

# CRITICAL NOTICE

## *Critical Pedagogy for Transformative Optimism*

PETER MAYO

*University of Malta*

A critical notice commentary on *Engaging Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of Possibility. From Blind to Transformative Optimism*, 2005, by César Augusto Rossatto. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 183 pages.

**ABSTRACT:** This essay critically highlights the main features of a study that attaches importance to the concepts of time and optimism and their effects on the achievement and goals of high and low achievers in a North American and a Brazilian context. The focus on the time factor that serves as a leitmotif throughout the study gives this work its originality. One of the study's most pleasing aspects is that it draws on Freire's ideas as Education Secretary in São Paulo to suggest options for future education policy intended to provide more democratic and socially inclusive educational programmes. It is argued that these Freirean ideas should be given greater importance in educational administration worldwide than is the case at present. They can serve as an antidote to the technical rational and managerial approaches that seem to dominate the area.

My colleague, Carmel Borg, and I were getting ready for another day at the Third Paulo Freire Forum at UCLA. As I stood in the washroom, Carmel suddenly jolted me out of my early morning lethargy with the exclamation that he had just witnessed a tragedy. He had been gazing out of the window of our shared hotel room onto the freeway below, where cars drove past at breakneck speed. One of them jerked violently away from the hurtling stream of traffic and catapulted into one of the trees surrounding the hotel car park. The distressing sight of the wreckage made me reflect later that the hapless driver had fallen victim

to the demands of speed and the uncompromising time schedule that regulates capitalism's fast lane.

This incident prompted me to begin to reflect on the relationship between capitalism, space, speed, time, and the precariousness and expendability of life. These reflections also resonated with some of the discussions carried out at the UCLA Forum, especially those discussions throughout which references were made to Freire's own concern with Neoliberalism's devastating impact on individual and communal lives (see Borg & Mayo, 2000). César Augusto Rossatto's book on engaging Paulo Freire's pedagogy of possibility resonates with this kind of thinking. He makes *time* the central theme of his discussion on education and the limits and possibilities of Freirean pedagogy.<sup>1</sup> He reveals, in the process, concerns about life on the capitalist "fast lane" in cities such as Los Angeles that brought the above tragedy back to mind: "everybody always seems to need to be someplace else very quickly" (p. 41).

César Augusto Rossatto's book differs from many other studies on Freire in that it does not limit itself to a theoretical explication of Freire's concepts or a reflection on concrete pedagogical projects, necessary though these will always be. Rossatto focuses on a number of key concepts in the Freirean lexicon such as fatalism, optimism, and transformation and employs them as key elements in his focused discussion on the situation in the life of high and low school achievers in two different contexts, one in Los Angeles and the other in the author's native Brazil. The work therefore has a strong comparative edge that renders the book of interest to students of comparative education.

The author employs both quantitative and qualitative research techniques to render his study well grounded. He organises his observations around different types of optimism including blind optimism that entails a belief in meritocracy (this despite the massive sociological research that exposes its fallacy), fatalistic optimism that immediately recalls Freire's own discussion on fatalism and magic in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and resilient optimism that is rather individualistic. In Freire's terms, therefore, resilient optimism reproduces the oppressor-oppressed relation of opposites (Allman, 1999) since it entails an individual adaptation to an unjust and unequal social order – "making it within the system" without any attempt to change it or, as Freire would say, "reinvent" it (Freire, cited in Gadotti, Freire, & Guimaraes, 1995, p. 44). Resilient optimism would belong to the domain of "having" rather than that of "being," to adopt the famous distinction

by Fromm that Freire uses in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. According to Paulo Freire, one engages in the task of becoming “more fully human” not simply on one’s own but in solidarity with others (Freire, 1970, 1993, pp. 85-86). This task “cannot unfold in the antagonistic relations between oppressors and oppressed” (pp. 85-86). In adopting an individualistic approach to being authentically human, one would be denying others the chance of attaining the same condition, that of being authentically human. This individualistic effort of resilience would involve a dehumanizing process of “having more” (pp. 85-86).

Rossatto relates each discussion, concerning optimism, to the time factor. For instance, the author argues eloquently: “The temporal construction of time consciousness within the hegemony of blind optimism can implant fatalistic views in disenfranchised students. Schools become complicit with the historical amnesia of blind optimism” (p. 50). Of course, statements such as these warrant elaboration on how the time factor impinges on such features of this condition as, for instance, a non-critical disposition towards banking education, memorization, and so forth. Sociologists have argued that, in traditional working class cultures, there has been a reluctance to invest in the future and therefore to postpone gratification (marking time) because of the traditional precariousness of working class existence which makes members of this class have faith in only the here and now.

Freirean pedagogy geared towards a transformative optimism (a sense of hope, or “educated hope” as Henry Giroux would call it – Giroux, 2001, p. 125) helps learners as subjects to “develop emancipatory concepts of time to maximize the utilization of their time.” The author does not stop there but takes a good look at educational policies affecting the two countries in which he has lived. His early discussion on his native Brazil is revealing, especially his references to such important sources of mass popular culture and common sense construction as the *telenovelas* (Latin American soap operas). These are quite familiar to the present writer since they have, for years, been featured on various private Italian TV channels that reach the Maltese islands. Equally revealing is the author’s discussion concerning the way he gradually developed his political consciousness as a “person in process,” outlining the various stages of his own transformations, of his becoming, in Freire’s own words “less incomplete” (Freire, 1997) and therefore more coherent (Freire, 1998, pp. 51, 66). His depictions of different facets of Brazilian society are a boon for anyone not familiar with the country and who seeks to obtain some preliminary

understanding of the context which shaped Freire's early and later ideas regarding education, politics, power, and society.

César Augusto Rossatto's analyses of educational policies in his current context, the United States, are equally revealing and he draws on numerous studies, involving different methodological approaches, to demonstrate the impact of different educational measures on the educational and other life chances of different students. Quite interesting is his discussion on the impact of United States standardized testing measures on the different kinds of optimism he identified in the earlier discussion in the book, including the much desired transformative optimism with its Freirean and critical pedagogical overtones. And it is to the areas of Freirean and United States critical pedagogy, the latter originally rooted in critical theory, that the author finally turns. He also draws on ideas emerging from the very inspiring reforms occurring in São Paulo when Freire served as Education Secretary there in the Erundina Municipal Government (Freire, 1993); the author provides us with a glimpse of the kind of pedagogical activity that took place within the classroom. The author does all this to strengthen his recommendations for policy changes intended to develop a more democratic and socially inclusive educational system. In fact the book ends with 16 points outlining what the author regards as the ingredients for a proposed Freirean critical temporal curriculum.

The recurring concern throughout is how to deal with the temporal knowledge of students and the author argues that the curriculum must be reoriented frequently since students change their concepts of time. One insight obtained from the Freire-led Secretariat's ideas concerning the "popular public school," so brilliantly analysed in the work of O'Cadiz et al. (1998), is that of developing a cross disciplinary curriculum based on the use of generative themes. This was a feature of the curricular reforms centring on thematic complexes in São Paulo and also Porto Alegre (City Secretariat of Education of Porto Alegre, 1999).

The generative themes were intended to help connect with the life worlds of the learners. They marked the initial stage in the educational process as part of an attempt to link the school to the popular classes, and therefore to render it an institution which is no longer alien to these classes. The PT's Secretaria Municipal de Educação (SMED) in Porto Alegre shared this concern with respect to the "Citizen School" that was developed in this city (Gandin & Apple, 2002, p. 110). César Augusto Rossatto also gives due consideration to the democratic process characterizing the popular public schools in São Paulo with their

emphasis on participation and collaboration at all levels. These schools were intended to allow their members (administrators, teachers, students, parents, school union members, and members of the surrounding community) to experience a sense of ownership of the programmes and the schools themselves. This is surely one of the finer conceptual developments in Freire's later work. It merits greater consideration in the discourse on educational administration and reform worldwide than is the case at present.

Unfortunately, I can gather from my own country's experiences and some of the international literature that circulates around the English speaking world, that the São Paulo educational reforms, which somehow resonate with other PT ideas such as that of the participatory budget in Porto Alegre, lose out to more northern oriented ideas. I am referring here to the rather managerial/technical rational ideas that derive from North America-based gurus, and, oddly enough, one comes across citations from people whose ideas gesture in the direction of this approach, citations which appear in the context of a discussion attaching importance to critical pedagogy. I felt that, at times, the author was too eclectic in his choice of sources. I suppose one can appropriate insights from different kinds of people with different pedagogical orientations (although I certainly recognize that there are limits), provided that the overall tenor of the discussion is not diminished as a consequence.

The most interesting aspect of this and the over all discussion, that covers a huge range of theories and approaches, including the psychosocial approach, is that the author retains the time leitmotif throughout and explores how Freirean pedagogy can help "deconstruct traditional temporalities, leading to the creative construction of new concepts of time for students" (p. 162).

This book by César Augusto Rossatto is different from many of the other books on Freirean pedagogy that emerged during the last 16 years or so. And we have witnessed several books on or dealing at length with Freirean pedagogy during this period (e.g. Allman, 1999; McLaren, 2000; Roberts, 2002; Morrow & Torres, 2002; Darder, 2003; Mayo, 2004; Ledwith, 2005). The writing throughout the middle and later sections of this book lacks passion, save for the vivid descriptions of Brazil and Los Angeles besides the short but lucid interview with Paulo Freire himself, carried out just a little time before Paulo died. Freire's concerns about Neoliberalism and its exacerbation of the culture of individualism rather than social solidarity are there for all to see in this interview. The final discussion, in which the author explores possibilities for a

Freirean inspired reform, drawing on the municipal government experience in São Paulo, raises some challenging questions but left me somewhat cold. Nevertheless I cannot doubt the rigour of the scholarship involved. The comparative and quantitative/qualitative dimensions of the research render the work exemplary as far as scholarship goes. It is, however, the foregrounding of the time concept in relation to different forms of optimisms or fatalisms that accords this book its originality.

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### NOTES

1. See Bartlett, 2005 for a recent discussion on the limits and possibilities of Freirean pedagogy.

#### *Author's Address:*

Faculty of Education

University of Malta

Msida MSD 05

MALTA

EMAIL: peter.mayo@um.edu.mt

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