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Paulo Freire's Legacy for Youth and Adult Education in Brazil

Abstract: Fifty years after the pioneering adult literacy experience known as the “40 hours of Angicos” (referring to a small town in the State of Rio Grande do Norte), the Brazilian government has established participation as social policy, conjugated with a framework of reference for popular education designed to consolidate popular education as an inter-sectorial and transversal public policy for citizen participation and for the democratization of the Brazilian state. The Angicos experience represented a watershed in educational thinking, giving rise to a new vision of education and a new epistemology in which popular culture, as a contra-hegemonic project, and popular education became the cornerstones of a new educational system, with a strong political dimension capable of contributing to the transformation of society. The challenge which Freire posits today is how to develop youth and adult education in the spirit of popular education so as to prepare citizens to participate actively in the democratic process.

Key words: Freirean ethos, democratic process, youth education, adult education.

In 2013, Brazil commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the pioneering literacy experience in 40 hours conceived and directed by Paulo Freire in the city of Angicos in the state of Rio Grande do Norte, one of the states of the north-east region of Brazil. Despite being a relatively modest proposal in terms of its coverage – 380 men and women took part – the project had a national and international impact disproportional to its size. Although perhaps best remembered as one of the first experiences which employed Freire's literacy method¹, the 40 hours of Angicos (as it became known) was based upon a new vision of education and a new epistemology constituting a rethinking in Torres² words “of the mis-

¹ Freire rejected the notion that what he was elaborating was a 'literacy method' preferring to classify it as part of a system of education or as an epistemology. Literacy was but part of his theory of education.

² Carlos Alberto Torres (2013) Angicos, 50 anos depois: da cultura popular à educação popular. In: **Cinquentenário: 40 horas de Angicos**. Brochure produced for the commemorations in Angicos in April 2013.

sion of the ‘public’ and of public education as a contribution to the constitution of democracy and citizenship”.

The educational and literacy proposal on which the Angicos experience was founded gave rise to a different pedagogy, which surpassed traditional models with its emphasis on dialogue – understood as an horizontal relationship between persons nourished according to Freire “by love, humility, hope, faith and trust” (1976, p. 45) – between educator and educatee and between scientific and popular knowledge. The educatees were conceived of and treated as protagonists and subjects of the educational process, since the literacy process was based on their life experiences and vocabulary. Inverting the logic of the great majority of previous pedagogical proposals, in the case of Angicos, the world, the culture and the knowledge of the educatees became valued and respected. This represented a new understanding of education in which popular culture, as a contra-hegemonic project, and popular education became the corner stones of a new educational system, with a strong political dimension capable of contributing to the transformation of society.

When also remembering the fiftieth anniversary of the National Literacy Plan, in which Freire’s literacy method became the official method and part of a system of popular education introduced by the Goulart Government³, we perceive the perennial and contemporary flavour of Freire’s educational philosophy. In May 2014, the Brazilian federal government organized what it called the Arena of Social Participation in Brasilia during which it launched two innovative proposals: a National Policy of Social Participation (PNPS), which includes a National System of Social Participation understood as a method of government, and a Framework of Reference as precursor of a National Policy of Popular Education. The latter intended to consolidate popular education as an inter-sectorial and transversal public policy for citizen participation and for the democratization of the Brazilian state. Freire lives!

However, we should not deceive ourselves. The reaction by conservatives sectors – both political opposition and elements of the corporative media – both inside and outside the national congress, to the presidential sanction for the decree (nº. 8.243) which established the National Policy of Social Participation, has been ferocious. Freire lives but continues to represent a political-educational pos-

³ Goulart took over the presidency of Brazil in 1961 when Jânio Quadros resigned. He was deposed by the military coup in 1964. During his brief period as president he initiated a series of wide ranging basic reforms (*reformas de base*) including banking, fiscal, urban, electoral, educational and above all, agrarian reforms. These social and economic nationalist measures which foresaw a greater intervention of the state in the economy were understood by the elite (property owners, businessmen, middle classes) to threaten the status quo. As President, he visited Angicos on 2nd April 1963 where he delivered the 40th hour of the literacy programme.

ture which is in no way consensual, as is absolutely comprehensible in the current Brazilian democratic context, just as was the case in the 1960's. In 1963, the then north American ambassador to Brazil, Lincoln Gordon, in a first written reaction to the pioneering pilot project in Angicos, informed the governor of the state of Rio Grande do Norte, Aluisio Alves: "I am suggesting to all the Brazilian state governments convened with the Alliance for Progress that they should also adopt the Angicos experience" (Guerra, 2013, p. 29). However, not long after, Gordon reconsidered his first evaluation, identifying in this experience "nothing less than the embryo of a subversive movement, aimed at conscientising and politicising the masses, 'associating it with the methods of Hitler, Stalin and Peron' (apud, Streck, 2010, p. 43)" (Ferraro, 2013, p. 77-78).

The fact that Freire was named as the patron of Brazilian education by the National Congress in 2012 (law n°. 12.612), should not make us forget that this was the same Freire who in 1964 was considered "subversive and ignorant" and then imprisoned and exiled. It is also the same Freire whose presence and influence are transparent in the set of measures which constitute the PNPS which has provoked the most diverse reactions.

When analysing the PNPS, the influence of the Freirean ethos is evident. The policy establishes the following guidelines, amongst others (Article 3):

- Recognition of social participation as a right of the citizen and an expression of his/her autonomy;
- Complementarity, transversality and integration between mechanisms and instances of representative, participative and direct democracy;
- Right to information, transparency and social control of public actions;
- Amplification of the mechanisms of social control⁴.
- In an affirmation of the importance of the participation of the citizen which cannot be reduced to the electoral process. While delineating the goals (Article 4) of the PNPS, the decree identifies as fundamental goals, amongst others, the need to:
 - To consolidate social participation as a method of government;
 - To promote the articulation between instances and mechanisms⁵ of social participation;
 - To develop mechanisms of social participation which are accessible to historically excluded and vulnerable social groups;

⁴ DECRETO N° 8.243, DE 23 DE MAIO DE 2014 – Retrieved 29/06/2014 from http://www.planalto.gov.br/CCIVIL_03/_Ato2011-2014/2014/Decreto/D8243.htm

⁵ The Framework considers the following as instances and mechanisms of social participation: councils, commissions, national conferences, federal ombudsmen, public audiences, public consultations, etc.

- To encourage and promote actions and programmes of institutional support, training and qualification in social participation for public agents and those of civil society⁶.

In the opinion of Fontana (2014), the presidential decree strengthens the thousands of municipal, state and national councils which already exist, and thereby contributes to a participative democracy which is not opposed to but complements representative democracy. According to Boff (2014) the decree recognises the reality of the rich diversity of social movements in Brazil “and reinforces the role of that diversity to enrich the existing variety of representative democracy with a new element which is precisely participative democracy.”

In Angicos, Freire set out to contribute to the formation of the citizen for a new democratic and participative society, among other objectives, recognising the fundamental role of a novel type of education in this process – popular education of which the literacy process was a part. Over the years, the praxis of popular education has developed and evolved although it has continued to retain the strong influence of the Freirean ethos. Although attempts to establish a unique concept of popular education are subject to pitfalls, we take the risk of presenting a limited number of principles which is in no way exhaustive, but suggestive of the potential and the actuality of popular education as a collective construction, capable of orienting new educational practices based on concrete conjunctures and as a tool which is capable of contributing to the strengthening and deepening of democracy:

1. Education as a right and a fundamental human need which is part of the ontological vocation of the human being. Learning is part of our DNA as superior animals and of our programming in the Darwinian sense.
2. Education as process, subject to human agency, whose fundamental objective is to humanize, emancipate, free and make people more creative. In this sense, education is not limited to transmitting but, above all, to producing knowledge as a constituent element of the practice of liberty. Whilst intending to emancipate, education takes dialogue as its starting point and essential instrument.
3. Starting from our ‘unfinishedness’/incompleteness as human beings, education and learning are understood as processes which underline and underscore our whole life span.
4. When refusing that fatalistic (neoliberal) thinking which denies the dream of another possible world, utopia becomes the horizon and

⁶ Ibid.

- true reality of the educator. In Freire's words (2001, p. 52) "The world is not finished. It is always in the process of becoming".
5. It understands education in the broad sense, covering what is conventionally known as formal and non-formal education in which the school or its equivalents are not the only space for the transmission of knowledge (Freire, 1991, p. 16) and, consequently, is characterised as a process which involves both logic and intellect, affection and sociability.
 6. An education which values daily experience and places the quality of life/well-being and collective happiness of its subjects as the goal of education: life as the ultimate curriculum.
 7. Education as an intentional political act which seeks to emancipate and presupposes a project of society⁷. A pedagogy committed to active citizenship and political participation.
 8. An education which values and seeks to deepen democracy, placing ethics at the centre of the search for its radicalization.

Thus, when questioning the legacy of Freire for youth and adult education in Brazil we consider that the challenge which Freire continues to put to us is how to develop youth and adult education in the perspective and in the spirit of popular education and in such a way as to prepare citizens to participate actively in the democratic process. In reality, when referring to the above principles, we can perhaps point to certain central challenges. Although schooling is still considered one of the central challenges for youth and adult education in Brazil, how should we reconstitute and value the political and emancipatory dimension of the educational process? Our current processes of teaching-learning are still excessively preoccupied with teaching rather than with learning. How can we bring the educatees to the centre stage of our pedagogical concerns in theoretical-methodological, political and practical terms?

In a world still dominated by neoliberalism, by the predominance of the market and the influence of employability on the shape of the youth and adult education which we offer, how to establish new utopias in which the principles of quality of life, solidarity, justice and sustainability predominate over those of consumerism, individualism and an anthropocentric vision of the relation between the natural and human worlds? Freire always questions, challenges and provokes us. The launching of the policy for social participation places immedi-

⁷ Freire (1985) considered that Amílcar Cabral, the leader of the revolutionary movement in Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau, "incarnates perfectly the dream of liberation of his people and the political-pedagogical procedures needed to realize that dream". For him, Cabral was the Pedagogue of the Revolution.

ate challenges which youth and adult education cannot attempt to escape from answering.

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Nasleđe Paula Freirea u obrazovanju mladih i odraslih u Brazilu

Apstrakt: Nakon pedeset godina od pionirskog rada na opismenjavanju odraslih poznatog kao „40 sati Angikosa” (što se odnosilo na gradić u saveznoj državi Rio Grande do Norte), brazilska vlada je definisala participaciju kao element socijalne politike, zajedno sa sa referentnim okvirom za popularno obrazovanje koncipiranim tako da ono postane predmet međusektorske i transverzalne javne politike za participaciju stanovništva i za demokratizaciju Brazila. Iskustvo u Angikosu je predstavljalo preokret u obrazovnoj misli i utrlo je put novoj viziji obrazovanja i novoj epistemologiji u kojoj popularna kultura kao ‘kontrahegemonijski’ projekat, kao i popularno obrazovanje postaju temelj novog obrazovnog sistema, uz snažnu političku dimenziju, koja im omogućava da doprinesu transformaciji društva. Izazov koji Freire postavlja i danas je kako razvijati obrazovanje omladine i odraslih u duhu popularnog obrazovanja, te na taj način pripremiti stanovništvo za aktivno učešće u demokratskom procesu.

Ključne reči: Freireovski etos, demokratski procesi, obrazovanje mladih, obrazovanje odraslih.

