

PHILOSOPHICAL SOURCES OF THE PEDAGOGY OF HOPE

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Abstract: Hope is central to our understanding of pedagogy and the process of teaching and learning. It reflects a philosophy that has energised society and humanity's lived experience in a manner that is essentially about building and forming human potential. In this sense education is hope and hope is at the very core of a community of learning. This article will explore the backdrop to this philosophy of education through the lens of one of its most important advocates, Paulo Freire, highlighting some of the key facets of his pedagogy. It will point to *conscientização* (critical consciousness), human agency and ethics-based liberation as the three pillars of his life's work and look at thinkers and movements that have helped to shape Freire's understanding of the importance of education for society and democracy.

Key words: Education; Agency; Freire; Hope; Pedagogy.

Introduction

The philosophy of hope has had a strong influence on the development of education in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. From various contexts around the world, the idea that education is essentially the inculcation of hope is a widespread pedagogical opinion. Arguably the most influential educationalist drawing from this philosophy has been Paulo Freire, who emerged out of the liberation struggles of Southern America with a dedication to the belief that education can empower people, particularly those who are oppressed, and engender social justice (Irwin, 2012: 17-45; Bailey et al., 2010). His philosophy, however, is but part of a wider movement that sought to bring a sense of openness to society where praxis and development can carry forward new understandings

of humanity, social development and participatory democracy. This article will look at the philosophical context from which this idea of hope emerges, drawing from a range of thinkers and positions to look at the converging approaches which helped form a definitive and sociological pedagogy of hope. It will highlight three aspects of Freire's philosophy: *conscientização*, human agency and ethics-based liberation.

Formative positions

In the philosophy of education there are concepts that are encompassing and highly impactful for human development. In the practice of education there are influences that shape the applied aspects of the profession which, under guidance from educators, can take learners from a point of need to a place of socio-economic, emotional and personal fulfilment. Even a cursory knowledge of this philosophy will reveal the understanding that education informs and enriches life experience and, in effect, enlightens the world around us. On surveying recent interpretations of the role of education for individuals and society, Randell Curren came up with a useful definition that carries forward into other more critically astute interpretations: 'The most worthwhile life, or life most objectively and subjectively fulfilling for a human being or community, would be the defining or (alternatively) most ethically appropriate purpose of education' (Curren, 2025). In the lexicon of this philosophy, themes of well-being, productivity, futures, community, personal autonomy, self-actualisation, life accomplishment, mutual benefit and indeed joy, come up continually as purposes and outcomes (Barry, 2005; Smith, 2015; Meyer, 2014; Harel Ben Shahr, 2016; Levison et al., 2024; Rorty, 1998). Education, at its core, and as read generally by philosophers working in this field, concentrates on the human state of becoming, a process in life, moving towards/creating what could be an individual's most fruitful lived experience.

From this, the phenomenon of hope is implicit to the process of learning, where it informs the environment and inspires learners to open up to new worlds of possibility. Curiosity, enquiry, the journey to know things are implicit. In St Lawrence's School in the Zambian compound of Misisi, the day begins with the children chanting 'education is power, education is freedom'. In one of the most impoverished regions on earth, education has exigency enough

to bring hope and aspiration to children's natural instinct to want the best for their future. Generally, in the education systems in most countries, education is about the empowerment of young people, giving them agency and helping them map their futures. This aspirational focus highlights the vocational and directional role of the educator, teacher or tutor. Hope in education is conative, it is about the process of harnessing expectations and layering the skills and conscience that can facilitate possibility. A pedagogy of hope is both cognitive and affective and has the potential to bring forward a hoped-for reality. To draw from a wonderful concept from Aristotle that informs this philosophy of hope, and to reemphasise the point - education in essence is about movement towards entelechy (the realisation of potential). Hope, comprehended through the lens of education, matches expectations with anticipated outcomes, and is intrinsically optimistic - or as some philosophers of the phenomena label it 'utopian' (Bloch, 1995). Learning in the genuine sense of the word, together with human agency, coalesces into a process of building hope, actualising meaningful change by creating human value. Ernst Bloch's epigraph is the starting point of this whole field of thought: 'What really matters, is to learn how to hope'.

The introduction of *conscientização* or critical consciousness into the discourse on the philosophy of education by Paulo Freire brought this process of realisation that bit closer in that his interjection views 'theory into practice' as a liberating act, particularly for those within society who are struggling against marginalisation and alienation. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1995) and *Education for Critical Consciousness* (Freire, 1973), Freire draws from a range of philosophical traditions to highlight the urgent need for a learning culture and methodology that engenders self-perception among learners and challenges social, economic and political contradictions. What Freire brings to the philosophy of hope is a dialectical tradition which accepts that the act of change is the fulfilment of an aspiration for change - freedom from poverty and oppression being the most pressing issues his community was confronting in the Latin America of the 1960s and 1970s. In a report he wrote for the World Council of Churches in 1974, *Ação cultural para a liberdade e outros escritos*, Freire links a tradition in philosophy within which he is absolutely absorbed:

“Just as the gnoseological [the study of knowledge] circle does not end with the step of the acquisition of existing knowledge, but proceeds to the phase of the creation of new knowledge, so neither may consciousness-raising come to a halt at the stage of the revelation of reality. Its authenticity is at hand only when the practice of the revelation of reality constitutes a dynamic and dialectical unity with the practice of transformation of reality” (Freire, 2013: 88).

The recurrent theme that runs right through this process of knowledge and Freire’s application of it is *praxis*, in a manner that would have been totally appreciated by that generation of philosophers who informed education and society in the years after the Second World War, and who pioneered critical theory, existentialism, phenomenology, Marxist humanism and a seminal pillar of his work, liberation theology. These influences were registered in *Pedagogy of Hope* (Freire, 2013: 11) where he felt obliged to list the thinkers who ‘formed’ his philosophy: ‘Marx, Lukács, Fromm, Gramsci, Fanon, Memmi, Sartre, Kosik, Agnes Heller, Merleau-Ponty, Simon Weil [the English translation spelling “Simone” incorrectly], Arendt, Marcuse, and so many others’ (See also: Mayo, 2004; Valenzano, 2021: 68-82; Roberts, 2000). Given the confines, this article will select a few of these thinkers and point to further research on the context within which Freire and his colleagues were operating.

Sources of conscientização

It is interesting that Freire begins his list with Karl Marx. The Marx that he read would have been – believe it or not – relatively new on the world stage, in that work to do with consciousness, Hegelianism and alienation (themes that Freire’s theories were derived from), were only published in the 1920s and 1930s. The *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State* from 1927 and the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in 1932 were only later worked through to translations and general circulation (Marx, 1984). While the Soviets dismissed this humanist Marx, others, such as the Frankfurt School (critical theory), found the contemporary insights to be resolutely appropriate to an undetermined praxis and a reflective acknowledgement of the subject in history. This Marx was about people and their agency, and not dialectical materialism. Consciousness and agency come alive in these ‘early writings’ of Marx and were enthusiastically

adapted by the New Left in the West and global South in all its various manifestations. What follows is a sample of what Marx was writing about in 1843-4 that is comparable to Freire's work in thought, language and tone over one hundred years later (apologies for the gender-biased terms):

“The *human* essence of nature exists only for *social* man; for only here does nature exist for him as a *bond* with other *men*, as his existence for others and their existence for him, as the vital element of human reality; only here does it exist as the *basis* of his own *human* existence. Only here has his *natural* existence become his *human* existence and nature become man for him. *Society* is therefore the perfected unity in essence of man with nature, the true resurrection of nature, the realized naturalism of man and the realized humanism of nature” (Marx, 1984: 349-50).

From Marx's early writings, we get the core thesis of a whole generation of radical thinkers in the mid-twentieth century. The concept of society comes through strongly in these works, the need for human interdependence, as does self-realisation and self-consciousness. Freire was keen to revisit the concept of praxis with the intention of moving beyond the economism that is often associated with a Marxist position on societal transformation. That is to emphasise agency as a means of enhancing individual consciences to act in the interests of others and build social justice. Read as existentialist by many (Dale and Hyslop-Margison, 2010) the philosophical context of the 1950s and 1960s – where existentialism was highly influential – certainly was a reference point. This is particularly the case with the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French phenomenologist who marries Marxist dialectics to this individual agency. A staple of post-war philosophy, his *Phenomenology of Perception* (*Phénoménologie de la perception*) (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) highlights the importance of consciousness and the ‘primacy of perception’ in the process of humanity ‘becoming’. We see humanism very much at the fore of this understanding of society, anticipating the criticality of individual agency and its role shaping human development.

Within the various schools of critical thought that traversed the globe in the 1950s and 1960s, there was a recurrent conversation around lived experience and activism peculiar to that period in history. The discourse on the links between consciousness and ontology ran through diverse and often culturally different contexts, such as Marxism and theology, pedagogy and psychoanalysis. The German-American psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm, for example, significantly reformed psychoanalysis by integrating social and cultural facets into what had been ostensibly a clinical field. He developed social psychoanalysis which emphasised how society and culture influence individual personality development and psychological well-being. The implications of his work were significant and can be read into many aspects of the philosophy of education from the late 1950s onwards. Fromm's intervention into social science also included humanistic psychoanalysis, which focuses on the patient-analyst relationship as a shared human experience, exploring the broader human condition beyond individual neuroses. His *The Sane Society* (Fromm, 1955) and *The Art of Loving* (Fromm, 1956) were globally received as the reimagining of human relationships beyond reification and alienation, whereas his *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology* (Fromm, 1968) and *To Have or To Be?* (Fromm, 1976) anticipated instinctual change within human communities through a prism of respect for the person and others (later useful in confronting 'othering' and 'stereotyping'). For Fromm, human liberation is summed up in acts of solidarity in harmony with others and could be interpreted as collective kindness (Kolakowski, 1985: 380-387). The importance of Fromm's socialist humanism for education and particularly for Freire is that his approach to psychoanalysis can be read into the application of *conscientização*. While Fromm was a personal friend and confidant of Freire, who collaborated together throughout the 1960s and 1970s and for whom there is a direct overlap across their respective professional careers, there were also others from the aforementioned schools of thought that Freire drew from and acknowledged as having been influences on his work.

Freire's context

Another stream of thought that is very evident in much of Freire's work is taken from his involvement with a social justice movement in Brazil called *Acción Católica* and his work with *Juventude Universitária Católica* (JUC). The former

was inspired by the pastoral work of community clergy and religious lay people working with rural impoverished communities, the politically oppressed and the marginalised of the city favelas. Freire was familiar with the ideological motivations of these community leaders and engaged with the various generic activities that eventually was defined as liberation theology. Essentially, it was a belief system that Christianity as a faith system was beatitudinal, about the freedom of the poor from poverty and oppression. In this belief system, praxis is a central theory in empowering individuals and communities to act together for freedom. The non-determined, non-structural formation of this praxis grounded its activism in primary ethical considerations and the responsibility to shape history in a manner that would challenge and serve to eradicate the poverty of mind, spirit and circumstance (Valenzano, 2021: 75).

Freire was particularly inspired by the life and work of the martyred Bishop Hélder Câmara and knew key figures in the liberationist movement across Latin America – Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff and Juan Luis Segundo. The names may not be, or have been, familiar in Europe but in Latin America they represented the voice of a generation of radicals and revolutionaries and reflected critical theory through the arch of religiosity. This approach was prevalent across that continent. In *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (1990) Freire spoke to this background and his parallel humanism:

“I have always spoken to both [Marx and Christ] in a very loving way. See, I feel comfortable in this position. Sometimes people tell me that I am contradictory. My answer is that I have a right to be contradictory, and secondly, I don’t consider myself contradictory in this” (Horton and Freire, 1990: 247).

What aligns these positions is a steadfast belief in the potential goodness of humans and the creative power of humanity given a supportive environment and entelechy. Indeed, the liberationists had a term for this that Freire would be very familiar with, *orthopraxis*, the living of one’s life and through one’s faith (if it is there) in a manner that contributes to creating relationships and contexts that are morally right and good.

Freire was of course very attentive to and connected with the ‘base communities’ in rural Brazil which were inspired by liberation theology and organised by local parishes in the form of cooperatives. These base ecclesial communities (CEBs), to give them their technical term, were (and are) small, grassroots initiatives which are characterised by their democratic organisation, voluntary participation, and focus on integrating faith with social and political realities. These communities played a significant role in fostering social awareness and action, particularly among marginalised populations, emphasising dialogue, critical reflection, and collective decision-making, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment among participants. Freire would have been instrumental in designing an educational component to these initiatives with his methodology of integrated learning being applied to both the school context and adult education. Linking education to liberation is instrumental in changing the conventional understanding of the role of pedagogy in society. Indeed, the first two chapters of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* are about exactly this, the elevation of education to being the glue with which transitional humanisation can bring forward relationships to *ser mais*, ‘to be more’ (Valenzano, 2021: 73; also see Copp, 2016: 149-167).

The timing of Freire’s educational activities and extension of his theory coincided with the discourse on the role of the religious in social justice movements, the influential Latin American Bishop’s conference in Medellín in August 1968 (which called for human ‘liberation’) and the publication of the defining text on liberation theology in 1971, Gustavo Gutiérrez’s *A Theology of Liberation* (Gutiérrez, 1988). Gutiérrez opens the book with this statement from the Medellín conference:

“we are on the threshold of a new epoch in this history of Latin America. It appears to be a time of zeal for full emancipation, of liberation from every form of servitude, or personal maturity and of collective integration” (Gutiérrez, 1988: xvii).

A colleague of Gutiérrez, Freire would not only have gained inspiration from this popular cooperative movement but would have informed the debates and framed the educational aspects of a distinctly Latin American culture of social justice. The

exchange was reciprocal with Gutiérrez mentioning Freire and his ‘movement’ throughout the book: ‘Freire’s ideas and methods continue to be developed. All the potentialities of conscientization are slowly unfolding, as well as its limitations. It is a process which can be deepened, modified, reorientated, and extended’ (Gutiérrez, 1988: 57)

Conclusion

With three philosophical themes coalescing in Freire’s work, *conscientização*, human agency and ethics-based liberation, we can see a distinct contextualisation of his epistemology. Humanism is an overarching principle, with intertheoretical influences bringing forward a view of human development that, while being universal, are soundly grounded in the political and cultural environment of Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. The genius of his work can be recognised in his marshalling of critical theory, liberation theology and phenomenology (European existentialism) to the service of pedagogy. Whereas conventional pedagogy has been a culture of ‘adopting educational methods and ways of acting that reduce man [learners] to the condition of an object’ (Freire, 1972: 49), a reflective pedagogy places the learner at the centre of a process of conscious human endeavour and equips individuals and their community in the formation of a socially aware and actively democratic environment. The dialogue charting his philosophy can be seen at every point of Freire’s long career, forcefully introduced in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* - originally in Spanish in 1968, reviewed and reasserted in the *Pedagogy of Hope* in 2013. A final comment will be left to Henry A. Giroux – another long-standing friend and collaborator – from his introductory analysis of Freire’s life-enhancing philosophy:

“[Freire] not only makes visible the power of the possible in forms of self-reflection, self-examination, and a historical rendering of the world, but also displays the courage that comes with refusing to give up the dream of a just and equitable society, one in which matters of literacy, education, and pedagogy informed each other in the fight for justice, economic equality, and democracy itself” (Giroux cited in Freire, 2021: 13-14).

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