

## Review

**Walter Omar Kohan, *Paulo Freire. A Philosophical Biography*, ISBN pb 978-1-3501-9598-1, hb 978-1-3501-9599-8, ePDF-3501-9600-1, EBook 978-1-3501-9601-8, 2021, , London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 277 pages**

Another book on Paulo Freire, whose birth centenary is being celebrated this year, has seen the light. I keep saying that, as long as there is rigour and new ‘takes’ on Freire as a subject to think with, then such books are welcome. I personally think that these qualities are contained in Walter Kohan’s offering which, as Carlos Alberto Torres, prominent Freirean scholar, writes in his endorsement on the back cover of the paperback version in hand, is a tour de force.

This book was previously published in Spanish and Portuguese, the Spanish version bearing the title *Paulo Freire. Mas que Nunca?* (Paulo Freire. More than never/ever?). The subtitle replaces the main title in this book because of a theme taken up in its main contents, the question of time. This book is original and imaginative in the way the discussion on Freire’s own ideas is organised thematically around the following: Life, Equality, Love, Errantry and Childhood. Some of the themes are familiar to those steeped in the Freirean corpus, although Kohan, who is quite erudite and well versed in philosophy, especially classical philosophy and, as an Argentinian ensconced in a Brazilian university,

Latin American social thought, provides innovative nuanced approaches to them. Equality is often preferred to equity, quite in vogue especially in the Anglophone world, in the discussions on social justice.

Scholars such as Kathleen Lynch have argued for a more refined concept of equality, one that takes into consideration the intersectionality of all dimensions of social injustice, and the conditions that need to be in place to deliver robust equality outcomes rather than merely equal formal rights.

Quite remarkable are also the different forms of time outlined in this book. *Chronos* stands for the chronological sense of time with watersheds, dates, past and future. *Kairos* entails ‘seizing the moment’ which is the opportune time that might not return. This has implications for revolutionary activity (when the conditions are ripe).<sup>1</sup> Finally we have *aion* which, as used by Freire and others, transcends *chronos*. For educators, it can involve working towards establishing the conditions to insert oneself in the *now*, that is “inhabiting the present” (p. 178). As far as education is concerned, it serves to problematise attempts to vocationalise it for a future that might not even come to fruition, what Gramsci, in his denunciation of the Giovanni Gentile reforms, called ‘mortgaging the child’s future’ (*ipotecare il futuro del fanciullo*, in the Italian original). Kohan highlights the relation of Freire’s writings to these categories. *Kairos*, for instance, is reflected in Freire’s frustration, writing in exile in Chile, at the CIA and multinationals-backed military coup in 1964. This brought about a rupture of a democratisation process in a country roused for social transformation. The discussion on time runs throughout the book, in the main thematic

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<sup>1</sup> This brings to mind Marx’s caveat, in the *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, that we bring about change but under conditions not of our own choice.

section and also in the added interviews, notably the one with Jason Wozniak.

The other theme which struck me in this book is that of *childhood* in Freire which, according to Kohan, is given short shrift in the thinking around his ideas. Yes, those who confine themselves to his early works, born out of adult literacy experiences in Angicos, Guinea Bissau and elsewhere, may fall into that trap – equating Freire solely with adulthood. I would submit, however, that many have seen the value of Freire’s approach and denunciation and annunciation (anuncio, denuncio) of different pedagogical approaches, always political pedagogical approaches, to engage in education within the ‘limit situations’ of formal schooling. There is ample evidence of this in the literature around Freire, and explicit ones at that. As for Freire’s own writings, I would argue that it is not even a case of leaving it to others to reconfigure his approach for schooling and other formal engagements. Freire’s oeuvre extends to published work, even in English translation, connected with Higher Education (his dialogue with scholars at UNAM Mexico, published as *Paulo Freire on Higher Education*, SUNY Press, 1994). Other published work connects with Freire’s involvement in formal education, certainly with his role in reforming public education. This occurred when he was Education Secretary in the Mayor Erundina-led Municipal Government in São Paulo. *Pedagogy of the City* would be the key work in English translation in this case, backed by the ethnographic work by Maria del Pilar O’Cadiz, Pia Wong and Carlos Torres, admittedly on social movements but more widely on the larger municipal context: *Education and Democracy: Paulo Freire, Social Movements, and Educational Reform in São Paulo* (Westview Press, 1998). We learn of his attempts at providing the conditions for children, the popular way of calling children in Brazil as *meninos / meninas popular* (child from the popular

classes), to learn, with cooks being engaged to ensure they are not famished. Together with other employees (janitors, administrators, teachers, etc.) in this community schools project (those who democratically elect to join the project of the 'popular public schools'), these cooks are formed as educators. This was presented by Freire and others in a symposium on his work as SP Education Secretary, held at the 1991 AERA meeting in Chicago. They have as much a say and vote on the schools' running as parents and the professional teachers. All are brought to bear on the educational experience of the child and all school employees are therefore immersed in a holistic education culture.

Kohan however highlights Freire's insistence throughout to not kill the child in us, to prevent what William Wordsworth, referring to the Platonic theory of Anemnesis (The Immortality Ode), described as shades of the prison house descending upon the child. In this case, not necessarily the romantic English bard's, it would be the child in us. The point is captured by Freire in the sense of social justice and critical consciousness being allied to dreaming - dreaming of a world *menos feio, menos malvado, menos desumano* (less ugly, less mean, less inhuman). This dream is ideologically represented as being 'impossible' but Freire did cling to the hope that it can be possible. Rooted in our existential situation, it is that dream which helps us imagine a world not as it is but as it can be. This is a call to rescue utopia or heterotopia from the stranglehold of 'Capitalist realism',<sup>2</sup> evoking memories of the kind of post-war dystopian reality which Samuel Beckett tackles in *Waiting for Godot*. Apparently 'dream the impossible dream' was the song Paulo Freire use to hum when he visited Danilo Dolci at his centre in Partinico

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<sup>2</sup> I adopt the late Mark Fisher's phrase. On this, see Henry A. Giroux in this volume.

near Palermo in Sicily.<sup>3</sup> The child in us smacks of being inquisitive and of asking questions, hence Freire's 'pedagogy of the question' which Kohan rightly highlights with regard to the book, *Learning to Question*, involving Paulo's exchange with Antonio Faundez. This is one of Freire's few 'talking books', translated to English, which provide some tension and contested positions. It also brings to mind a conversation between Freire and Neal Bruss and Donaldo Macedo, originally published in the *Boston Journal of Education*. Questioning is situated at the heart of problem-posing. One of the standard criticisms of conventional schooling and parenthood is that they kill the inquisitive dimension of our upbringing through pressure for conformity and to embrace the 'given', specific social constructions of reality, normalising discourses if you will. Figures such as Jean Piaget, Gabriela Mistral and Ada Gobetti underline this. Questions beget further questions and induce scepticism towards 'certainties'. This approach is politically dangerous from the vantage point of those within the system-world seeking to safeguard the status quo. In short, the child is not to be dismissed as a fount of naïveté but is feared by those who want to smother change initiatives. The child in us will be tagged with the warning, echoing Mr Murdstone regarding David Copperfield, 'Take care of ... [*the child*]. [*The child*] bites' – more metaphorical, in our case, than literal (in Dickens' case).

Another aspect of this book, which struck me, is the notion of the errant Freire or the errant intellectual. It is the image of the itinerant intellectual who wanders in exile. This image connects with Paulo Freire's well known exile post-1964 which took him to Bolivia, Chile, the USA, Switzerland, including sorties to parts of Europe, the

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to former Maltese Education Minister, Evarist Bartolo, for this point. In his youth, he had a stint working at Dolci's centre and Freire's visit coincided with his time there.

Caribbean and Africa, and then back to Brazil. As with James Joyce, on self-imposed 'exile' from Dublin, Freire's thoughts never wavered from his home context as manifest throughout his works. Freire immersed himself in the present exposing himself to a variety of struggles and issues, worldwide, about which he wrote but Brazil was firmly on his mind. As I argued in several books, talks and papers, exile served as a means of praxis for Freire, as it must have done to Joyce, enabling one to obtain critical distance from an everyday reality one thought one once knew to see it in a more critical, semi-detached manner – critical distancing. Freire and Faundez discuss this in their specific 'talking book' originally produced by the World Council of Churches in Geneva – *Learning to Question* (1989). After being convinced of the 'non fragility' of the new democracy in his home country (by the Rev. Paulo Evaristo Arns, among others), Freire and most of his family travelled back for him to relearn his homeland before intervening in public policy in one of its largest cities. Kohan, for his part, presents these episodes as Freire's 'third exile', the first being the exile from his mother's womb, which applies to all of us, the second being his dislocation from Recife and its playful present of innocence and vitality to the experience of Jabotão when the Great Depression left its mark on many livelihoods, including that of the Freire family. There, he had to confront new harsh realities, having to enter the accelerated adulthood world of work and deprived schooling (just like Gramsci following his father's arrest), to contribute to his family's ability to put food on the table.

Freire however broadens his repertoire, as an intellectual and pedagogue, being alive to these new learning experiences, experiences that included reading and learning from books, newspapers and other documentation. As Wordsworth himself insisted, in 'The Tables Turned', however, this also entailed learning from

mutable life lived to the full, from the rest of nature in which we are all immersed (“One impulse of the vernal wood would teach you more of man [*sic.*], of moral evil and of good than all the sages can.”). Freire learnt from different sources, from his interpersonal communication with peasants in different countries and continents, other intellectuals such as Amilcar Cabral whose spirit he encountered in former Portuguese colonies in Africa, years after Cabral was assassinated, and different revolutionary and post-independence contexts and social movements from all corners of the world, including his homeland Brazil.

Like the errant knight of medieval chivalry, he is depicted, in the chapter on Errantry<sup>4</sup>, as having moved from site to site with love. This was not love proclaimed in a *Chanson Courtois* for a fictitious damsel. We do have chronicles of love put together by his second wife Nita, and interviews. There are interviews in this book, one with his son Lutgardes that affirms how important was his much-loved first wife, Elza (she died in 1986) in Paulo’s evolution as an engaged intellectual and pedagogue – confirming the same point stressed to Antonia Darder and me, at a meeting in Paris (2019), by Freire’s Geneva-based daughter Cristina (not the Cristina of the *Letters to Cristina*). The recurring notion of love attributed to Paulo Freire’s thinking is love for anything one engages in throughout life. This includes what Antonia Darder, author of this book’s Foreword and *Paulo Freire. A Pedagogy of Love* (Westview Press, 2002), refers to as a love for humanity and the rest of nature manifest in his striving for a better and more social-justice oriented and ecologically more sensitive world. It is reflected in his view

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<sup>4</sup>There is double meaning in the word err here. It also means revising errors of judgement and views. Freire revised earlier misconceptions and writings especially with regard to gender and masculinity, ultimately providing a multifaceted view of the subjects of history. There was greater emphasis, in his later writings and interviews, on ecological concerns.

of education as an act of love and, more generally, in revolution as a similar act, the latter as described by Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. One fights for a better and more socially just world because of one's love for humanity and the rest of nature. All these sentiments are captured in this compelling and lucid book, a fitting tribute to Freire on his birth centenary year.

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