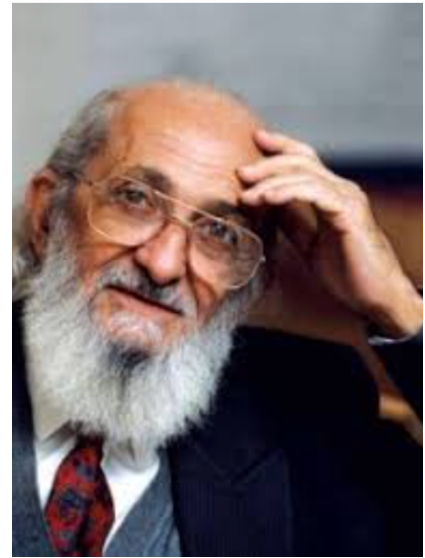


Humanist Readings Club Session XI, Brazilian Humanism - Paolo Freire

The Brazilian humanist thinker most well known in the United States is the education theorist, Paolo Freire (1921-1997). His book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in 1968 has sold over a million copies, an amazing number for a book of education theory.

Freire consistently identifies as humanist. He is remarkable for the way he integrates both Marxism and Christianity into mainstream humanism. Freire wrote:

Freire- "God led me to the people and the people led me to Marx ... When I met Marx, I continued to meet Christ on the corners of the street—by meeting the people."



Paolo Freire

In the United States, many people who identify as "humanist" are hostile to Christianity, often because they associate Christianity with oppressive institutions which humanists naturally oppose. The Brazilian tradition is different.

Many Brazilians believe that humanism, in particular the belief that the individual human person is always more important than any abstraction, has been at the heart of Brazilian culture since the earliest days of Portuguese settlement in the 1500s. In a 1956 article for *The Atlantic*, explaining Brazil for an American audience, Brazilian writer Alceu Amoros Lima, a contemporary and fellow Catholic of Freire, wrote:

Lima - "Almost instinctively, it seems, Brazilians choose the human, the person, in place of the values of efficiency, political idealism, or the other incitements of the modern world. There is nothing vague or putative about this aspect of Brazilian humanism; it can be seen clearly in the fashions, politics, and working habits — the whole style of living — of the nation. The human being, with dignity, character, and feeling, with claims to moral and spiritual recognition, is at the very center of Brazilian civilization."

Brazilian humanists believe that many people want the spirituality which the Catholic church has to offer and that humanists should respect what people want. In practice, this only works if the traditional Catholic church is willing to respect core humanist values. Lima and Freire believed that, in Brazil at least, the church was willing to do that.

Lima- "Because I place myself among the renovators of the Church, I am called [by Catholic conservatives] progressive and a 'useful idiot'. But the truth is that the Church, over the last fifty years, has gradually evolved towards what I call humanism, that is, of placing the primacy of the common good, in which the individual is subordinated to the

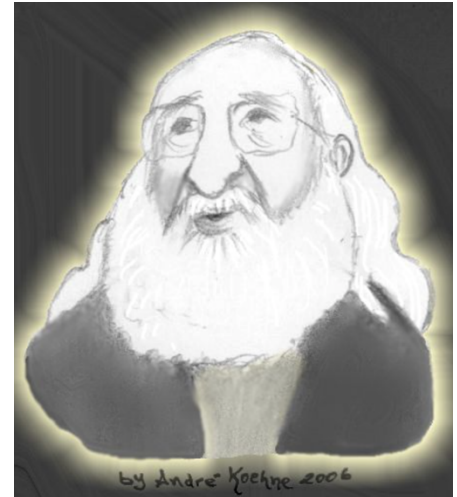
collective and the collective, in turn, is subordinated to the person, freedom and justice. This is where I consider an understanding between the two antagonistic currents possible."

Freire's Educational Philosophy

Freire believed that individuals humans should always be regarded as supremely important. Education empowers people and enables them to stand up to oppression. Freire opposed rigid education which worships the authority of the teacher, memorably comparing it to a banking transaction.

Freire- "Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into 'containers,' into 'receptacles' to be 'filled' by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better the students are.

"Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the works, and with each other."



Freire again

Freire developed his theory based on his experience organizing literacy campaigns in his native Northeast, the poorest part of Brazil.

Freire- "Experiences as the Coordinator of the Adult Education Project of the Movement of Popular Culture in Recife led to the maturing of my early educational convictions. Through this project, we launched a new institution of popular culture, a "cultural circle," since among us a school was a traditionally passive concept. Instead of a teacher, we had a coordinator; instead of lectures, dialogue; instead of pupils, group participants; instead of

alienating syllabi, compact programs that were "broken down" and "codified" into learning units."

Freire is emphatic that education is revolutionary in its empowerment of the oppressed. In order for this to work, students must learn real material, not just the ideology of the teacher.

Freire- "The school we need so urgently is a school in which persons really study and work. When we criticize, on the part of other educators, the intellectualism of our schools, we are not attempting to defend a position with regard to the school in which the study disciplines, and the discipline of studying, would be watered down. We may never in all of our history have had more need of teaching, studying, learning, than we have today. Of learning to read, write, count. Of studying history, geography. Of understanding the situation or situations of our country. The intellectualism we fight is precisely that hollow, empty, sonorous chatter, bereft of any relationship with the reality surrounding us, in which we are born and reared and on which, in large part, we yet feed today. We must be on our guard against this sort of intellectualism, just as we must be on our guard against a so-called anti-traditionalism that reduces schoolwork to mere experiences of this or that, and which excuses itself from performing **and again** the hard, heavy work of serious, honest study, which produces intellectual discipline."



Freire is particularly hostile to Ideologically rigid leftists, often from middle-class backgrounds, who see their job as indoctrinating the poor.

Freire- "It is precisely the authoritarianism, magical comprehension of content that characterizes the 'vanguardist' leaderships, for whom men's and women's awareness is an empty 'space' waiting for content-a conceptualization I have severely criticized in Pedagogy of the Oppressed. And I criticize it again today as incompatible with a pedagogy of hope."

While Freire was personally Catholic, he understood that many of his idealistic followers would have been ardent Marxists, influenced not only by Marx's concern for the poor, which Freire shared, but also Marx's belief that religion was "the opiate of the masses" and Marx's contempt for "the idiocy of rural life". [quotes are from Marx]. He gently instructed his followers to respect the culture of the poor, including religion.

Freire- "Educators need an understanding of the meaning their [poor people's] festivals have as an integral part of the culture of resistance, a respectful sense of their piety in a dialectical perspective, and not only as if it were a simple expression of their alienation.

Their piety, their religiousness, must be respected as their right, regardless of whether we reject it personally (and if so, whether we reject religion as such, or merely do not approve the particular manner of its practice in a given popular group)."

Freire is remarkable in his ability to make humanist educational thinking acceptable to both Catholics and Marxists, without ever compromising his opposition to the authoritarian tendencies of either the right or left. Indeed, starting in the 1950s Freire was able to attract substantial government support for his literacy efforts. At the same time the government was building a new, modernist capital in Brasilia. It is easy to see why Lima, writing in 1956 would have a deeply optimistic view of the power of Brazilian humanism to create a better world.



New Brazil Capitol Building, 1960

Lima- Brazil is plagued by many grave problems, especially in the spheres of politics and economics, which no serious-minded Brazilian can overlook. Most of Brazil's troubles can be traced to the conflict which has occurred whenever the nation, in her haste to develop quickly, has sheered away from her traditional, deeply engrained humanism. The temptations to do so have been enormous. For centuries Brazil has been a subordinate nation, first to Portugal and Europe, later to North America. Naturally her few idealists have felt that "progress" could be made by importing the systems and institutions of the "superior" countries. But idealism itself is contrary to the Brazilian's emphasis on human values, and the foreign systems and institutions have been like so many wrong-sized shoes.

Yet if the Brazilians of today face many problems, their heads and especially their hearts are still sound. The humanistic outlook still prevails. There is every reason to think it will continue to prevail and will triumph over the obstacles it encounters.

That was written in 1956. Since then Freire's ideas have spread throughout the world, and Brazil itself has made real progress in promoting literacy and reducing poverty. Yet progress has been uneven. Many Brazilians are concerned that humanism, while excellent at promoting human dignity and social harmony, doesn't always lead to effective government. It is particularly disturbing that while the Christian/Marxist humanism of the current president, Lula, has been seemingly successful, many poor Brazilians have rejected humanism. They have turned to Pentecostal Protestantism and voted for the authoritarian Jair Bolsonaro, president from 2019 to 2023. Brazilian and other observers that I have read don't understand why.