reason, informed judgment, and critical consciousness; it must also be aligned with the power and potential of collective resistance. We live in dangerous times. Consequently, there is an urgent need for more individuals, institutions and social movements to come together in the belief that the current fascist regimes of tyranny can be resisted, that alternative futures are possible and that acting on these beliefs through collective resistance will make radical change happen.

At a time when democracy is under relentless assault, Paulo Freire's work is not just necessary - it is a revolutionary imperative for survival. We must reclaim education as a radical act of resistance, a space to nurture critical consciousness, collective power, unyielding civic courage, and collective change. We must confront and dismantle the authoritarian forces that seek to transform education into a weapon of domination, embracing instead Freire's vision of education as an emancipatory force - one that ignites the oppressed to reshape their world and forge a future anchored in justice, radical equality, and genuine democracy. Moreover, we must call not for reform but for structural change. This is a call not to lessen the horrors of capitalism but to replace it with a form of democratic socialism, while recognising that capitalism and democracy are not synonymous.

In the face of rising fascism, Freire's pedagogy demands that we see education for what it truly is - a fight for freedom. He showed us that education is either an instrument of liberation or a tool of tyranny. Most of all it must be a practice of freedom and a project of collective emancipation. In an age starved of vision, Freire offered a revolutionary pathway, insisting that education, critical pedagogy, and civic literacy must be bound to a fierce responsibility to resist the unspeakable and unthinkable.

Freire called upon educators and cultural workers to act with unyielding conviction, audacity, and the fierce courage required to challenge the forces dragging us back into a dark past - a past marked by fear, terror, and submission. He taught us not only to learn from history but to transform it, to stand defiantly against oppression, and to devote ourselves fully to the struggle for justice, liberation, and radical joy. Today, more than ever, we must seize this moment as defenders and enablers of critical education and embody the spirit Freire invoked. We must rise with the fire he lit within us - confronting those who would shackle us to a history of fear and submission - and instead, boldly carve out a future grounded in justice, equality, and collective emancipation.

Freire's legacy is not just a memory; it is a revolutionary flame, blazing in the call for both individual and collective resistance. In this era of intensifying authoritarianism, we must break free from the confines of traditional education and the narrow, simplistic notions of empiricism and repression. Education must be reimagined as a radical act - alive in every space - as defiance, as a weapon for liberation, as a relentless force for emancipation. To forge a truly democratic socialist society, every corner of our world must become a battlefield of critical inquiry, a space of organised resistance, where people are empowered to confront oppression and envision a world built on justice, equity, and freedom. Freire's vision is ours to keep alive, fueling the struggle for a future where learning itself becomes an act of courage, hope, and rebellion.

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