

# The Intercultural Perspective in Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed

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**Abstract.** This paper proposes an intercultural interpretation of the “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” by Paulo Freire highlighting how his pedagogical vision reflects a valid perspective of fusion between pedagogical theory and intercultural educational practice useful for reading, interpreting and addressing the crucial issues of contemporary educational debate and the most urgent social problems of our times.

**Keywords.** Freire, Interculturalism, Educational Responsibility, Educational Relationship, Dialogue

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## 1. Premise

The everyday aspect of modern society is unprecedented in history. The ancient and new phenomenon of migration increasingly determines a diverse mixture of cultural models, beliefs, different lifestyles, which create an ever more pluralistic society. As Franco Cambi affirms, this phenomenon generates more models and ways of living that demand the development of a new concept of coexistence that goes beyond mere belonging and opens up to the value of discussion, dialogue and understanding<sup>1</sup>.

This creates the shared opinion of an “us” as opposed to “others”. This forces foreigners to acknowledge their diversity, even though migrant women are the ones who look after the elderly and are exploited in the fields, construction, catering and the heavy industry in Italy.

It is precisely because of this socio-cultural image that the reflection and analysis proposed by Paulo Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* still offers an authoritative and valid perspective of the fusion between pedagogical theory and intercultural educational practice.

Even though it has been more than fifty years since its first edition, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is still incorporated into the structural and moral essence of current educational practices. Indeed, Freire's perspective offers ideas capable of responding to the most urgent social challenges and problems of our times as well as to the crucial issues of the contemporary educational debate. His perspective translates into a project of society and

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<sup>1</sup> See F. Cambi, *Incontro e dialogo. Prospettive della pedagogia interculturale*, Roma, Carocci, 2006.

above all education aiming to empower every human being to be a person, an autonomous subject and emancipator of his/her own life situation, regardless of where he/she lives and works.

The pedagogical work of the Brazilian educator conveys a candid and intense meaning to the reader. We rediscover an anthropological vision that is based on a vivid respect for the person in it. We identify the teleological horizon of education called on to promote the path of “humanization”. We also find the modalities and forms of education as “dialogue”, to the benefit of teachers, educators and all those who can be “humanizing actors” in every context anywhere. Freire’s work sheds light upon important aspects that insist on the importance of dialogue and speech as fundamental elements to rediscover, respect and recognize the true face of the Other as a person and resource<sup>2</sup>.

From this point of view, the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* plays a significant ethical, human and democratic role revolving around the “problem of humanization”. It denounces the multiple and diverse forms of “dehumanization”. In the first chapter of the present work, Freire affirms that «the problem of humanization, although it has always been the central problem of man from an axiological point of view, today acquires the character of an inescapable concern»<sup>3</sup>. However, he specifies that addressing this concern inevitably involves recognizing its opposite, namely “dehumanization”. According to Freire, the two aspects constitute the two choices for humans, but he believes that “humanization” is the true vocation of humanity. This vocation of “humanization” is almost always denied by many forms of injustice, exploitation, marginalization and violence.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, these two particular aspects are also translated into a specific conceptual dichotomy of “oppressors-oppressed” which is realized through precise modalities of behavior that in turn are reflected in the educational practice. A concrete example of the two features is proved by Freire when he speaks of “dehumanization” in reference to his native land (Brazil) which, governed by a military dictatorship, allowed those in a situation of privilege and domination (“the oppressors”) to manipulate and exploit the popular masses (“the oppressed”) through ideological means. The latter, totally immersed in the “culture of silence”, were considered incapable of reacting not because they were naturally incapable, but because the ontological vocation “to be more” which is inherent in every human being, had been extinguished in them from an early age<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, the very condition of “domination-subordination” was fed by the “depository or banking” concept of education, based on the theory of anti-dialogue.

It is well known that Freire upheld a strong commitment to struggle against all forms of oppression, dehumanization, marginalization, injustice and violence. He believed that education is the fundamental instrument for building a less inhuman world. He was a staunch supporter of education as a “practice of humanization” which overcomes every form of injustice, oppression and discrimination. He proposed “problematizing education” as a valid antidote able to show humans the path to “humanization”. According to Freire, this type of education based on the theory of dialogic action enables the “oppressed” to become aware of their condition of mental subjection. This aware-

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<sup>2</sup> See *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York, The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> See *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> See *Ibidem*.

ness enables them to reject the fatalism they used to define their marginalized condition. This meant leading the “oppressed” to the understanding that they could emancipate themselves from the slavery of the “false myths” invented by the ruling class to achieve their objectives<sup>6</sup>.

The *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, therefore, focusing on the “problem of humanization” and “dehumanization” and on the conceptual dichotomy that justifies and resolves the opposition and the condition of the “oppressor-oppressed”, can be transferred and applied to the binomial concept of “identity-otherness” because many times we recognize the same “dehumanization”. That is, the “process of dehumanization” means that those who are labeled “Other” as widely understood, perceive themselves as actors-protagonists of an “inescapable destiny” that in turn makes them feel like “lesser beings”. Simultaneously, this very process makes it possible to almost automatically assign primacy to *identity* and, consequently, “to identify in the *difference* a disruptive element to be controlled or even to be erased”<sup>7</sup>. This condition defines identity and otherness not only as an ontological condition and position but also as a historical reality that is practiced through forms of injustice, oppression, discrimination, exploitation and distortion of the vocation to recognize every human being as a person and as such “to be more”, irrespective of specific cultural aspects, race, ethnicity, social *status*, sexual orientation and religious beliefs.

## 2. Intercultural education as a “practice of humanization”

One wonders about the role of education in light of the above discussion. Education, as a “practice of humanization”, is a means to overcome the identity, the closures and the prejudices of the sense of belonging and to open ourselves, instead, to new horizons of democratic coexistence. Hence the need for a pedagogical path and educational space dedicated to challenging «prejudices, cognitive and axiological canons, leading us *beyond* identities, while not denying them, and towards an ethical universe built on meeting and dialogue. A need that leads towards a new horizon of life, of relationships, of exchanges in which the rule is to stand *with* others, to agree *together* and to establish *common spaces* that respect differences and their value»<sup>8</sup>.

This vision, in today's globalized and multicultural society, is considered a necessary intercultural educational practice. It is a valid and effective tool to change the social reality that requires a major and responsible educational commitment on the part of everyone. It thus becomes an opportunity for rethinking and critical reflection on relativism and cultural pluralism and at the same time an opportunity to learn and fully embrace the values of equality, justice, solidarity and peace. According to Franco Cambi, these values constitute the new foundations of interculturalism and “living in a society”, which today is unfortunately overly marked by devious and outrageous injustices that give rise to conditions of existence that are too poor and uneven<sup>9</sup>. In this perspective,

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<sup>6</sup> See *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> F. Cambi, *Incontro e dialogo*, cit., p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> See Ivi, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> See *Ibidem*.

Paulo Freire's "problematizing" education constitutes a very valid and relevant pedagogical and educational entity. Indeed, it embodies an educational space through which one can practice the acquisition and the interiorization of a new mental garment that Freire calls *praxis*, or action and reflection that interact. This new mindset generates a *habitat* for meeting-comparison-dialogue between the diverse and heterogeneous principles. These are values that every human being preserves in the heart of their cultural intimacy, in order to rediscover a common commitment to be elevated to a responsible and democratic dimension of society. Furthermore, the dialogue considered by Freire as the foundation of "problematizing education" becomes an existential need that «is imposed as a path by which men acquire meaning as men»<sup>10</sup>. That is, it is an act of creation in which the meeting of the "reflection" and the "action" of the respective subjects, oriented towards a world to be transformed and humanized, is necessarily and exclusively achieved through love, humility, faith, hope and critical thinking<sup>11</sup>.

In the third chapter of his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire specifies how "love" is the foundation of dialogue and collaborative commitment among humans to "create" and "recreate" the world. He asserts that dialogue cannot exist without deep love for the world and for humans. It cannot exist without "humility", the human authenticity necessary in order to be able to approach the other; it cannot exist without a great "faith" in the vocation of each human being "to be more". It cannot exist without the "hope" of seeking, recreating and transforming a humanity denied by injustice. And finally, dialogue cannot exist without an authentic and critical thought that reads the present as a process in continuous evolution in which each person constitutes an essential element for the construction of the present-future puzzle.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the pedagogy of the South American educator possesses a highly ethical, human and democratic nature, as it is a pedagogy of dialogue based on a pluralistic philosophy. It is, essentially, a type of intercultural education that promotes the originality and authenticity of the person and diversity of human beings. It is an education that presents problems to be solved, creates awareness and intends to break the chains of fatalism. This is done in order to lead the individual to understand that his existence and self-fulfilment cannot be established *a priori* by other men, because all human beings, regardless of their geographical, cultural, religious origins, must be able to be the authors of their history. Naturally, in this process, every human being plays a fundamental role because everyone must know how to take care of the Other, welcoming it in its entirety and specificity, without ever forgetting its absolute dignity as a person, the starting point and foundation of the rights of each person. This attitude could create paths that would constitute and regulate the space of civil and democratic coexistence, thus succeeding in going beyond multiculturalism and highlighting the great challenge of the present and the future. This future will consist of an increasing number of identities encountered in daily life that will intertwine with otherness. This future will employ dialogue as the privileged democratic and value form, will tend to reject all the illusions and forms of hegemony and ethnocentrism. On the other hand, it will enable us to know, review, recognize and understand the mutual fruitfulness of individual differences. This will result in giving them a polysemic value that

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<sup>10</sup> P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, cit., p. 79.

<sup>11</sup> See *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> See *Ibidem*.

contributes to building and enriching the common horizon of everyday life on a global scale, which finds its lifeblood in the values of democracy, co-responsibility, equality, justice and peace.

### 3. A shared social responsibility: the role of the school and the "Critical Researcher"

In light of the above analysis, Paulo Freire's pedagogy can be combined with intercultural education precisely because it defines itself as «openness, acceptance, moving towards the *other*, it includes the attempt to walk together, the attention to the interiority of others as well as one's own»<sup>13</sup> and the dialogic relationship that enables us to experience «'diversity as a value' through the recognition of individual differences»<sup>14</sup>.

This pedagogical approach therefore aims to facilitate relations between people with different and multiple cultural identities, starting from the acknowledgment of diversity, to enhance the promotion of dialogue and exchange. According to Critical Pedagogy<sup>15</sup> scholars, these relationships should be developed in the educational and pedagogical space par excellence, i.e. the school should educate to rediscover the shining value of respect for the person, thus assuming «the institutional and social mandate to mediate between cultures, to promote dialogue, democracy, peaceful coexistence, starting from the promotion of cultures rather than their elimination through assimilation»<sup>16</sup>.

Pedagogical reflection and the educative approach of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* demands, however, that all those who are involved in the education and training process as social and cultural actors take on an important role. This role is revealed in the non-neutral struggle of those historico-socio-political processes of the forms and dynamics of oppression, exclusion, marginalization and social injustice that are reflected in educational practice.

Indeed, the school, where every day society is built in a democratic direction, «must become a place for the construction of free, aware personalities, open to forms of shared solidarity»<sup>17</sup>. This means that the school has the task of guiding young generations to actively practice democracy by empowering them in the search for new paths of humanization in which all ethnocentric and racist attitudes as well as skeptical and resigned thinking are excluded. Moreover, the design of this school becomes the driving force of lifelong training for everyone only if it regains the purpose of this task of humanization. It must share it with all the forces committed in a democratic and humanistically supportive sense, favoring above all the inclusion of subjects and groups at risk of exclusion<sup>18</sup>.

Here, then, the thematic core of Paulo Freire's thinking is once again relevant today because «it concerns the role of the school in pursuing a horizon of social equity [...] and as an institution that promotes the cultural bases of democracy»<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> M. Giusti, *Pedagogia interculturale. Teorie, metodologia, laboratori*, Roma-Bari, Editori Laterza, 2004, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> D. Zoletto, *Dall'intercultura ai contesti eterogenei. Presupposti teorici e ambiti di ricerca pedagogica*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2012, p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Reference be made to the North American current.

<sup>16</sup> M. Tarozzi, *Dall'intercultura alla giustizia sociale. Per un progetto pedagogico e politico di cittadinanza globale*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2015, p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> G. Chiosso, A. Mariani, *Teorie della scuola e professione docente*, in AA.VV., *La formazione degli insegnanti. Scienze dell'educazione e nuova professionalità docente*, Torino, Utet Libreria, 2002, p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> See C. Scurati, *Fra presente e futuro. Analisi e riflessioni di pedagogia*, Brescia, La Scuola, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> M. Catarci, *La pedagogia della liberazione di Paulo Freire. Educazione, intercultura e cambiamento sociale*,

According to Freire's perspective, a school that wants to and succeeds in defining itself as a "school open to all and for all" does not only need attentive and engaged citizens who are concerned about the future of humanity and the integral education of the person. Above all, it needs education professionals who are passionate and willing to creatively commit to address the values of peace and solidarity, today at great risk and, to build, through a critical and problematic rationality, a pluralistic, dialogue-based and participatory culture that involves all the actors of the educational process.

As Joe Lyons Kincheloe<sup>20</sup> stated, those with educational responsibilities must find the courage to play the role of the Critical Researcher or "teacher-researcher" who, to respect the "ethical and formative nature" of education and the dignity and identity of the pupil at the same time, is able to enhance every aspect and dimension of what is considered "diverse" or "different". This must be carried out while enhancing the attitudes, resources and skills of each individual subject, regardless of cultural, ethnic and social affiliations.

Teachers cannot escape what Paulo Freire calls "the universal ethics of the human being"<sup>21</sup> in this new landscape. These ethics recognize and always value the presence of the "other", while condemning marginalization and any kind of cultural discrimination, including gender, race, social status, sexual orientation and religious beliefs. The question is how to best defend the dual nature (ethics and aesthetics) of educational practice in terms of "critical-dialogic-intercultural" when it is practiced towards those who are educated. This means that the whole educational-training process must be founded on the mutual respect of all the differences that characterize the two actors of the same process through unitary, joint and mutual teaching-learning. Therefore, an authentic and comprehensive pedagogical experience combines "aesthetics with ethics". Specifically, each teacher of every grade and level of education must be humanly and seriously involved in the training of the new generations by demonstrating vigilant and loving attention to each person in the educational process. Teachers must respect the learner's "being in training", their identity *in fieri* and thus implement a dialogic practice in which the respect that we know we owe to them is realized instead of being denied. Otherwise this educational practice would lose meaning and value and a genuine encounter with them would not take place<sup>22</sup>. Moreover, finding the courage to practice this would never offend the very nature of the human being and would not radically negate democracy. This requires that we as teachers, although it may be difficult to deal with by virtue of certain local and/or national conditions, have a duty to respect the dignity and identity of each learner in training. If one of these learners becomes a racist, classist or something else by inventing or anchoring to historical, genetic, sociological justifications, we ourselves become transgressors of human nature itself and covertly repeat any kind of discrimination, which is immoral. This must be an ethical imperative for us. It is up to us all to struggle every day against the enormous number of masks of racial, cultural, sexual orientation and religious beliefs that we can encounter in formal or informal educational contexts. Therefore, adopting a *habitus* of "aesthetic and ethical responsibility" toge-

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Milano, Franco Angeli, 2016, pp. 134-139.

<sup>20</sup> See J.L. Kincheloe, *Critical Pedagogy*, New York, Peter Lang, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> P. Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom. Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield, 2001, p. 52.

<sup>22</sup> See *Ibidem*.

ther would define the formative character of the pedagogical space that has always been a “text” to be read continuously, to be interpreted, to be written and rewritten. In this sense, the greater the solidarity between the teacher and the learner in training in the “treatment” of this space, the greater the opportunities for democratic learning that will open up in the school<sup>23</sup>.

Therefore, being a teacher means taking on a pedagogical responsibility that is

entrusted on those who believe that there is still room for a commitment to fair social justice, against all forms of political domination, cultural discrimination, economic exploitation or political subjection. Considering all these problems and issues, Freire's pedagogy can help overcome all forms of historical fatalism and pessimistic passivity. His pedagogy may therefore bring about a committed kind of hope, which respects the personal limits and the “dialogic” respect for differences. It may spur the wish to leave behind the interior mutism and the one-size-fits-all and mass-media standardization approach, enabling students to rediscover their ability to critically interpret reality and commit to their world and shared destiny<sup>24</sup>.

Obviously, this will be possible only if we reject the idea of “cultural self-sufficiency” and continue asking ourselves the questions that Freire highlighted in one of his pages of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own? How can I dialogue if I regard myself as a case apart from others mere “its” in whom I cannot recognise other “I's”?

How can I dialogue if I consider myself a member of the in-group of “pure” men, the owners of truth and knowledge, for whom all non-members are “these people” or “the great unwashed”? How can I dialogue if I start from the premise that naming the world is the task of an elite and that the presence of the people in history is a sign of deterioration, thus to be avoided?

How can I dialogue if I am closed to and even offended by the contribution of others?

How can I dialogue if I am afraid of being displaced, the mere possibility causing me torment and weakness?<sup>25</sup>

These questions will enable us to understand that even though we are conditioned individuals, we are not predetermined, as long as we “recognise that history is a time filled with possibilities and not inexorably determined and that the future is problematic and not already decided”<sup>26</sup>.

Therefore, our responsibility extends to all of humanity because the results of our attitudes up until now have gone far beyond the limits of our moral imagination by promoting insensitivity and indifference. Most of our actions, unfortunately, are hardly ever accompanied by an ethical reflection that leads us to question ourselves on what the impact of our actions may be in terms of the ‘Others’ that are new and unknown. Probably, if we decide to take on this commitment, in the ethically empty space of our socie-

<sup>23</sup>See *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> C. Nanni, *Che cosa ha prodotto Paulo Freire in noi educatori italiani e nella nostra cultura?*, in AA.VV., *Paulo Freire: pratica di un'utopia*, Piacenza, Editrice Berti, 2003, p. 37.

<sup>25</sup> P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, cit., p. 90.

<sup>26</sup> P. Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*, cit., p. 18.

ty as defined by Bauman,<sup>27</sup> we could finally, as Boltanski<sup>28</sup> suggests, transform ourselves from “spectators” into “actors” and perhaps succeed in putting an end to all the roots of evil that have been generated in the past centuries.

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<sup>27</sup> See Z. Bauman, *Il secolo degli spettatori. Il dilemma globale della sofferenza umana*, Bologna, EDB, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> See L. Boltanski, *Distant Suffering. Morality, Media and Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

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