

## PAULO FREIRE BEFORE AND AFTER THE COUP – A PERSONAL ESSAY

**Ira Shor**

*City University of NY Graduate Center*

**ABSTRACT** This paper provides a first person account of a personal relationship between the author and Paulo Freire which culminated in a ‘talking book’, as Freire calls such books, between the two. It captures Freire’s feelings about the unleashing of the state’s repressive forces to stem the groundswell of activism, which includes education, and critical literacy, for which Paulo Freire was a catalyst. In so doing, the military intervention was intended to halt the momentum in a country roused for social transformation. This, for Freire and others, is a crime against democracy and humanity, for which the perpetrators should be brought to justice, as he imagined would be the case when the totalitarian and murderous<sup>1</sup> military regime in Argentina, under the command of General Galtieri, collapsed in the aftermath of the defeat in the war concerning the Falkands/Malvinas in 1982.

**KEYWORDS** Argentina, Brazil, coup, violence, remaking history.

---

<sup>1</sup> For accounts of the horrors of the dictatorships in Argentina see *Nunca Mas* (Never again) under Conedep headed by public intellectual and author, Ernesto Sabato and, in Brazil, *Brasil: Nunca Mais* (Never Again), a document prepared by a commission headed Paulo Freire’s friend, Paulo Evaristo Arns, a Franciscan Bishop of the Cathedral of Sao Paulo. Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns (1985) is the book’s author. Ana Maria Araujo Freire (1996:198), Paulo Freire’s widow, makes reference to the latter document in her notes in Freire (1996).

“After the coup, I was really born again with a new consciousness of politics, education and transformation.”

--Paulo Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (1987), 32.

A long time ago, my good fortune was to meet Paulo Freire and write a book with him. On a cold February day in 1984, walking to join him, I first glimpsed Paulo through the steamy windows of a pizza parlor in Amherst, Massachusetts, where he was in residence at the University. Paulo sat among students conversing and eating. When I entered the dining room, he may have recognized me from the photo on my first book which he had read and written a letter about to me. He stood up and came over to embrace me. Overwhelmed, I held on to avoid passing out. Then, he sat me down next to him and introduced me to those at the table. I was struck by his face which was a handsome beige-tone framed by a signature white beard and expressive eyes. Later on, he would tell me he liked his dark shade of skin, declaring, “I am not certain of my whiteness.” Before my several trips to Amherst ended that February, I would see on his face and hear in his voice an abiding pain for the terrible coup of 1964 that ruptured his life and work, and forced him out of his beloved Brazil.

On my second trip to Amherst that February, I was driving alone from New York when news came over the radio about the arrest of General Galtieri in Argentina, the recent head of that nation’s military junta, now disgraced for losing the Falklands/Malvinas War to Britain. I was cheered that a junta somewhere was paying a price and I thought of the coup in Brazil twenty years before Galtieri was taken into custody. I was eager to bring the good news to Paulo when I joined him at the residence of the university provost. Paulo sat on a sofa conversing with his hosts, several deans among them. I waited for a break in the talk and then abruptly announced, “Paulo, Galtieri has been arrested!” Paulo’s

eyes opened wide, and he leaped to his feet, exclaiming “No! Is it true?” I too stood up and said, “Yes, the news just came in.” The deans also stood up, though in some confusion. Seeing us all on our feet around him, Paulo registered embarrassment for leaping up when “Galtieri” meant little or nothing to others in the room. Quickly, Paulo recovered and explained about the deposed head of the junta, “It is very important to make the military accountable for their violence against the people.” The others nodded politely, and we all sat back down. Of course, holding the military responsible had never happened in Brazil, as Paulo knew too well.

A week later, I was in a campus apartment used by Paulo and Elza, his first wife for forty-three years. A large tray of black beans was usually soaking in their refrigerator. Paulo asked me to drive him to a supermarket so he and I could shop for dinner. We bought pasta, sauce, broccoli, and vanilla ice cream (Elza’s favorite, he told me.). After dinner, Elza went to bed early while Paulo and I washed the dishes. Then, we watched a film on TV, *Judgement at Nuremberg* (1964), the Hollywood drama about the 1946 trial of Nazi war criminals. The film was well-received when it came out (the same year as the coup in Brazil) and I remember watching it back then, though Paulo had never seen this courtroom drama. The film presented intense court scenes where Jewish survivors and others testified about their suffering. Paulo watched with growing passion. He started to sweat, something I would later observe at other times when a testimony at a public session or a story he was narrating drew him into deep feelings. Then, as the movie continued on TV, he turned to me and said, “It’s very important to arrest war criminals and make them accountable,” repeating the lesson he drew about Galtieri the week before. His anger and sadness were palpable in the room; I felt like a witness to his lasting pain from the coup.

Twenty years had not healed all the psychic and political wounds. During the coup, Paulo's office was ransacked; he was harshly interrogated by police, then sent home only to be arrested without warning and jailed without indictment, trial, conviction or sentencing. He remarked how brave Elza was then, never reproaching him for this calamity, bringing food to jail for him and others. After seventy days of his incarceration, lobbying on Paulo's behalf by the Brazilian Catholic Church succeeded in getting him released. (Paulo told me that the Church approached coup leaders and vouched for him, telling them "This is a good man.") But relentless police interrogations began again. Fearing imminent re-arrest, he sought asylum in the Bolivian Embassy (the only South American one willing to shelter him). Finally getting safe passage, Paulo escaped but could not bring his wife and 5 young children. A few weeks later, a coup in Bolivia overthrew the government protecting Paulo. He was on the run again, this time to Chile, where Eduardo Frei's Christian Democratic government took him in and allowed Elza and the kids to follow.

The 1964 coup erupted just as Paulo planned to open 20,000 "culture circles" nationwide. He had been appointed by liberal President Joao Goulart to direct a massive effort which could develop the basic literacy in peasants and workers then required by the Constitution of 1932 to qualify as voters. If tens of thousands of Freirean culture circles qualified hundreds of thousands of new working-class voters, electoral power could shift to the left and the oligarchy could finally lose control of government. This historic threat became sharply visible one year before the coup, when Pres. Goulart brought his entire cabinet to the small town of Angicos in the impoverished Northeast of Brazil to witness the graduation of 299 peasants and workers in a culture circle set up there by Paulo. The mostly adult students impressed Goulart. Freire addressed the President at the event: "[There] exists today a people who decides, a

people that is rising up, a people that has begun to become aware of its destiny and has begun to take part in the Brazilian historical process irreversibly.” (Kirkendall, 2010: 40)

The President was looking ahead to national elections in 1965. The Constitution kept the electorate conservative by denying the vote to millions of working people who could not read or write. Soon after the Angicos graduation, the first labor strike ever in that region erupted. Goulart spoke in its favor, and asked Freire to the capital Brasilia to direct a national program of literacy. Could literacy democratize Brazil by mobilizing millions of the poor to vote and even to strike? But the culture circles barely got underway. A series of confrontations in March 1964 escalated to a military takeover. Goulart fled to Argentina. The coup accomplished what armed violence can do for threatened elites--extinguish rivals and crush democratic insurgencies from below.

Forced from Brazil, Paulo became in his own words “a peregrine of revolution” flying from place to place. The coup drove Paulo out of his native land in his prime during his most productive years for mass organizing. Paulo Freire was in love with Brazilian speech, food (the bean stew called *feijoado*, the sugar cane liquor called *cachaza*), the dance and music. (Whenever I traveled with Paulo, we ate Brazilian whenever we could, dish by dish as Paulo told stories.) No longer situated in his home culture, Paulo often found himself in places whose languages were not his, whose histories and cultures were unfamiliar. Abroad after 1964, Paulo was no longer a native in any space but rather became a foreign guest, invited, honored, but not embedded and soon to move on. With little choice but to adapt to radically different conditions than before the coup, he had to reinvent himself as a scholar and author, as a public speaker and consultant, as a visiting professor.

He had spent fifteen years in Brazil learning the everyday conditions of the working class and developing for them a “situated pedagogy,” designed from local “generative” words and themes posed as problems for dialogue and action, legible because the subject matters represented familiar contexts. This pedagogy made strenuous demands on the teachers to reposition themselves as students of their students before they served as teachers for the students. Paulo articulated this mutual goal early in the second chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in his famous contrast of his method with the dominant “banking concept of education”: “The *raison d’être* of libertarian education...lies in its drive towards reconciliation. Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students.” (Freire, 2018, p. 72, italics in original).

In writing and in speaking, Paulo declared that all pedagogies are political, not just his; no method or theory, no classroom practice, curriculum or testing regime can be neutral, that is, free of political impacts and effects because all develop human beings to act, think, and speak one way or another. Paulo openly owned the politics of his pedagogy, to question and transform an unequal, unjust status quo. Authorities who set up, finance, and regulate formal schools, colleges, and educational programs do not do so to teach students how to question and displace them. Formal education is a long, managed process of unequal social development; unequal by gender, race, and class; managed by successive layers of authority beyond the classroom teacher (department chairs, division deans, district superintendents, state commissioners, federal monitors, etc.). Paulo thought it “naïve,” “angelic” or “manipulative” to ignore or deny that traditional teaching and learning sustained the unequal status quo (The unequal wealth and power dominating all societies and the unequal inputs and outputs of all education systems

were so apparent that Paulo designated himself “a vagabond of the obvious” for traveling the world to denounce what should be obvious.). He wanted his public appearances to serve as “pretexts” in his words, that is, apparent occasions to hear from a celebrity but actually chances for oppositional educators to consolidate their resistance. He warned, however, that resistance “is not a weekend on a tropical beach.” Opposition involves greater or lesser risk depending on the action, the time and place.

The risks of opposing the unequal status quo were less apparent than the promises when young Paulo Freire worked in Brazil. About the time before the coup, he said: “With some exception in left groups, there was almost a certainty that we would move forward to power. There was a great generalized hope that I was part of...The moment was extraordinary. The young were absolutely motivated historically to participate in the transformation.” (Shor and Freire, 1987: 32) The oligarchy was threatened by popular mobilizations. To stop this, a massive military intervention was needed, which threw Paulo Freire out of one life and into his next. He could not return home until 1980, after the regime lost authority and provoked growing opposition in the face of economic failures.

In 1984, two decades after the coup that ruptured his work and life, Paulo at 63 was in Amherst, Massachusetts where I met him. Paulo Freire, in my judgement, can be understood as a survivor of political violence who recovered to fight another day. This was a fortunate survival and recovery not possible for all targets of repressive violence. He lived to codify the pedagogy of the oppressed into a small library of books which launched an international school of critical teaching and learning. That school continues to grow and evolve. Two generations of educators and scholars followed Paulo’s work with reinventions, refinements and critiques. Paulo has also been survived by the Workers’

Party (Partido Trabalhadores, PT) in Brazil which he helped found to contend for state power. Social justice was to him a dream fought for with the weapons at hand, then passed on to the next generation who face the rewards and risks of remaking history with their own hands, as he put it.

His first life of opposition was overwhelmed by repressive generals and oligarchs, so Paulo Freire regathered and restarted a second life for social justice. When news of General Galtieri's arrest sprang him to his feet like a young person, not a man of 63, he spoke eloquently with his body about his lifelong commitment to change the world. It's our turn now.

## References

Araujo Freire, A.M (1996) Notes. In Freire, P., *Letters to Cristina. Reflections on My Life and Work*, New York and London: Routledge.

Arns, P. E (1985) *Brasil: Nunca Mais* (Brazil: Never Again), Fourth Edition, Petropolis: Vozes.

Freire, P (1996) *Letters to Cristina. Reflections on My Life and Work*, New York and London: Routledge.

Freire, P (2018). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Fiftieth Anniversary Edition, Bloomsbury Academic, New York.

Kirkendall, A. J (2010). *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.



Shor, I and Freire, P (1987)<sup>2</sup>. *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*. New York: Bergin-Garvey/Greenwood.

---

<sup>2</sup> 18<sup>th</sup> printing 2015