

IN MEMORIAM

TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF PAULO FREIRE'S DEATH (1997-2017)

FREIRE'S RELEVANCE FOR UNDERSTANDING COLONIALISM

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ABSTRACT This article pays tribute to Paulo Freire (1921-1997) on the 20th anniversary of his death (1997-2017). Rather than provide a comprehensive discussion around his ideas from writings spanning around almost thirty years, it focuses on one aspect of his body of work. It is that aspect that closely falls within the purview of this journal: colonialism. The emphasis is on the 'oppressor consciousness' and cultural invasion as they are relevant discussions around colonialism, both in terms of direct colonialism and neo-colonialism. The paper also builds on this theme to address the complex issue of language in postcolonial contexts.

SUMMARJU Dan l-artiklu jaghti gieħ lil Paulo Freire (1921-1997) fl-ghoxrin anniversarju mill-mewt tiegħu (1997-2017). Flok jaghti ħarsa komprensiva lejn il-kunċetti ewlenin tiegħu li żviluppa fil-kitbiet f'medda ta' kważi tletin sena, l-artiklu jiffoka fuq aspekk wieħed mix-xogħol ta' Freire. Dan l-aspekk għandu x'jaqsam b'mod dirett mas-sugġett ta' speċjalizzazzjoni ta' din ir-rivista, jigi f'forma ta' l-kolonjalizmu. L-artiklu jillimita ruħu għat-temi tal-'kuxjenza tal-oppressur' (l-oppressur intern) u 'l-invażjoni kulturali' billi juri kif dawn jintrabtu ma' diskussjonijiet dwar kolonjalizmu dirett u neo-kolonjalizmu. Jieħu spunti minn dawn it-temi biex jiżviluppa diskussjoni dwar il-kwistjoni kumplessa tal-lingwa f' kuntesti postkolonjali.

KEYWORDS colonialism, neo-colonialism, oppressor consciousness, cultural invasion, language, creole

Introduction

Tuesday 2nd May 2017 marked the twentieth anniversary of the death of Paulo Freire, one of the previous century's most revered political and pedagogical thinkers whose influence continues to be felt in various fields. Freire's impact on pedagogy is well known but his influence is also strong in such areas as health work, social work, community development, cultural studies, communications, theology (Elias, 1994; Leopando, 2017), philosophy, and sociology. Most recently his work has been adopted with regard to analyses of literary classics (Roberts, 2010). Freire's influence in postcolonial studies is evinced by articles published in this journal. Enough has been written and continues to be written about Freire's basic political pedagogical philosophy. I shall therefore refrain from rehearsing the signature concepts involved. This issue also carries an article focusing on a Freirean analysis of 'Banking Education' viewed against the background of wider contemporary politics and policy making in education. As befits this journal, my tribute focuses on one specific aspect of Freire's writings - Colonialism.

The paper is based on the premise that colonialism or neo-colonialism takes many forms and comprises issues concerning a "heterogeneous set" of subaltern "subject positions" (Slemon, 1995, p. 45). Drawing on my own work (Mayo, 1995, 2004), I shall restrict myself, in this short tribute, to the following: (a) the concepts of 'oppressor consciousness' and 'cultural invasion', described in Carlos Alberto Torres' (2014) book on the 'Early Freire' and (b) the very complex issue of language in a post-independence, post-colonial situation.

These issues feature prominently in Freire's body of work and are discussed against contextual backgrounds where *direct* colonialism, in Edward Said's terms (Said, 1993, p.8), neo-colonialism and, to adopt Gramsci's perspective, 'internal-colonialism' make their presence felt, often in crude and exceedingly violent ways. Freire has also been made relevant to analyses of education in a specific situation of 'settler-colonialism' (Silwadi ad Mayo, 2014; Sperlinger, 2015). Elisabeth Lange (1996) discussed the notions of dependency (also analysed by Torres, 2014) and the roles of the colonial traditional / neo-colonial modernizing churches, as opposed to the 'prophetic church, in this context. The key text here is the chapter on these churches in Freire's *The Politics of Education*, translated by and strongly featuring Donaldo Macedo (Freire, 1985). The contrast lies between what Cornell West calls the 'Constantinean Church' (the 'Church of Empire') and the grassroots- oriented 'Prophetic Church' with its basis in Liberation Theology. The latter is a decidedly anti-

colonial theology born out of the most overtly colonised contexts which have moved from being directly colonised to being informally colonised by the superpower that is the USA and multinationals. Given the all pervasive colonial and neo-colonial nature of the different contextual backgrounds to Freire's work,¹ it is hardly surprising that his ideas are frequently presented as being immersed in a postcolonial politics. His is a brand of pedagogical politics for 'decolonising the mind', the first step towards which is that of *verstehen* (understanding) which takes the form of comprehending the nature of oppression and the way ideology operates to render human beings complicit in their own oppression and the oppression of others. The image of the oppressor is internalised by the oppressed (Freire, 1970, p. 30) which prevents the latter from contributing to resolving the oppressor-oppressed dialectical relation. This situation echoes Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic, reinvented dramatically by Samuel Beckett through the characters of Pozzo and Lucky² in the existentialist play, *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*, in its English version – Beckett, 1956).

Divide et Impera

Those who are oppressed in one context can be oppressors in others. In a colonial context this manifests itself in instances of 'divide and rule', a theme broached by Freire in the additional chapter to his original draft of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.³

1 The difference in colonial control exerted over different countries is one of degree with many of the 'Third World' contexts, with which Freire engaged, being among the hardest hit in terms of colonial legacies, with class and indigeneity intersecting.

2 See Raymond Williams (1968, p. 346) on this.

3 Freire's original intention was to develop a book of three chapters which hold together, with a dialectical streak running through them. This plan changed as a result of the publishers' insistence that Freire should write and add a fourth chapter, in light of Frantz Fanon's and Albert Memmi's insights on colonialism and the work of other thinkers (see Schugurensky 2011 on this). I have always reckoned that the dialectical streak stops at the end of the third chapter as the fourth comes across as an 'add on' where themes like 'divide et impera', 'cultural invasion' itself and 'Unity for Liberation' are thrown in as if 'hanging on a line'. However some of the themes suit the colonial context of the discussion and can, with some imaginative 'piecing together', connect with the earlier ones developed in the first three profound chapters. Relating 'divide and rule' to the 'oppressor within' concept constitutes one example of tracing relations between different themes in the book.

Segmentation on racial/ethnic lines constitutes a key contemporary strategy of divide and rule predicated on the process of internalizing the oppressor's image. This becomes more important in a period of hegemonic globalisation where producers are segregated on ethnic and national lines. This is connected with the notion of the 'oppressor within', a situation evident, for instance, in the perpetration of acts of violence against people constructed as different and whose characteristics do not fall within eurocentric terms of reference.

Conquistador Mentality

This situation applies to Western countries developing their economy on immigrant labour and at the same time being places where fear of and 'competition' against the 'Other' prevail. It also applies to countries such as Paulo Freire's native Brazil with its complex set of racial politics involving whites, positioning themselves as being of European stock, south-east Asians to a limited extent, blacks and indigenous people. The last mentioned are still among the greatest victims of rapacious capitalist speculation in areas such as the Amazon. They are victims of the sort of contemporary atrocities which Eduardo Galeano saw as a continuation of the old 'Conquistador' mindset (Galeano, 2009). Freire's chilling account of and reflection on the wanton killing of a Pataxo Indian, Galdino Jesus dos Santos, in a piece included in the posthumous collection of essays grouped together under the title *Pedagogia da indignação* (Pedagogy of Indignation) (Freire, 2000), highlights the continuation of barbarous racist acts in Brazil. This particular crime is an example of the oppressor consciousness residing within people who use white supremacy as a means of positioning themselves against *alterity*. It gives them that sense of 'positional superiority', to use Said's pervasive term (Said, 1978), that would allow a few of them to kill fellow humans for their sport, like 'flies to wanton boys' in Shakespeare's famous line from *King Lear*.

Violent, racist, sexist, cross-tribal, anthropocentric⁴ and homophobic acts are examples of the kinds of behaviour that indicate the presence of the 'oppressor's image' inside the oppressed. Again, this behaviour can be encouraged by a colonial strategy of 'divide and rule' (Freire, 1970, p. 137).

⁴ This includes wanton killing of animals, insects (as in the line from Shakespeare), and birds – a contradiction in the illustrations in Freire's early work (Freire 1993) with their machista images of hunting – the conquest of nature.

One can point, as a relatively recent example, from among the many similar examples throughout history, to the inter-tribal carnage in the 1990s resulting from the Belgian colonial pitting of Tutsis and Hutus against each other in Rwanda.

The situation is exacerbated by the process of what Freire calls ‘cultural invasion’ – the colonisation of “the mental universe” of the colonized, in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s (1981, p. 16) words. This is banking education on a large scale. It was historically characterized by the direct imposition of the ‘cultural arbitrary’ (cultural interests and choices) of the colonizers in most sites where ‘official knowledge’ (Apple, 1993) was imparted, schools in particular. The process of ‘Anglicisation’ in the British colonies is an obvious example. Nowadays, cultural invasion is manifest primarily by that all pervasive type of Western Eurocentric neo-colonialism we call, echoing Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ‘hegemonic globalisation’, in recognition of the presence of an alternative type of globalisation: ‘globalisation from below’.⁵ It is also present in the concomitant consumer culture ideology. ‘Cultural invasion’ was the process by which certain Africans saw themselves as ‘Black Europeans’ or, in Frantz Fanon’s terms, ‘Black skins in white masks.’ It refers to the situation which has led people from my native country, Malta, to play down the strong Arab element, if not Islamic element, that is part of the country’s history, and all this to emphasise the country’s purportedly uninterrupted ‘Christian lineage’ and ‘European vocation.’ All this can be read as part of a process in which certain formerly directly colonized subjects desire to be identified with and assimilated within the centres of Eurocentric colonial power.

Of course discussions in each of these contexts become more complex when one recognizes hybridization as a feature of postcolonial life, including resistances, assimilation and appropriation. The French term *metissage* is an intriguing concept in this regard (see Tarozzi and Torres, 2016, p. 48).

Fear of Freedom

Echoing Fromm, Freire goes on to maintain that, under these conditions of prescription and cultural invasion/dependency, freedom can become a fearful thing for the oppressed. People

⁵ One must be wary of providing binaries here as the two often intersect, for example: using the tools of hegemonic globalisation such as the internet to get different activists interacting in the build up to such events as a street protest or world social forum.

can be so domesticated that any activity entailing creativity can appear to them to constitute a journey into the unknown. As Freire has argued, creativity involves risk taking (Freire, in Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 57), with the immediate connotations here being different from those attached to Ulrich Beck's concept of a contemporary 'risk' society. Risk-taking is something in which many formerly oppressed persons are reluctant to indulge having been immersed in the 'culture of silence'. 'Can the country survive as an independent nation?' was the frequently asked question I came across in the build up to the withdrawal of the UK armed forces from Malta in 1979. I often hear the same thought among Scots in light of Brexit and the possibility of another referendum on whether Scotland should remain within the Union (this in a country which has much more natural resources than Malta, the latter currently enjoying a buoyant economy and good standard of living).

The fear of 'liberation' and the unknown is very much part of the colonial form of Banking Education, one of Freire's most famous concepts, echoing Dewey's 'pouring in', where prescription is the order of the day and where the cultures and creative spirits of the colonized are denigrated and constructed as inferior to those of the colonizers and their comprador elites. It is for this reason, to give one example, that the 'New Jewel' Government in revolutionary Grenada insisted on a policy intended to 'Grenadise Grenadians.' This was intended not to develop an insular nationalism but to instil worth and pride among the formerly directly colonized people. (Hickling-Hudson, 1997) It was intended to help people gain the confidence necessary to partake of the development process, and do so in a conscious manner, asking the question: development for whom? This echoes the kind of reflection at the heart of Freire's central pedagogical and philosophical notion of *praxis*. Praxis entails action-reflection for transformative action, the process being not sequential but dialectical (Allman, 1999).

The Language Question

There is of course another aspect of Freire's writings which would be of particular concern to activists/adult educators engaging in postcolonial politics. This is the language issue. Freire argues that not all that pertains to the colonial experience is irrelevant to the new postcolonial context. This point becomes all the more valid when one considers that hybridization is a feature of the colonial power-resistance experience. A Gramscian 'war of position' involving critical appropriation occurs on different

fronts. Freire refers to the knowledge of the colonizer's language as beneficial in the postcolonial situation of such former Portuguese colonies as Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau or São Tome e Principe or Mozambique. For instance, where and when different languages are used by different tribes, the colonial language can serve as a 'lingua franca'.

Of course, the language issue in former direct colonies remains complex, as the colonizing standard language becomes a source of social differentiation between groups and classes, even though, in small states, it serves as a language of international currency, therefore being an economic asset. I would submit, however, that the language needs to be taught differently from the way it was taught under direct colonial conditions. In former British colonies, the emphasis would no longer be placed on 'Anglicisation' and English language teaching as a 'civilising mission,' with its connotation of constructing that which is native/indigenous as 'uncivilised, but on language learning as a liberating experience.

Language education policies would, in a postcolonial context, include teaching/learning the national-popular or tribal languages and literacies which in countries like mine were once referred to as the *volgare* (vulgar language [sic]). Learning the native alongside the colonizing language can well form part of a bicultural education, as advocated by a leading critical pedagogue of Freirean inspiration, Antonia Darder, with regard to Latino and Latina education in the USA (2011). The colonizing language would, from a Freirean perspective, need to be taught in a problematising manner, in which its historical and socio-political roles are addressed; problematising entails learning together how ideology, including colonial ideology, resides in languages – a far cry from the colonial and neo-colonial way of teaching languages till this very day (see discussions around TESOL among immigrants). It also entails learning the role which, in the case of English, the colonising language plays as a hegemonic force (Macedo, Dendrinis and Gounari, 2003). An education predicated on *praxis* entails this approach. Freire (1978) paraphrases Amilcar Cabral when stating "Language is one of culture's most immediate, authentic and concrete expressions" (p. 184) There are echoes here of Marx and Engels' statement in *The German Ideology* to the effect that language is "practical consciousness" which is as old as consciousness itself. (Marx and Engels, 1970, p. 51)

National-popular languages

Giving importance, in the process of praxis, to indigenous languages, and especially national-popular languages, when they exist, becomes key in light of the strong relationship existing between language and consciousness and between language and one's view of the world, as Gramsci argued in the latter case. Freire insisted that the "so-called failure" of his work in Guinea Bissau was the result of the use of Portuguese "as the only vehicle of instruction" throughout the campaign (Freire, in Freire and Macedo, 1987, p.114). Echoing Pierre Bourdieu, he stated that this use renders the coloniser's language a form of 'cultural capital', the vehicle for reproducing the kind of class (and I would add: tribal) stratification associated with the previous colonial order (Freire, in Freire and Macedo, 1987, pp. 110-111). This explains his advocacy of bilingual/cultural language involving the indigenous (Creole in Guinea Bissau's case, although not all sectors of the population have access to this hybrid language) and the colonizers' language. These are to be learnt in a problematising manner and for the purpose of not constraining people to remain at the margins of political life.⁶

Conclusion

Language issues in former direct colonies, as with most postcolonial issues in general, remain complex. Together with and drawing on other writers, Paulo Freire helps us steer a route through this complexity. This is why his ideas continue to inspire writers, educators and countless other cultural workers twenty years after he passed away.

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⁶ This situation recalls Gramsci's discussion around imposed standard language and dialects/literacies in the quest for the development of a 'national-popular' language.

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