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Dialogue on Paulo Freire

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Dialogue on Paulo Freire

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Paulo Freire's wife, who was affectionately called "Nita" by her husband, holds a Doctor of Education degree from Pontificia Universidade Católica de São Paulo (PUC-SP). She has written, among other books, her husband's biography: Paulo Freire: uma história de vida. [Paulo Freire: A history of Life] Indaiatuba: Villa das Letras, 2006, which won second place in the category "The Best Biography, 2007" of Prêmio Jabuti, the most important literary prize in Brazil.

Paolo Vittoria

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Freirean Education and Participatory Democracy

Introduction

Paolo Vittoria

Reflecting on education means analyzing the context in which one intends to work. Otherwise, when the context is not taken into account, education can be reduced to theoretical thinking. Real educational praxis must be linked to its social context and to the complexity of its environment. A theory cannot be a vehicle that secludes praxis, but rather an instrument of critical analysis that is embedded in our own praxis.

From my point of view, one of the deepest teachings of Paulo Freire's pedagogy is the dialectic between theory and practice. Theory without practice would be mere abstract thinking, just as practice without theory would be reduced to naive action¹.

Thinking about education, about school and about teaching, is thinking and acting towards change. Such action is based upon a fundamental Freirian premise: *education is a political act* and its neutrality is a myth. As a "political act", education can be a practice of

participation, and the school can become a laboratory of ethics and solidarity.

When an educator, humbly learning from his or her own teaching act, encourages cognitive processes and the collective construction of knowledge through dialogue, listening, and communication, – he or she is creating the basic conditions for a participatory education. Knowing is interacting with reality. Educator Paulo Freire's restless determination to criticize the authoritarian and mechanical teaching/learning models has a political logic: it attempts to develop an alternative to the vertical imposition of power. Such alternative would create a participatory teaching/learning method that would lead to a future project, and give voice and dignity to those usually excluded from the education processes: the students from the oppressed social classes, as well as from the middle class.

Freire's education philosophy is understandable given a fundamental tenet: there is no absolute knowledge or absolute ignorance. Knowledge, as well as ignorance, is relative. That does not mean that knowledge has many different levels (Maritain , 1959) . The educator will confront his or her own relative knowledge. This tenet is, in its apparent simplicity, immensely deep. The difference between



the roles of an educator and student is a dialectical one, as *the educator is an educatee of the educatee and the educatee is the educator of the educator.*

In order to act, following an authentic democratic process, it is necessary to be aware of the active role that each one of us can have in the social community: between its limits and possibilities and between the individual and the collective. In this sense, Freire's pedagogical tenets are invaluable.

A critical and permanent increase in awareness, an awareness of reality and its changes, would turn us into the choices that affect the public interest, projecting our individuality into the complexity of collective dynamics.

In the following text, gathered from three interviews with Ana Maria Araújo Freire, the second wife of the Brazilian educator, there is an analysis of Paulo Freire's life history and revolutionary education philosophy, which have influenced processes of political democratization in social movements and popular education in Latin America and many other places in the world.

The tone of the interviews, which inevitably takes the shape of a dialogue, connects the narrative of "Paulo's" life experience with "Freire's" philosophical theories. The words of Ana Maria, affectionately called Nita by her husband, express the feelings of a wife and the wisdom of a dedicated scientist. She presents her subjective perspective, with her idiosyncrasies, as compared to her husband's.

Ana Maria gives us a narrative about Paulo Freire that can be read in different ways, choosing the useful aspects of his life and education philosophy to reflect about education as a conscientization process, and democracy as a revolutionary way to participation. Education and democracy need each other, in an open and permanent dialectical process.

The Universal Ideas of a Northeastern Brazilian Educator².

Memory and Present in Freire's Pedagogy

Paolo Vittoria:

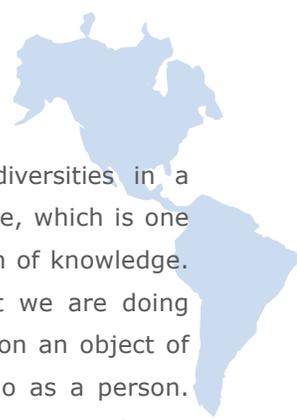
Paulo Freire rose to fame in Europe during the seventies, a time of political protests and social renovation, after that, his work was slightly abandoned. How can we explain that?

Nita Freire:

In the seventies, Paulo's books were particularly read because it was a time of contestation, maybe not only that, but because it was also a time in which people were looking for a paradigm of hope.

Besides having scientifically explained hope (Freire, 1992), Paulo's success can be explained by his extreme and genuine humanism. Paulo's humanism lies in his calm, peaceful and tranquil personality. Also, he was successful because he was a man who was always seeking coherence and was an educator who knew that we need to necessarily communicate, and communicate with others, with respect and openness to diversity. Paulo was a humanist, and humanism was disappearing. He was partly forgotten with the fall of the Berlin Wall. That is why his work was, to some extent, abandoned. Yes, there was an abandonment of Paulo's work, but now he has been widely read and sought in many places around the world.

There has been a very powerful revival of Paulo's work. His books were and are being translated into many eastern languages: Chinese, Indonesian, Korean, Japanese... He is widely read and sought throughout Latin America, as well as in Italy, France, and Germany. even though these European countries may have a culture – as is the case with powerful countries – which becomes closed and unified in order to become strong and protective against "invasions," or interventions by others, that could set conditions



for social changes. The political conservatism of Europeans and North Americans, especially against progressive actions taken in undeveloped countries, is very strong.

It is often said that the capitalism of the "Third World," of the countries facing a developmental process, is savage. But savage capitalism, I believe, is essential to the maintenance of the "First World," of the developed world, where things are determined by the oppressor against the oppressed.

Nowadays, more than ever, there is a great lack of tolerance (Freire, 2005). Tolerance is one of the characteristics of Freirian humanism. What imperialism is missing is tolerance: it wants to ratify, determine everything in the world, "pasteurizing" and imposing its "coca-cola" way of thinking, i.e., it wants to force the rest of the world to think as it thinks. The one who thinks differently thinks wrongly, and belongs to an evil world or is the evil in the world. That is how imperialism typically "reads the world," without respect for the diversity of cultures. There is only one singular model of truth: its own culture. There is only one pattern which can be defined as democratic and civilized: its own, its culture and its own way of life. The one who does not respect what is different, who does not respect people who differ from oneself, is intolerant. According to Paulo, understanding tolerance lies in respecting differences.

In short, this negative attitude towards human beings made many people forget about Paulo Freire. But he has been revived in many eastern countries, Europe, America, especially in Brazil! I know that there are also some African countries that study and apply Paulo's theories.

Paulo Freire says that knowledge helps respect diversities...

... yes, I have just talked about that, the virtue of tolerance!

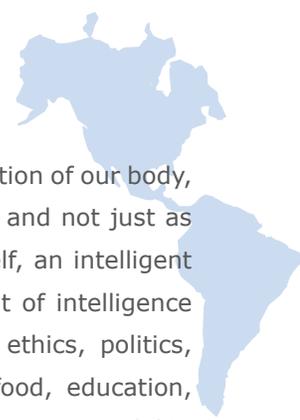
Respect and understanding of diversities in a dialectical movement implies dialogue, which is one of the instruments for the acquisition of knowledge. An epistemological dialogue is what we are doing now: an "I" with a "You," reflecting on an object of knowledge: Paulo's theory, and Paulo as a person. Cognizing subjects reflecting on a cognitive object, in this case, Paulo Freire and his work. It is not just relating an "I" with a "You" in a nonsense conversation, even if it is one about love. Paulo asserts that there are two dimensions in the dialogue that can lead to a critical perception of the world: it is in this dialogue about love that one can reach communication and knowledge. The possibilities of transforming the world are open.

Before reading words, a person reads the world. It can be either a fanatical or a critical reading. In contexts influenced by formal, positivist idealism, dialogue, communication, and the search for knowledge get lost along the way. Those perspectives fail to recognize the virtue of tolerance of diversity, which is the essence of humanism. This reading of the world does not understand, or want to respect, cultural diversity or accept that there is no absolute equal, but equality within diversity.

It is necessary to respect the language, the way of walking, of talking, of choosing food... the different ways of "reading the world," because all these things are the different and authentic ways of cultural expression.

How do you think the creativity of Brazilian popular culture can deal with the conservatism that still remains in Brazil?

I think that Brazil is an ambiguous country, full of contradictions. On the one hand, it is very conservative – it is elitist, authoritarian, and discriminatory. On the other hand, we Brazilians have become a society that is open to the world, attentive to everything and to everyone. If you come to Brazil and then come



back three years later, you will see many changes. I always say that whoever comes to Brazil undergoes a “baptism of fire,” he never comes back the same... We have a great ability to teach in a positive way, with empathy, solidarity, happiness, curiosity, with the ability of creating and accepting what is new!

Is creativity the engine of change?

Brazil is a very creative and dynamic country. Its miscegenation certainly gives it that tone, this dynamic of creativity that enables changes, especially changes for the better.

Freire’s work is read in many countries in Europe, Asia, and America. He traveled a lot. Are there aspects of universality in his ideas? Does oppression occur only to illiterates or to people in general?

I think that there are oppressed people everywhere. You, Paulo or a person from the first world can also be oppressed. Anyone can experience oppression here or in your own country. Paulo talked about this in the seventies. He showed how people in the first world were also discriminated against because of their poverty, color, sexual orientation, religion, etc., or because they do not have food, a home, or good clothes. They suffer persecution, cultural invasion... they are oppressed! That is why Paulo used to say: “There is a third world in the first world and there is a first world in the third world.” As we can see, there are millionaires and powerful people of all kinds, with luxurious stands of life, also in poor and miserable countries.

The oppressed, in a special way, is a victim of the circumstances of oppression, a person deposed from his or her ontological calling of being a man or a woman.

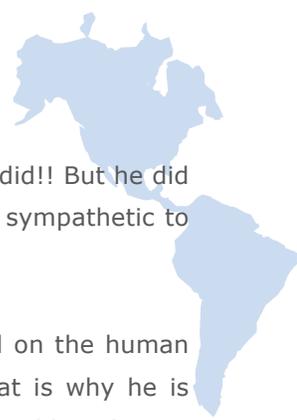
Let’s see what this ontological calling of human beings is, according to Paulo. We were born as animals and, through time, we became men and women because

we used our front hands as a continuation of our body, as something to be used as we want and not just as a support for walking. That is, in itself, an intelligent act that made a greater development of intelligence possible. Then, we created culture: ethics, politics, languages, art, religion, processed food, education, and a wide diversity of institutions. However, our ability to create culture has been working in a contradictory manner. It has led to a separation between human beings through the different forms of discrimination and oppression. That is, oppression does not only exist against illiterates. Human intelligence itself has created many unbelievable and evil ways to oppress everyone...

Do you think that the division of the planet into first, second and third world is due to a misconception of culture? Don’t you think this is a partial and reduced classification?

That’s not how you say it anymore. That classification was eliminated. Nowadays we say “emerging countries,” “developing countries,” “underdeveloped” and “developed countries.” But that doesn’t matter! Brazil is already “developed” in some aspects. However, our lateness in development is not economic, because we produce a lot of agricultural and industrial products. Our underdevelopment is social. There is a terrible income distribution and an education system that is not satisfactory, neither in quantitative nor in qualitative terms. Here in Brazil, unfortunately, illiteracy or functional illiteracy is a concrete fact.

I’ll tell you an interesting fact about the different forms of behavior in these “two worlds.” I witnessed at the airport in Brussels when a Brazilian, who has been living in Switzerland for quite a while, saw when another Brazilian, who was trying to pick up his luggage, asked a person waiting near the baggage belt: “Grab that brown suitcase, please, it’s mine!” The Brazilian who was living in Switzerland mumbled: “No, you can’t do this here! It’s not polite!” Well, I



don't think that is impolite. It's accepted to talk to a stranger and ask for a favor. That is part of our cultural communication process which capitalist individualism, especially the neoliberal kind, is ending in the name of "civilized rules," of a "civilized world".

Paulo used to say something like this: "A country, a people, cannot be another one; that is something to be respected, the cultural differences. A culture is no better than another. There are cultural features that ought to be changed in the name of humanism. But that cannot be determined from the outside. That must be started from the conscientization of the people that belong to that culture."

He warned me a few times: "Nita, don't think that Brazilian culture is always the best. It is yours, it is ours, but you have to recognize that in each country, in each part of the world, there might be better or worse cultural aspects than the ones we have in our own culture. The parameters of good or bad are given by a critical analysis, which can judge the possibilities of humanization of a culture. If you are tolerant, you accept cultural differences better. There is no culture that is better or worse than ours." That is, we cannot classify or place the world in a hierarchy according to cultures...

Getting to know Brazil was a learning experience for me: a humanist education, an education about the human being, especially about a kind of communication that is missing in other parts of the world.

I ask myself: What does it mean to be developed? Is it developed to consider it impolite to say, "That's my suitcase, grab it, please"? Talking to a stranger is not a problem in Brazil. In other parts of the world, on the other hand, it is considered bad taste. It seems that people are afraid of each other. When Paulo said, "I believe in the human being," he showed that he accepted things as long as they were not disrespectful. Paulo met many people who tried to

deceive him and others that actually did!! But he did not regret being open, humane, and sympathetic to others.

Paulo's entire philosophy is based on the human being, on the individual's virtue. That is why he is a humanist; that is why the diffusion of his ideas is becoming necessary. Last year I received a letter from a German intellectuals' society: they had proposed to the European Community to disseminate Paulo's work and his humanist ideas in schools, unions, churches, etc. They asked for my collaboration and I accepted. Later, one of them told me that it was difficult for the project to be approved because it was too daring, that power in Europe is stable and does not want to be "invaded" or renewed, does not want to change the parameters of truth.

Unfortunately, we know that we are treading the wrong path, towards an uglier, more individualist, more competitive world. However, many people, most people, don't want to change the status quo. That is the issue.

That's it, Paolo, Brazil baptized you in the baptism of benevolent and beneficent marks of fire.

Education from a political-revolutionary perspective

Freire's educational thinking has a strong revolutionary potential also from a political standpoint. How much has the fact of being born in Recife, in northeast Brazil³, where inequality and poverty is widespread, influenced his rebellious feelings against social injustice? How do you explain his solidarity with popular art?

There is a great difference between Paulo and other educators/thinkers. Paulo was a Brazilian, a northeastern man from Recife. He used to witness social injustice, the abuse against the black population and contempt for the poor since he was a child. He used to ask himself how that could have happened if



we were supposed to be all equal. Are they different? Why do some people have possessions and others don't? That was what Paulo was worried about since he was a child!

His father was a military police officer. When he fell ill, he retired, and then his wage became too low to support his family. The family started to lose everything. His uncle, who had a successful grocery shop in Rio de Janeiro, helped them financially. In 1929, with the economic crisis, his uncle lost everything and was no longer able to help them. Paulo's family became even poorer.

Thus, they went to live in Jaboatão, a little town near Recife. In Jaboatão there was only one primary school. Paulo, whose ambition was to go to secondary school and keep studying Brazilian syntax, felt helpless.

When Paulo was 16 his mother looked for a school in Recife where he could study. However, the religious schools would not accept him without him paying tuition. It was my father, Aluizio Pessoa de Araújo, who accepted him under one condition: that he had to be a good student!

Paulo studied at the Colégio Osvaldo Cruz. I met him there when I was less than four years old. In three or four years he already knew a lot. After 5 years he became a Portuguese teacher. He taught in the secondary school, when I was his student. I was 11 and 12 years old. Colégio Osvaldo Cruz was a mixed school; there were boys and young men, girls and young ladies in the same classroom. That was not very common in those days.

Paulo's career had a very rapid ascent. After this experience at the Colégio Osvaldo Cruz and other schools in Recife, he started working for SESI⁴. There, interacting with the workers, he started to concern himself with people's ontological right to be able to read and write, and with the conditions and relationships

of exploitation of workers, which later he would call conditions and relations of oppression.

As Paulo's theories were always based on concrete reality and obvious things, on his own experiences as briefly described here, he was different from German, Italian and French philosophers who studied the theory of others, who tried to review some ideas or criticize others... According to Paulo, we had to prioritize our own praxis, the concrete, what we feel, the intuition, and the obvious. Theories should be based on what people suffer, work, feel, and think! Thus, obviously, his ideas had more than a political dimension. He was a philosopher of education, preoccupied with feelings, dreams, desires, and rights of the oppressed, not only with their duties. Those preoccupations came from his rebellion against social injustice, which originated from the fact that he was born in Recife, northeast Brazil, where poverty is widespread. His love for the people made him sympathetic towards popular art. Then he started to work with the anthropological concept of culture, which opens possibilities of raising consciousness about reality and illiteracy.

Nita, do you think that building theories about theories, we can come to isolate praxis from a more authentic confrontation with the human being?

Yes, that is the originality and diversity of Paulo's ideas. His ideas were based on praxis. He started from what was obvious, from the intuition that leads men and women to praxis. See, for example, how Paulo understood the phenomena he had reflected on: illiterates are illiterates in terms of written language, not oral language. When someone is familiar with a certain subject, it is easier to study and to deepen the knowledge about this subject. We know it is easier to learn about something we are already familiar with than having to start in a new field. Then, when dealing with literacy, it is necessary to start from what you already know. That's what the literacy method was like: to learn how to write a word, we need to start teaching how to write words that we already know the meaning of. The "Paulo Freire literacy method" has this fact as a tenet:



adults already know the things they talk about!! We have to teach how to write these things, to start with “the speech of what is already known.”

Paulo used to say that, in a literate society, learning how to read and write the word and the world is an ontological right of women and men. It is part of human nature... knowing how to read and write is part of the ontological nature of human beings, it is the least that can be expected. Whoever cannot read and write has one right stolen has his or her humanity stolen. That is a very serious consideration and statement. Paulo started from this praxis, because he would see and empathize with the feelings of the oppressed.

In fact, Paulo invented and created. However, one cannot create from scratch, but only from what already exists – overcoming, growing, changing and historically transforming the real, transforming what is already in the world. That’s why he became one of the greatest educators after the Second World War. He considered the praxis and meaning of things and reflected on them. Many people did not like that in Europe or even in Brazil: they accused Paulo of being sentimental, a romantic. I think that if you don’t have emotions, don’t value your feelings, you are only “half alive.” Paulo had the conviction that, “I don’t think with my mind, with my head. We think with the whole body. My body is also conscious, not only my mind.” That is what he used to say, and many people thought that was ridiculous. The proof of this intuition is that nowadays there is a centre in the United States to study this matter. The body knows. It knows when to go back home – our metabolism gets into balance – and knows when the environment is friendly or hostile.

Before thinking, the body feels. The body knows and Paulo used to say that “everything that makes my heart beat faster, or feel my blood circulating more rapidly in my veins, or my body hair when it bristles are the things I have to think about.”

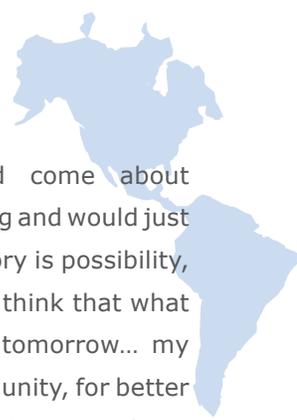
Anyway, Paulo valued feelings, intuition, common sense (he refused to accept that common sense was worthless). He started from these things; even understanding that truth was not limited to this cycle. That would be imprudence! He was sure that we have to reflect about what our body tells us to. The body is the starting point.

Those are the things that set Paulo apart from other philosophers from the First World! Paulo lived human conflicts with emotion, and reflected about them. Emotion was left aside, probably in hibernation, by First World philosophers.

Nowadays in Europe, thanks to the work of Peter Mayo (Mayo, 2003) as well, there is a reflection about the comparison between Freire and Gramsci. Besides the time and geographic differences, there are many convergences, especially in the relationship between pedagogical activity, political ideas, and the will to transform society. Gramsci is well-known in Brazil and Paulo Freire is receiving renewed attention in Italy.

Paulo read Gramsci after the exile. Gramsci, unlike today, wasn’t known in Brazil. Paulo left Brazil in 1964, when the writings of Gramsci in Italian prisons were unknown. Paulo met Gramsci’s work in Chile, after having written *Pedagogia do Oprimido* (Freire, 1974) [Pedagogy of Oppressed]. When he asked some of his friends to read his work before being published, one of them asked: “Paulo, didn’t you read Gramsci? You wrote things that belong to him and you didn’t cite him!”

That means that the social context gives convergent comprehension, statements, and beliefs to people that have the ability to make a radical and critical “interpretation of the world.” Even when these people are separated by distance – time was not significant – the social context gives the ability to reveal similar or even identical things.



Paulo never talked about the dictatorship of the proletariat...

Paulo used to say that if you only fight against the oppressor, you take the place of the oppressor and the oppressor turns into the oppressed. You ought to fight against the relationships and conditions of oppression!

In real socialism, at the beginning, even with some mistakes, the Russian revolutionaries fought to attain the emancipation of their people, who were living in degrading conditions at the time of the Czars. They fought against the relationships and conditions of oppression! But later a social status with many privileges was created. It started to oppress in a perverse way, determining and forcing everyone to think as the "power elite" did. Imposing this way of thinking and acting, the experience of socialism totally failed.

In the Soviet Union there was both a lack of the necessary love for the lives of people, and a lack tolerance of diversity. We, as subjects, create history. When we are ethical, we try to be better; if we are not ethical, we lose our "life's destination." The Soviets wanted to determine history, they were neither ethical nor efficient in accomplishing such a task which, let's admit, is impossible.

The wickedness of the Soviets made them lose their "life's destination," because it is our vocation to Be Greater. This process led the Soviet Union to degradation. What really happened was a distortion determined by the corruption of the socialist system, which destroyed the utopia of equality and collaboration. The fall of the Berlin wall was the end of this utopia, not of all utopias.

Marx categorically asserted that socialism would lead to an egalitarian society after the dictatorship of the proletariat. If that were a mechanical and inexorable process, if men and women were assured

that an egalitarian society would come about spontaneously, they would stop fighting and would just wait... For Paulo, unlike for Marx, history is possibility, not determinism. That is, we need to think that what we do today can change the world tomorrow... my world, your world and the world community, for better or worse. The future depends on what we are doing today, it doesn't come automatically. That's why we need, with Paulo, to dream and fight for better days!

That is possible because we are unfinished beings, the reason for hope. Today we are not what we were yesterday, and tomorrow we won't be what we are today. As unfinished beings, we have to broaden the possibilities of Being More, as we are doing now with this conversation, looking for a better world.

Possibility is a very rich concept in Paulo, who categorically denies the determinism of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In the meantime, what we are doing today in the world is what destroys the world; it is what can lead to a worse world. Either we stop this process of intolerance and destruction or the world will certainly and irreversibly end. But we have the ability to intervene in the world; we are able to change paths. Our unfinished being gives us hope to build better days. When we want to change, we want to change for the better, not for the worse. Humanity in general hopes for a better world. Everyone hopes for something positive, that would take us to a higher level, to a human project of the possibility - not of historical determinism, or the dictatorship of the proletariat. Everyone hopes for a better society, with better people, where everyone can be more and not less, where people are not denigrated and don't suffer the violence of poverty, of terrorism of any kind, and don't lose dignity. I went too far with your question. I took the opportunity to say some important things for understanding Paulo's understanding of education.



Freire understood the conscientization process as a strategy for the liberation of the oppressed, as a critical and permanent awareness.

There are two words to consider here: 'consciousness' and 'awareness'. Conscientization, or awareness raising, goes beyond them.

I think it is important to note that 'conscientization' is a word that only exists in Brazilian Portuguese. Before I go on, I want to make clear that 'conscientization' is not a word created by Paulo. In the 1950's a research group in Brazil founded the ISEB (the Instituto Superior de Estudos Brasileiros [Higher Institute for Brazilian Studies])⁵ which began to talk about *conscientization*. Dom Helder Câmara⁶ diffused it⁷.

But it was Paulo who actually reflected on this concept, systematized it, and used it as a methodology for a critical understanding of the world, for a **reading of the world** that would allow an understanding of the presence of human beings in the world as subjects of history, not as objects of it and of the oppressors. Also, for Paulo, conscientization implies an intentional action for change, that is, for transformation.

There is a difference between Piaget and Freire: Piaget uses the expression 'awareness' while Freire uses 'conscientization'...

Conscientization is not only awareness, but a critical analysis. It is a permanent process in order to be in the world, critically, as I mentioned in my previous answer. Piaget studied the mental mechanisms, the learning mechanisms, but without the political implications that characterize Paulo's *conscientization*.

The contexts of the two authors were also very different, which explains why their readings of the world were so different. Piaget was born in Geneva within a rich family. His studies were intentionally neutral. So, as a matter of principle, Piaget had to understand that he had nothing to do with the tragedy

of a girl who became a prostitute in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, or with thousands of children without schools who are submitted to slave work in Latin America or in Africa, just to mention two examples.

Unlike Piaget, Paulo, who had a modest childhood and a very poor adolescence, never disregarded these facts when generating his own ethical and political, rather than educational, theory.

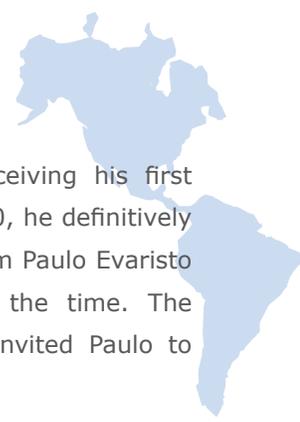
These facts explain why Paulo gave priority to conscientization while Piaget constrained himself, only and deliberately, to increases in *awareness*.

How was he changing during the final years of his life?

His writing was becoming simpler. He was becoming freer in all aspects of his life. He became more mature. I have no doubt, with no false modesty, that I significantly contributed to these changes. He was sad at Elza's death, but he overcame his sorrow when we got together. He used to say: "When I fell in love with Nita, I fell in love with the world and life again." Thus, in this second stage of his married life, he wrote more and his writings became more connected to reality, more poetic, more beautiful... more loving, I guess!

The exile...

Paulo didn't want to leave Brazil. He was persecuted by the ones responsible for the military coup in April 1, 1964 and he left Brazil to save his life. He managed to enter the Bolivian Embassy in Rio de Janeiro. It was October, 1964. He went to Bolivia, having already set a job with the Ministry of Education of that country. He had health problems because of the altitude – La Paz is about 3,700 meters high. When he got better, the United States staged a coup d'état in Bolivia. Paulo went to Chile, where he lived for four and a half years. When his book written in Chile, *Pedagogia do Oprimido* [Pedagogy of the Oppressed], was published in the United States, he became famous worldwide.



At that moment, he had been living in the United States for almost a year and he worked for the World Council of Churches, in Geneva, an institution created by Protestant churches in Germany, Switzerland, and many other countries.

He was invited to Switzerland and he visited almost the whole world. The idea of the WCC, when they invited Paulo, was to give a humanist aspect to the relations of the institution with populations in many parts of the world.

He coordinated educational projects in former Portuguese colonies in Africa. He worked with the people who were looking for emancipation from Portuguese colonization on the Atlantic coast. Guinea Bissau was the first country to invite him; then Cape Verde, San Tome and Principe, and Angola. Paulo never lived in Africa and he never went to Mozambique. He wrote a book about these experiences, *Cartas a Guiné Bissau* (Freire, 1977) [Letters to Guinea Bissau]. In this book he cites Amílcar Cabral⁸, someone he admired a lot, who influenced his theoretical work, but whom he never actually met. When he went to Africa, Amílcar had already been assassinated by a nationalist, a political crime ordered by reactionary groups in Europe. Recently, Sérgio Guimarães and I published *A África ensinando a gente: Angola, Guiné-Bissau, São Tomé e Príncipe* [Africa Teaching Us], a “dialogue book”⁹ between him and Paulo. My husband also worked in Tanzania, Zambia, and Nigeria.

In 15 years of exile, Paulo lost his passport. He had only temporary permissions to stay and travel. Paulo applied for a new passport many times, but the Brazilian government didn’t grant him one, even though that was an inalienable right.

In 1979 a democratization process started in Brazil – he and other Brazilians in exile were in high spirits in the context of the movement for a “wide, general and unrestrained amnesty”. At this time, Paulo applied for a passport, which was finally granted him.

In August, 1979, right after receiving his first passport, Paulo visited Brazil. In 1980, he definitively returned, under the protection of Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns, Archbishop of São Paulo at the time. The archbishop, when visiting Geneva, invited Paulo to teach at PUC/SP¹⁰.

His return wasn’t easy. He was honored at the PUC/SP Theater with great enthusiasm and affection, but many intellectuals criticized him because he wasn’t in Brazil and he didn’t suffer all the hardships that they had endured. On this day, in a packed theater, Paulo thanked all the “exiled insiders” who had bravely and audaciously fought so that people like him, an “exiled outsider,” and many other Brazilians, could return... Besides that, Paulo was very worried about Elza’s¹¹ health, because she was very ill and her condition was getting worse.

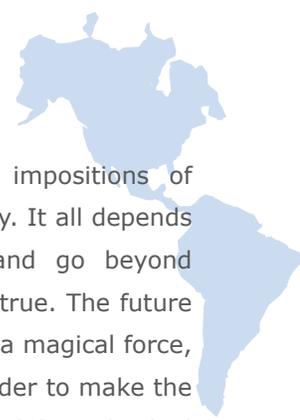
Is the universality of many aspects of Paulo Freire’s work due to exile? Is that universality due to the fact that his ideas were thought in and through many different cultures?

His work is universal because he started and was deeply rooted in his most distant place: Recife. He explained the universality of his work saying: “My worldliness can be explained by my Latin Americanness that explains my Brazilianness, which can be explained by my Pernambucanness, explained by my Recifeness”¹².

That’s why Paulo had the possibility of being universal and to reach people **throughout the** World, in spite of race, culture, religion, age, gender... Only later did he travel to disseminate his ideas...

Oppression is also universal...

Paulo used to say that even if you had critical consciousness, you wouldn’t be free from oppression. It’s necessary to find out where the oppressor is, and what the conditions of oppression are, to fight against



the conditions that hinder dignity in our lives and the realization of our dreams.

The first thing, the first step that has to be taken by the person who wants to be relieved from oppression is, under the orientation of the educator, to become aware of reality, become critically conscious. Then, there has to be a permanent struggle for liberation, both your own and everyone else's, and every society's.

The social context and the society work together in oppressing. Capitalist societies in general are organized to make one oppress the other, especially by the "necessity" of the implicit and explicit competition of capitalism. Liberation cannot be individual, but of the society, so that we can all live with solidarity in a fair and truly democratic society.

Paulo denounced our inexperience with democracy, which has been determined –and in turn has determined– the relations of oppression that characterized our history: large-scale landed property, work exploitation, including a long period of black slavery, and a small internal market, which was followed by commercial monopoly. A country cannot be democratic if it has people who can and people who cannot read, if it has people who have everything and people who have nothing, if exploitation among men and women is still commonplace.

Paulo read Marx a lot, but didn't follow him dogmatically. He marked his significant difference when he understood that "history is not determinism, it is possibility." The past teaches us how to be in the present and to project ourselves in the future. According to Marx's determinism, history is based on the presupposition that a socialist society will be achieved through the dictatorship of the proletariat.

For Paulo, history depends on a choice by a community or by a society: the community chooses. That is democratic, and it helps to build democracy,

to be released from the dreadful impositions of oppression. People choose from reality. It all depends on our ability to fight hopefully and go beyond hindrances, making the dream come true. The future is not something mechanical. It's not a magical force, but a result of the actions taken in order to make the human dream come true, the dream of the individual and collective Being More.

CONSCIENTIZATION AND HUMANIZATION¹³

The conscientization process as a contribution to liberation

Conscientization and humanization are parts of one and the same way to liberation...

To become humanized we need, above all, to be conscientized of our condition of being **in** and **with** the world. To become humanized, we need to realize and have the political insight that neither are we treated nor do we treat others with humanity. We have been deprived of things that are part of the ontological nature of human beings: having a house, food, hospital, medicine, school. To build culture is to build utopias and that has political, economic and ideological reasons. It is necessary for the victims of oppression to recognize the social reasons of their own condition, and feel responsible for their own liberation and the liberation of others. For the one who does not know how to read and write, this condition is a problem of social organization. However, one thinks that the problem is that he/she is not intelligent enough and then loses his/her self-esteem. As Paulo said, the person "is dismissed from life," since the illiterate feels that he/she cannot change his/her situation.

Therefore, the first step for humanization is the conscientization process, to be critically conscious of oppression. This is the beginning of the action. It is a process which begins with the interpretation that denies the apparent common sense that spreads the idea of an intrinsic inferiority of the illiterate, poor



and dispossessed people. This is a process oriented to preventing these people from being condemned to a position of inferiority. It is necessary that they gradually perceive it as one of the ideologies of powerful people, who want to take advantage of those who don't have anything and are not conscious of the possibility of being subjects of history. They think of themselves as objects of history –which they actually are, because they are persons with duties, but without rights.

The *conscientization* process consists in making emerge critical consciousness and a potential for political struggle in people who think they are inferior; in making them understand that they were oppressed because they were not conscious of being productive and intelligent persons, the creators of their culture and history. It is from this point that action begins.

It is possible to construct history without consciousness, but it is necessary that people, conscientized and engaged in their societies, feel and construct themselves as "Being More." They have to do, and know that they are doing, what is politically true, right and ethical. In this way, they become those who construct the authentic history of their societies. This is the humanization process. Therefore, *conscientization* leads to a demand-making process. A demand is the fight for the things that give people the sense of knowing that we have duties and rights. So, the one who has duties and rights starts demanding with critical consciousness and becoming responsible as a subject of history. It is through this process that we humanize ourselves.

I can give you an excellent example of this point. It is about a person who struggled in Brazil for the liberation of the oppressed: Chico Mendes. He was assassinated in the Amazonian forest because he worked with other rubber tappers for the conscientization of the group. He affirmed that he learned how to write and read when he heard about Paulo Freire. He developed an interest and became literate. Then he searched for

more information about Freire's pedagogical proposal and became familiar with the conscientization process. Working as a rubber tapper, he understood that the methodology of conscientization could inspire the liberation of his own working class, the preservation of the environment in the Amazonia basin, and the earning of our daily bread¹⁴.

Can the rise in critical awareness be difficult? Wouldn't it be easier for the oppressed to live without developing any critical thinking about his or her condition? Can conscientization be painful?

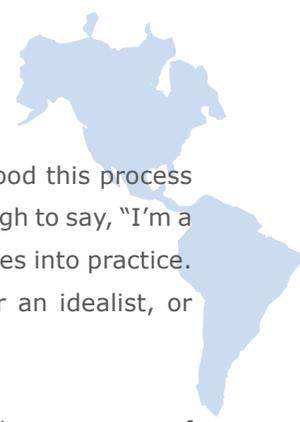
Paulo used to employ pictures, drawings, and slides to decode the existential situation in the process of conscientization. There is a feeling of deep abandonment in poor dwellings, in shanty towns – the favelas, where open sewers run near the houses, where people have to go up very steep slopes and live without electricity or running water. In decoding, when there's a group discussion, there's always someone who says "That is our street, that's how we live." This moment is of fundamental importance to the process of gaining critical awareness.

In the process of *conscientization* there is a necessity of assuming the condition of oppression. The oppressed in general don't assume it, much less verbalize it. The oppressed must assume their condition in order to humanize themselves. It is a painful process, almost a psychoanalytic therapy. Recognizing the difficulties or even their own mistakes is a very difficult, very painful process, but necessary in order to live a true human condition, a human existence.

Conscientization as an inquiry and research process

How difficult is it for the oppressed to accept the conscientization process?

It is a difficult and painful process, but it all depends on how you, the educator, act. Paulo used a sort of



maieutics, the “Freirian maieutic.” You can’t just tell a person: you are worthless, you don’t have a house, food, education, a job, or respect... you are worthless in the society. That would cause anger, discouragement, disillusion, disappointment, and helplessness.

The methodology of conscientization created by Paulo implies discussing generator themes through questions/answers. If you ask a person, “Why is life like this?” and he or she answers: “Because it is God’s will;” then you ask again, “But why does God want life to be like this? Is it true that God really wanted this?” – the educator formulates new questions following up on the students’ answers and, then engages in the conscientization process. You, the educator, don’t give the answers. You ask questions about the answer given by the student.

The pedagogy of Paulo is not about giving answers; it is the pedagogy of asking questions (Freire, 1985). We have to ask fundamental questions, which in his epistemology are: “How?”, “Why?”, “Why is it like this?”, “Who benefits?”, “Who loses?” in order to reach the essence of the phenomenon. This dynamic, which goes to the root of the problem, results in conscientization.

All human beings are able to do this, asking questions and giving answers. It is not necessary to be an intellectual or a college professor to do it. If you take a group of popular people, they can do it. Anyone, knowing to be obfuscated, denied as a subject, can little by little reveal the reality through the process of “Freirian maieutics,” and then have the chance to change his or her life, and then the world.

In a dialogue with Ivan Illich (Freire & Illich, 1975), Paulo says that he didn’t want to use the word conscientization anymore...

Paulo never denied the efficiency of the process of *conscientization*. He was misinterpreted in Europe and in the United States, more than in Brazil. Some

interpreted him as if he had understood this process in an idealist manner, as if it was enough to say, “I’m a victim of society,” and then put changes into practice. Paulo never said that. He was never an idealist, or mechanistic.

Conscientization implies an active process of understanding reality, of making decisions, making choices and demanding concretization of one’s demands. When the word *conscientization* was being misinterpreted, Paulo stopped writing about it for a long time. But he was still convinced of the importance of *conscientization*. He wanted to write about this theme again. He had a great ability to go back to the themes he had written about, “remodeling” them, rephrasing them, and adding new contents, sometimes because he wanted to see them from a different perspective, sometimes because he had reconsidered an interpretation.

When he published ***Pedagogia da autonomia***¹⁵, he wanted to write about ethics and *conscientization* again. He already realized – foreseeing the world, that eight years later was characterized by the lack of ethics, by the transgression of ethics, confined to times of terror and excesses of all kinds – the importance of discussing his *conscientization* category again, in relation to ethics. He had this project because he was very concerned not only about the transgression of ethics, but about the helplessness brought about by liberalism and the globalization of the economy, spreading out in Brazil and all over the world. He wanted everyone to be aware of what was happening in order to overcome it. He believed that *conscientization* offered tools for transformation that could help to achieve the possible dream of true planetary democracy.

Word reading, world reading

Can the lack of choice that characterizes poverty be an obstacle to the conscientization process? I mean, if people cannot choose food, clothes, instruction, it is likely that they won’t have consciousness of their own



condition. How is a liberation process possible in such conditions?

We have to be careful not to understand this process according to middle class parameters, although we belong to the middle class. The liberation process is gradual. Its speed varies depending on individuals and circumstances. It will bring men and women from the condition of Being Less to the condition of Being More. This process will be gradual, not mechanical. Progressively, through this revolutionary liberation process –which is not revolutionary by means of arms-, you fight for your rights, for a school, for a literacy course, etc., just because you were conscientized. This does not mean that conscientization leads to unhappiness because I cannot buy or I cannot go to the theater. This does not necessarily happen. Excluded persons begin thinking in a novel way: they want and they feel they have the right to learn how to write and read, to have a house, to have food, to participate in the main decisions of their community and country. That is the rule, although obviously there are exceptions.

In the sixties, illiterate people in Brazil did not have the right to vote¹⁶. Most illiterate people wished to be literate to vote, to write letters to their parents, to their children, to the wife or the husband.... To become literate meant also to have the possibility of reading the Bible in the church, to identify the names of bus lines, the name of your street or the nearest park, in order not to get lost in the big city. Please note, Paulo, how minimal the demands were, and still are today.

After Paulo's death, the City Council of São Paulo paid a tribute to him and I was invited. A woman about sixty five years old told us how learning to read and write had changed her life. When I asked her what this change was like, she said she came from Recife to work in São Paulo with her husband and children. Her husband died, her children went to the University, but she did not know how to read and write. When she wanted to go to one of her daughters' house, the

other daughter had to take her to the subway station. The daughter she was visiting had to pick her up at the local station. She silently counted the stops to have some orientation: "one, two, three, four... here it is." She was very afraid of going anywhere alone. Her children advised her in case there was no one waiting for her: "Get off the train, go upstairs, look to the other side of the street, and then find that yellow house..." They taught her how to get to her daughter's house using these kinds of signals. Her fear was so big that she decided to learn how to read and write.

One day, during her literacy process, when she was at the station waiting for the train, she looked at the name of the coming train, and began to identify syllables "Ja-ba-qua... " "Ja-ba-qua-ra!!!" She was so happy and astonished, almost shouting: "I've learned how to read!" Actually she felt liberated...

She had been seeing the same doctor for a while and she always had the same symptoms. In the first appointment after having realized she could read "Jabaquara," the doctor asked her:

--- "Maria, it has been 15 years that I've been seeing you and you always had high blood pressure. Not today. What happened? Did you take any medicine?"

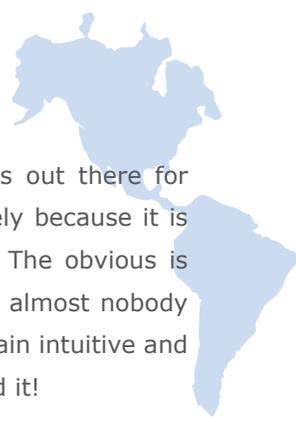
--- "My medicine was to learn how to read and write," she answered.

--- "That is not possible," he said smiling.

--- "For you it is not possible, because you already know how to read and write. For me, who had always lived under the shadow of others, everything has changed. I know that now I govern my own life," she answered very confidently.

For Maria, learning how to read and write was her liberation process. There are people who demand more than this, but for her the main demand was to learn how to read and write.

After Maria's testimony, I read about a research study conducted at the Federal University of Alagoas,



where it was confirmed that persons who learned how to read and write rarely continued having visual and auditory problems, high blood pressure...

The liberation process begins at this point: to know how to read the word. But real liberation implies knowing how to read critically the word and the world, knowing how to act, how to choose your political goal and to participate in many other activities.

This was the liberation process for Paulo. It is a continual process from Being Less to Being More, that is, from being only an object of manipulation upon which oppression acts, to progressively recovering your space as a historical subject. It is not just to have a house, food, medicines, etc. that leads to *conscientization*, although all this is also necessary. It ultimately depends on education for conscientization and liberation.

Does the body learn with the mind? The rise in awareness is part of the body...

Our body becomes aware and it can even change our mind. There is undoubtedly a dialectical relation between body and mind. The rise in awareness begins in the body and has repercussions in it... I am talking about the biological body, of course. Paulo said: "I write with my head, but actually I write with my whole body. I do not think with my mind, I rather think with my whole body, with all my emotions, my feelings, my intuitions.... I think with my common sense experiences, with the lived facts that, although rarely perceived, are still present in my life, and I think with my reflexive consciousness as well." All that Paulo said by means of his intuitive, pre-scientific perception has now become scientifically confirmed.

But we have already talked about this point, Paulo...

An intuitive and creative perception?

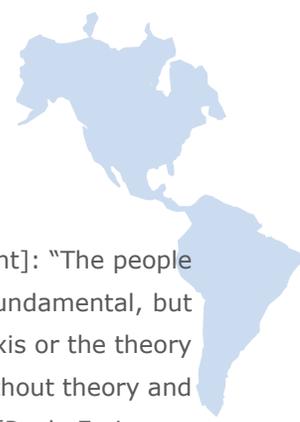
Yes, I don't know anybody who has dedicated time and effort to research the obvious. What seems

obvious and seemingly self-evident is out there for anybody to talk about it... but precisely because it is obvious nobody pays attention to it. The obvious is very hard to see and to understand... almost nobody perceives it... there's a need for a certain intuitive and creative talent to do it... and Paulo had it!

Before reading the word, the person reads the world...

Paulo used to say that reading the world is preceded by the reading of the word. The first reading of the world is given by the mother, because she is the first person with whom the baby establishes the first contact. The child begins to realize that when he/she cries, the mother comes. This is the first reading of the world. After a while, he/she realizes that if he/she cries too much, it is possible that the mother may not come. Thus, the child begins to 'estimate' how much he/she has to cry in order to call her. For everything there is a distinct cry: A cry for diaper change, a cry for nursing... In this way, the mother begins to realize what her child is saying. It is in this dialogue with the mother that the child begins his/her reading of the world...

The reading of the world begins when we perceive the relations, conditions, phenomena, things which gradually can or cannot become critical. This reading implies an education oriented to uncover the real. A critical reading of the world generates satisfactions and demands duties. For this reason, Paulo used to say that the critical reading of the word has to be a re-reading of the world to transform it. . To read the world by reading the word or to read the word by reading the world constitutes an indivisible relation that that makes transformations possible.



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- 1 Paulo Freire said in one speech to the MST [Movimento Sem Terra, Brazil's landless movement]: "The people have the right to know the theory of people's praxis. That is, people's praxis is absolutely fundamental, but the praxis is not a theory of itself. It is necessary that people understand thoroughly the praxis or the theory of praxis, or the theoretical knowledge, because they have the right to. There is no praxis without theory and there is no theory that does not submit to a praxis." MST, Paulo Freire, um educador do povo. [Paulo Freire, an Educator for the People] ANCA, Sao Paulo, 2005. pp, 23-25.
- 2 Interview held on 12/04/2005 and reviewed in November, 2006.
- 3 The northeast is one of the poorest areas in Brazil. On the other hand, it has an enormous potential in its popular art. Freire, once more, relates the importance of the northeastern context in his human and pedagogical education: "I didn't need to examine scientific studies about the relationship between undernourishment and learning problems. I had a previous knowledge, an existential knowledge that came from those relationships." Freire, Paulo, Cartas a Cristina [Letters to Cristina], (org. Ana Maria Araújo Freire) 2002. São Paulo: UNESP. p. 40.
- 4 SESI – Serviço Social das Industrias – is the institution where Paulo Freire worked from 1947 until the military coup in 1964, first as the Director of the Education Department and later as a Supervisor. This is how Freire remembers his experience in the SESI: "Working for SESI with different professionals, in different levels, and with workers, whom I challenged to assume, more and more, attitudes of subjects, to learn democracy and to practice it, I ended up giving a number of essential lessons to who is inserted in the process of changing reality" Freire P. Cartas a Cristina [Letters to Cristina] (org. Ana Maria Araújo Freire) 2002. São Paulo: UNESP. pp. 144. Or: "The pedagogy of the oppressed could not have been born in me just because of my experience in SESI, but my experience in SESI was fundamental. I would say it was essential to its elaboration". Freire P., Pedagogia da Esperança [Pedagogy of Hope] (2005). São Paulo: Paz e Terra. p.18.
- 5 The ISEB (Instituto Superior de Estudos Brasileiros)[Higher Institute of Brazilian Studies] was founded in 1955. It was originally a Center for Research which debated and proposed paths for the development of Brazil, through an approach to topics which were part of areas such as history, philosophy, economics, politics, and sociology. The military regime in 1964 closed the ISEB and sent to exile many of its researchers.
- 6 Hélder Câmara was one of the encouragers of Liberation Theology in Latin America and of a sort of Christianity which would search for the liberation of the poor classes.
- 7 Paulo Freire explains that the term 'conscientization' was created by the ISEB and spread by Hélder Câmara: "People generally believe that I am the author of this strange term 'conscientization,' since this is the core concept of my ideas about education. But actually it was created by a research group from the Higher Institute for Brazilian Studies around 1964. Among them, the philosopher Álvaro Pinto and Professor Guerreiro can be mentioned. When I heard this word for the first time, I immediately realized the profundity of its meaning, because I have the strong conviction that education, as praxis of liberty, is a knowledge action, that is, a critical approach to reality. From then on, this word forms part of my own lexicon. But it was Hélder Câmara



who was responsible for its diffusion and translation into English and French” Freire P., *Conscientização. Teoria e prática da libertação* [Conscientization. Theory and Praxis of Liberation] (2005). São Paulo: Centauro Editora. p. 29.

- 8** Amílcar Cabral, with Aristides Pereira, his brother Luís Cabral, Fernando Fortes, Júlio de Almeida and Elisée Turpin, founded the PAIGC - Partido Africano para a Independência de Guiné e do Cabo Verde [African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde] in 1959. He fought for the liberation of the people of these countries from Portuguese colonialism. He was murdered by Portuguese colonial agents in 1973, before the literacy work of Paulo Freire in Africa. Freire, who always admired him, defined him as an “educator educating his people”. Freire dedicated the book *Cartas a Guiné Bissau* [Letters to Guinea Bissau] (see note 14) to him.
- 9** These two books are being published by Editora Paz e Terra.
- 10** PUC-SP stands for Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo.
- 11** Paulo Freire married Elza Maria Costa Oliveira, a primary teacher, in 1944 and had 5 children. The Brazilian Educator often expressed his love for Elza, who gave him great support and was the inspiration for many of his activities. Her death, in 1986, caused great distress in his life. As he said, falling in love with Nita was the reason for falling in love with life again.
- 12** Recife is the capital of the State of Pernambuco, which is one of the smallest states in Brazil. It is noted for its strong popular culture and creativity. To say “I’m Pernambucano” is an assumption of identity that goes beyond geographic limits.
- 13** Continuation of the interview done in 08/22/2005, and reviewed in November, 2006.
- 14** In 1976 Chico Mendes founded the Rubber Tappers Project [Projeto Seringueiro] in the Amazonia. The Project was based on a special education school which used Paulo Freire’s methodology. Education was born from workers’ daily life with the aim of transforming reality. Union leader Chico Mendes had an important role in the Conselho Nacional dos Seringueiros [Rubber Tappers National Council]. He was assassinated in 1988 because his activism had been considered dangerous.
- 15** Freire Paulo, *Pedagogia da autonomia. Saberes necessários à prática educativa* (1996). São Paulo: Paz e Terra. Published in Brasil by Paz e Terra, by November 2006 it had already sold over 850,000 copies. Editors’ note: *Pedagogia da Autonomia* was published in English with the title *Pedagogy of Freedom*.
- 16** Educator Marcos Guerra, who worked with Freire in Angicos (1962-63), tells in an interview made by Paolo Vittoria about the first literacy experience: “In the period around 1962-1963, the illiterate in Brazil did not have the right to vote. At that time, there was a climate of changes and reforms in Brazil for illiterate people to vote. But there was no political decision about the point. Thus it is evident that the claim for literacy was a sort of lawsuit for more electors to participate in elections. It was an issue that naturally represented an attempt to obtain a popular conquest and, at the same time, something that other people was very afraid of”.



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