

Paulo Freire and the pedagogy of the pseudo-left

Patrick O'Connor
15 October 2021

This year marks the centenary of the birth of Brazilian literacy educator and international “New Left” figure Paulo Freire (1921-1997). The anniversary has been widely observed in pseudo-left and academic circles, with his image even being featured on Google’s daily “Doodle.”

Freire’s 1968 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* sold millions of copies and, according to one recent survey, is the third-most cited work in social science research. Its success made Freire an international figure, and he subsequently led or advised mass literacy campaigns in several former colonial countries, including Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and Tanzania, while also receiving honorary degrees from 29 universities in Europe and the Americas. More than two decades after his death, Freire’s work remains influential in education departments around the world.

The academic consensus is that Freire advanced a radical and even Marxist educational theory and practice. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is promoted as one of the founding texts of so-called “critical pedagogy.” This has been bolstered by the promotion of Freire by various pseudo-left figures internationally from the 1970s to the present day. This includes, in the US, linguist Noam Chomsky (“Freire is a radical revolutionary”) and educationalist Peter McLaren (Freire, he recently wrote in *Jacobin*, “continues to be a lodestar for teachers working in poverty-stricken communities across the globe, and for just about anyone who’s searching for a sense of justice in an unjust world”).

The centenary provides an opportunity to clarify the record. No aspect of Freire’s work, to be blunt, has anything whatsoever to do with Marxist theory, the struggle to build a revolutionary party in the working class or the development of a socialist pedagogy.

Like numerous other figures within the “New Left” of the 1960s, Freire eclectically blended a mix of different anti-Marxist philosophical tendencies, in his case including “liberation theology” Catholicism, Hegelian idealism, existentialism and Frankfurt School politics. In class terms, Freire’s entire career demonstrated a consistent orientation—towards the middle class and the peasantry, with literacy learning aimed at bolstering bourgeois nationalist projects in oppressed and former colonial countries in Latin America and Africa.

Freire’s early career

Freire was born in Recife, the largest city in Brazil’s Northeast, into a middle-class family—his father was a member of the military police. He studied law before transitioning into teaching via Portuguese-language adult classes. He was active first in the anticommunist Catholic Action organization and then in the *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base* (Grassroots Church Communities) linked to the liberation theology movement that developed within the Catholic Church in Brazil and throughout Latin America.

Freire then ~~Sevigan~~ working *Social* the (Industrial Social Service, SESI), becoming director of the organization’s education and culture division.

The SESI was created and funded by Brazilian industrialists in 1946. As summarized by one historian: “The organization was founded in response to labor protests regarding the rising cost of living in Brazil as the Second World War progressed. The emerging Cold War exacerbated fears that the limited educational opportunities available to Brazil’s working class made them likely to be led astray by left-wing leaders. The organization promised to deliver ‘social peace in Brazil.’ By eliminating class conflict, the organization would help further economic development.” [1]

Diverting and suppressing the class struggle was a critical issue for the Brazilian ruling elite. The industrial proletariat in the country had more than tripled in size in the preceding period, from about 300,000 in 1920 to one million in the early 1940s. The Brazilian Communist Party underwent a Stalinist degeneration in the late 1920s and 1930s, and in this period pursued various opportunist, Popular Front alliances with purportedly “progressive” representatives of the country’s national bourgeoisie. The working class nevertheless remained profoundly influenced by the 1917 Russian Revolution and sought to advance its independent interests against the bourgeoisie.

Freire worked with the SESI for 10 years, later acknowledging that the organization represented “an attempt to ease class conflict and stop the development of a political and militant consciousness among workers.” [2] His literacy work in this period, including the creation of the vaunted “Freire method” for teaching people to read and write, was developed within the SESI’s anti-communist framework.

His method involved working with groups of adult illiterates, using a slide projector to show them different illustrations of life in Brazil—a peasant hoeing the earth, an indigenous man hunting birds, people making clay pots (urban workers were notably absent from Freire’s slides)—with subsequent discussion aimed at revealing the illiterates’ existing oral vocabulary and at the same time clarifying the difference between products of nature and of culture. From this, the educator developed a number of “generative words,” which helped in teaching. These words (usually around 18) were deemed “generative” from two standpoints: their value in teaching syllabic letter-sound relationships and their development of the illiterates’ political understanding.

The word *tijolo* (brick), for example, was a widely used “generative” word. One observer reported: “A picture of a construction scene was prepared. This picture was shown first without the word *tijolo*. Only after the group had discussed using bricks to build their own houses, housing as a community problem, obstacles to better housing, and whatever other topics were generated, was the second picture introduced showing the construction scene together with the word *tijolo*. In the third picture or slide the word *tijolo* appeared alone.” [3]

Literacy teachers then broke *tijolo* up into syllabic parts, developing understanding of letter-sound relationships through comparison with other

syllables (an approach, incidentally, effective only with languages like Portuguese, but unlike English, that feature a predominantly transparent relationship between letters and sounds).

The development of political understanding through the Freire literacy method was described as *conscientização* (variously translated as “conscientization,” or “critical consciousness”).

This was a term popularized by Freire though it was first coined by sociologists at the Advanced Institute of Brazilian Studies (ISEB), a government-funded institute. The ISEB promoted “national-developmentalism,” an ideology that served the rise of Brazilian capitalism in the post-war period. Freire was at this point a convinced “national-developmental” *Conscientização* was a bourgeois nationalist concept, essentially aimed at ensuring that peasants, who were then only eligible to vote after learning to read and write, would support the establishment parties in Brazil.

Researcher Vanilda Paiva summed up the viewpoint of a leading ISEB intellectual as follows: “Nationality is the key category in critical consciousness ... Taking national interests into account, critical consciousness is able to analyze specific issues within the nation’s totality and to perceive the national reality at that moment, all while continually making new choices about the goals of nationalist struggles in tune with the goals already achieved. ... This form of consciousness would thus lead naturally to the defense of certain political positions: humanization of labor, agrarian reform, strengthening of national industry, Brazilian settlement of the Amazon, national sovereignty, protection of the country’s natural resources, containment of foreign capital, and so forth.” [4]

Freire won widespread attention for his literacy work, especially for the claim to be able to teach peasants to read in just 40 hours, equipped only with a slide projector and some flash cards.

The teaching of reading and writing in Latin America emerged as a political issue within the Cold War after Fidel Castro’s radical bourgeois nationalist government initiated a mass campaign in 1961 to eliminate illiteracy in Cuba. Freire’s growing prominence in this period was due in no small part to the support of US imperialism, which sought educational alternatives to those promoted by Cuba. A substantial part of the funding for Freire’s work came via the Kennedy administration’s Alliance for Progress, an aid program aimed at tying Latin America’s economies to the US and putting a “progressive” gloss on US imperialist policy in the hemisphere.

In 1961, Freire was tasked by the mayor of Recife with developing a city-wide literacy program. Afterwards he accepted Alliance for Progress funding to extend this across the impoverished state of Pernambuco. In May 1963, Brazilian President João Goulart led a team of government officials, US State Department personnel, and American journalists to observe the official graduation of the first cohort of newly educated peasants. The *New York Times* report on the event quoted Philip Schwab of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID): “We are not just trying to teach people to read and write. We intend through the literacy program to make these people capable of being citizens.”

Goulart subsequently invited Freire to work across Brazil through the government’s education department. This project was interrupted by the US-backed military coup of March 1964.

Class tensions had escalated to the point that US imperialism no longer believed Goulart’s populist nationalism capable of containing the working class and averting social revolution. The elected president had also drawn the ire of Washington officials through his opposition to sanctions against Cuba and various reform measures, such as the nationalization of several oil refineries and limits on transnational corporations’ profit repatriations. Washington’s shift behind the military saw US funding for Freire’s literacy program withdrawn several months before the coup. After the military takeover, Freire was arrested and then exiled, accused by the new

dictatorial regime of paving the way for communism by helping to teach the poor to read and write.

Freire’s “radical” turn and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Freire went to Chile and worked for the Christian Democratic administration of President Eduardo Frei. The CIA had bankrolled Frei’s election campaign in September 1964 and considered the defeat of social democrat Salvador Allende a Cold War success. Chile received more US aid per capita than any other in South America in the 1960s, and many of Frei’s programs were funded via the Alliance for Progress. [5]

He was employed at different times between 1964 and 1969 by the Chilean government’s Agrarian Reform Corporation and by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), as he developed adult literacy courses across rural Chile. There, 36 percent of the population remained illiterate, in contrast to urban Chile, which had the highest literacy rate in Latin America.

The Frei administration embraced the “Freire method” and promoted *conscientização*. In an introduction to the literacy program’s official handbook, a senior government official provided a revealing explanation of the administration’s calculations in promoting “critical consciousness” against the peasantry’s supposed “magical consciousness”—a group of rural Chilean fishermen, it was reported, believed that fish could sense and evade people who were greedy for money. After a good haul, the official complained, fishermen therefore took several days off work, forgoing the possibility of accumulating greater profits and contributing to the economy’s development. [6]

Chile in the 1960s was in a pre-revolutionary situation, and by the end of the decade the Frei administration was in deep crisis. Soaring inflation and government austerity measures undermined workers’ living standards, triggering a growing strike wave across what was one of the most urbanized countries in Latin America. In the countryside, state forces clashed with peasants who invaded large estates and demanded expropriations. This coincided with a radicalization of workers and youth around the world, as a revolutionary period opened up with the breakdown of the post-World War II economic boom and the US imperialist crisis escalated by the Vietnam War.

Broad layers of the Latin American petty bourgeoisie and intelligentsia were radicalized in the 1960s. The Cuban revolution was a major influence, and guerrillism was promoted as an alternative to the Stalinized official Communist parties, which advocated “peaceful coexistence” and a “parliamentary road” to socialism through Popular Front alliances with bourgeois parties.

Within Freire’s literacy team in Chile, many of the young teachers and administrators shifted their allegiance from the Christian Democratic party to the middle class Castroite *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* (MIR, Revolutionary Left Movement), after its founding in 1965. Later, during the Stalinist-backed Popular Front (1970-1973), the MIR lent so-called “critical support” to the administration of Salvador Allende. This opportunist-centrist position served to subordinate the landless peasants that backed the MIR to the bourgeois government that sabotaged the developing revolutionary movement and promoted fatal illusions in the capitalist state, including the military.

Freire was clearly influenced by the politics of the MIR and related tendencies across Latin America as he wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1968.

The nature of Freire’s “radical” turn has frequently been misunderstood and misrepresented. He promoted populist-nationalist political movements and Castro-Guevarist guerrillism, oriented to the peasantry and aimed at

a pan-American economic development free from the domination of US imperialism. All this had nothing to do with—or more accurately, was consciously opposed to—an orientation to the working class, the development of Marxist politics, and the taking up of a fight for the political independence of the workers on the basis of a revolutionary and internationalist socialist program. Freire's class orientation, towards a supposedly progressive wing of the Latin American bourgeoisie, remained consistent throughout his career.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed was part reflection on Freire's approach to teaching and part petty-bourgeois political manifesto.

With regard to the teaching and learning process, there was little especially original in Freire's book, which drew heavily on decades-old progressive pedagogical approaches, such as those developed by American philosopher John Dewey and French educator Célestin Freinet. Such figures had promoted anti-authoritarian teaching approaches and had sought to connect the assimilation of literacy to students' learning about the society they lived in.

Freire's presentation of the latter point became associated with his call to "teach the *word*, and teach the *world*." *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* also introduced the metaphor of the "banking model" of teaching—subsequently made known to countless student-teacher undergraduates around the world—where didactic, "direct instruction" models of teaching were criticized for being akin to "an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor ... the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat." [7]

Notably absent from Freire's book was any consideration of numerous issues long central to pedagogical debates within the socialist movement—for example, the role of physical and mental labour within a polytechnic education, the relationship between school and society, and the pedagogical practices through which humanity's cultural achievements could be effectively assimilated by the working class and youth.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed instead featured a turgid rhetorical radicalism typical of the 1960s "New Left." Few figures within this milieu went uncited in Freire's book (often gratuitously and pretentiously), among them, Herbert Marcuse, Jean-Paul Sartre, Erich Fromm, Frantz Fanon and Régis Debray. Also typical were the mawkish celebrations of love and "humanization"—one characteristic passage insisted that "conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth." Such appeals were accompanied by apologetics for Stalinism—Freire welcomed Mao Zedong's so-called cultural revolution as "action in depth" that opposed a "culture of domination."

Politically, Freire sought to connect his critique of authoritarian teaching to bitter denunciations of any effort to build a revolutionary and socialist party of the working class. This was repeatedly condemned as "sectarianism" and "vanguardist leadership." One of the few references to the working class in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* involved the complaint that it was "privileged" and manipulated by ruling class ideology: "[L]arge sections of the oppressed form an urban proletariat, especially in the more industrialized centers of the country. Although these sectors are occasionally restive, they lack revolutionary consciousness and consider themselves privileged. Manipulation, with its series of deceptions and promises, usually finds fertile ground here." [8]

Pedagogy of the Oppressed promoted two varieties of Latin American bourgeois nationalism—populism and guerrillism. On the former, Freire quoted at length from a May 1, 1950 speech by Brazilian corporatist-populist President Getúlio Vargas, in which he called on workers to join the state-sponsored trade unions and unite behind his administration. Freire promoted this campaign to subordinate the working class to Vargas's authoritarian bourgeois government as "open encouragement to the organization of the people, subsequently linked to a series of measures

in defense of the national interest." [9]

Freire's attraction to guerrillism was an aspect of his promotion of liberation theology and the Colombian "guerrilla-priest" Camilo Torres. Freire's "radicalism" never extended to a critique of religion or Catholicism, of which he was a life-long adherent.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed also promoted the Cuban government, with Castro and Guevara described as "an eminently dialogic leadership group." Freire nowhere explained the "dialogic" nature of Castro's imprisonment of Cuban Trotskyists, nor of Guevara's embrace of Ramon Mercader, Leon Trotsky's assassin, after his release from prison in Mexico. The author also, it ought to be added, failed to ever consider his share of responsibility for the disastrous consequences of guerrillism, which saw tens of thousands of young people in Latin America tortured and murdered by US-backed military and security forces, which easily defeated the various adventurist armed struggles attempted in this period.

Post-Chilean exile and the embrace of Popular Front politics

After the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire left Chile in 1969 and worked for two years as a visiting scholar at Harvard University in the United States. He then moved to Geneva, Switzerland, where he spent a decade working for the World Congress of Churches. During this period, Freire led several literacy campaigns in newly independent states, mostly former Portuguese colonies in Africa, and also went on speaking tours in different countries as something of a "New Left" celebrity.

Thanks to Julian Assange's searchable archive of US diplomatic cables on WikiLeaks, we have access to a revealing episode in 1975 that demonstrates how US imperialism assessed Freire's supposedly "radical pedagogy."

Secretary of State and infamous war criminal Henry Kissinger invited Freire to the US via a diplomatic cable sent on August 7, 1975—less than two years after he and President Richard Nixon had helped the Chilean military seize power and kidnap, torture and murder thousands of left-wing workers and young people. Describing Freire as a "distinguished Brazilian educator and author," Kissinger cabled American diplomats in Switzerland for "assistance in issuing invitation to Paulo Freire to give address to international literacy day conference in Washington," with the U.S. Office of Education (USOE) to "reimburse Freire for per diem and travel expenses."

(State Department officials informed Kissinger that "after telephone contact with Paulo Freire his office confirms that it [was] regretfully impossible for him [to] accept USOE invitation.")

In 1980, Freire was a founding member of Brazil's Workers Party (PT), which was established by sections of the trade union bureaucracy and myriad "left" opportunist organizations, including Pabloite and ex-Trotskyist groups. The PT played the central role in diverting the mass strike movement of the Brazilian working class in the late 1970s, which had had an insurrectionary character, back behind the bourgeois state and the "transition" from military rule to parliamentary democracy. The PT moved steadily to the right as its electoral strength increased, and the party sought to assure the Brazilian ruling elite that it could be trusted to protect its interests while in office.

Freire played a role within this process. In 1988, the PT won municipal elections in the city of São Paulo, and Freire served as education secretary under Mayor Luiza Erundina de Sousa between 1989 and 1991. In this role he enacted limited reform measures, such as repairing many of the city's dilapidated public schools. The wider significance of the short-lived Erundina administration in Brazil's largest and wealthiest city was the PT's demonstration to the ruling elite that it was a "safe pair of hands" in

government.

Just over a decade later, in 2002, party leader and former metalworkers union chief Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva won the presidency and in office implemented IMF-dictated economic policies demanded by the bourgeoisie. These experiences of PT rule, at the city and national levels, discredited the party in the working class and opened the door for Bolsonaro and the extreme right. Today in São Paulo, the PT holds just eight of the municipal chamber's 55 seats.

In 1992, just after Freire's experience in office and five years before his death, he published his last significant book, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

This was written in the immediate aftermath of the liquidation of the Soviet Union and the related collapse of the bourgeois nationalist perspective in Latin America and internationally that had promoted economic nationalism based on import substitution. No longer able to maneuver between US imperialism and the USSR, the ruling elites throughout the former colonial world sought to attract international finance capital by implementing anti-working class "structural adjustment" programs dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Numerous petty-bourgeois guerrilla leaderships, in countries such as El Salvador and Nicaragua, accepted US-dictated "peace" settlements and the program of "free market" capitalism, turning themselves into bourgeois parliamentary parties.

Freire's *Pedagogy of Hope* reflected his demoralized response to these developments. Echoing the anticommunist "end of history" triumphalism promoted in the aftermath of the restoration of capitalism in the former Soviet Union, he insisted that "Marx and Lenin are also guilty, and not just Stalin" for the "authoritarian mould" of "really existing socialism" (i.e., the Stalinist states). [10]

This anticommunist effort to hold Marx and Lenin responsible for the crimes of the counterrevolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy within the Soviet Union was accompanied by Freire's promotion of right-wing politics. He demanded that "Marxists get over their smug certainty that they are *modern*, adopt an attitude of humility in dealing with the popular classes, and become *postmodernly* less smug and less certain—progressively postmodern."

Freire endorsed class collaborationist politics even more openly and crudely than he had previously. In 1992, El Salvador's 12-year civil war ended with the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) guerrilla movement converting itself into the establishment party in opposition to the ruling right-wing ARENA party. The peace agreement involved a blanket amnesty for war crimes carried out by the Salvadoran military, which was funded and armed by Washington as it murdered and "disappeared" tens of thousands of people. Freire supported these measures on the basis that: "There are historical moments in which the survival of the social whole, which is in the interest of all the social classes, imposes upon those classes the necessity of understanding one another. ... It may be learned that, in a new democratic process, it is possible gradually to expand the space for pacts between the classes, and gradually consolidate a dialogue among the different—in other words, gradually to deepen radical positions and overcome sectarian ones." [12]

Reflecting on the Chilean Popular Front and 1973 coup, Freire criticized social democracy and Stalinism from the right, insisting that insufficient concessions had been made to the right-wing Christian Democrats. "The correct road for the progressive forces standing to the Left of the Christian Democrats would have been to move—within ethical limits of concession on policy—closer and closer to them," he wrote. [13]

In any case, Freire concluded, the military takeover had been inevitable: "Of the coup in Chile that would have come even if the Left had not made the mistakes it had made. The fewer the mistakes, the sooner the coup would have come. In the last analysis, the reason for the coup was much more in the correct things the Left had done than in any mistakes it had

made." [14]

This is a declaration of political bankruptcy. Freire's "profound" philosophical reflections on the coup amounted to a crude alibi, covering up the responsibility of the social democracy, Stalinism and the MIR for the 1973 catastrophe. A revolutionary situation had emerged in Chile, but what was lacking was the very political leadership whose development Freire had always opposed—a revolutionary party fighting to establish the political independence of the working class on the basis of a fight for a workers' government committed to socialist policies.

Conclusion

There are few intellectual figures in the 20th century whose reputation for political radicalism is more directly belied by an objective review of their record than Paulo Freire.

This reflects the political impact of Stalinism and Pablistism in the post-World War II period. Education was among those disciplines worst affected by the Frankfurt School's anti-Marxism. In recent decades, figures such as Peter McLaren and Henry Giroux, both students of Freire, have been promoted, and their petty-bourgeois "radical" pedagogy has been palmed off as revolutionary and even Marxist.

This has well reached its limit. The political perspective upon which Freire based his educational writings has proven an abject failure. At the same time, the crisis of the international capitalist system has politicized broad layers of educators and school workers. Just before the COVID-19 pandemic, large-scale strikes of teachers were seen in countries across the world, including Brazil, as well as the US, France, Chile, Argentina, Algeria and Tunisia. Now, amid the drive by countless national governments to reopen the economy on behalf of big business and return to in-person schooling, teachers and school workers are on the front line of the struggle against the murderous "herd immunity" strategy of the ruling elites.

The next period will see ever wider layers of teachers and educational workers take up the fight for a socialist and internationalist program. Together with this, the re-emergence of a genuinely socialist pedagogical perspective can be anticipated, involving a thorough cleaning out of the Augean stables of the Frankfurt School and pseudo-left politics, and a re-assimilation of the rich history of classical Marxism's engagement with educational theory and practice that was largely buried by Stalinism in the second part of the 20th century.

References

- [1] Andrew J. Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), p. 15.
- [2] Paulo Freire, *Letters to Cristina: Reflections on My Life and Work* (Routledge, 1996), p. 82.
- [3] Cynthia Brown, "Literacy in 30 Hours: Paulo Freire's Process in Northeast Brazil," in Ira Shor (ed.), *Freire for the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching* (Boynton/Cook, 1987), p. 226.
- [4] This quote is a paraphrase of Vieira Pinto, a leading IESB intellectual and major influence on Freire; in Vanilda Paiva, *National Developmentalism: its influence on Paulo Freire* (?Instituto de Estudos da Cultura e Educação Continuada, 2016), location 2610 in the ebook edition.
- [5] Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*, p. 64.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- [7] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Penguin, 1996), p. 53.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p. 132.

[10] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 86.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 86.

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 185.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 30.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)