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# THE LEGACY OF PAULO FREIRE IN STRUGGLES FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: NOTES FOR A PEDAGOGY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, adult education has been the subject of an attempted appropriation by neoliberal educational policies, which, in many cases, have actually managed to reduce its problematizing character by encouraging conniving perspectives or even functional ones to the current configurations of capitalism.

In this scenario, some interesting attempts to remain faithful to the philosophy and experiences of popular adult education and its critical vocation have been made by researches aiming at understanding and highlighting the political and educational significance of social movements committed at local, national or international levels. Such research promotes the emergence of a pedagogy of social movements. It is a developing field of study within political pedagogy, especially interested in exploring the educational dimensions of collective subjectivities and forms of participation, which move in the domain appointed by the Italian feminism of difference *politica prima*<sup>1</sup>.

Pedagogy of social movements is often invisible, both for it embodies a departure from the agenda of mainstream educational issues, and the same characteristics of the study object. Social movements, in fact,

1 F. Graziani et al, *Sottosopra rosso "È accaduto non per caso"*, Libreria delle donne di Milano, Milano 1996.

similar to the karstic rivers, alternate phases of greater vitality and dissemination, to “back off” phases, during which they organize themselves through channels and forms not always recognizable. This paper lays within this horizon of research and is divided into two parts. The first part analyzes the relationship between Paulo Freire’s pedagogy and social movements. The second part proposes a reading of the educational dimensions of social movements, which consists of four angles once they are taken into account: pedagogical subjects and agents of transformation; contexts of learning; laboratories of decolonization of knowledge; and generative spaces of pedagogical theories. This paper therefore aims to delineate the pedagogy of social movements as a field of studies, faithful to the radically transforming impact of popular adult education experiences.

## FREIREAN PEDAGOGY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

I would like to begin by recalling the immense faith that Freire had in social movements. This faith characterized his whole life, right until the end. We can say that Freire’s last public words were devoted to social movements. In his final interview, given to TV PUC on April 17th 1997 (just fifteen days before his death) he commented on a march of the Landless Rural Workers Movement and said “I would happily die if I saw Brazil full, in its historical time, of marches. [...] Marches are historical itineraries for the world”. He also said that, in his opinion, the Landless was one of the strongest expressions of the political and civic life of the country and that it was trying out some theoretical statements by political analysts: that it is necessary to struggle to promote social transformation.

On the other hand, Freire’s pedagogy is, by its constitution, a pedagogy of movements<sup>2</sup>, at least for three reasons:

- First, because it is a generated, problematized and radicalized pedagogy starting from the practices of social movements<sup>3</sup>. Just

2 D. R. Streck, *Uma pedagogia em movimento: os movimentos sociais na obra de Paulo Freire*, in J. Mafra et al. (eds), *Globalização, Educação e Movimentos Sociais: 40 anos da Pedagogia do Oprimido*, Instituto Paulo Freire e Esfera, São Paulo 2009, pp. 63-72.

3 P. Vittoria, *Narrando Paulo Freire. Por uma pedagogia do diálogo*, UFRJ, Rio de Janeiro 2011.

think of the movements for adult literacy, within which Freire developed his literacy and conscientisation method. To this regard, Beisiegel<sup>4</sup> points out that the change of theoretical references from “Education as a practice of freedom” to “Pedagogy of the oppressed” – both concluded in Chile – must be considered a return effect of the application of the literacy method. In particular, according to the author, the practice of the method had revealed to Freire that the existential condition, the organization of society and the possibilities, implications and limits of education could be better interpreted through the Marxist categories. This characteristic of the Freirean pedagogy, as a pedagogy elaborated in dialogue with the reality, is even more evident by reading “Pedagogy of hope. Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed”. This work testifies that Freire allowed himself to be provoked, challenged and questioned by the social movements, which he met around the world: the movements for ex-Portuguese colony independence in Africa; feminist, black, migrant movements; the movement for the re-democratization of Brazil. He also received confirmations confronting himself with them. In particular, “Pedagogy of hope” shows that Freire took into consideration the criticisms put forward by feminist scholars, who have examined the masculine language of his writings. Unfortunately Freire did not indicate the names of these scholars but we can recognize the voice of bell hooks<sup>5</sup>.

- Furthermore, Freire’s pedagogy is a pedagogy of movements because it was created and recreated in displacements, in cross-border crossings, and even paradoxically thanks to the experience of exile. In this aspect, we can find many points of contact with feminism since feminism originates precisely from the strength with which readings of reality by groups of women were able to generate resonances in other parts of the world. Also in this case,

4 C. R. Beisiegel, *Das 40 horas de Angicos aos 40 anos da Pedagogia do Oprimido*, in J. Mafra et al (eds), *Globalização, Educação e Movimentos Sociais: 40 anos da Pedagogia do Oprimido*, Instituto Paulo Freire e Esfera, São Paulo 2009, p. 133-138.

5 bell hooks, *Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom*, Routledge, London 1994.

paradoxically, it was not the ambition of universalism to build bridges but rather the deep rootedness in specific experiences of oppression and struggle<sup>6</sup>.

- Finally, Freire's pedagogy is a pedagogy of movements because, in these recent decades, it has shown an extraordinary capacity to move through different contexts, reinventing itself in the light of new challenges. Freire's pedagogy is constitutively open, on-going and characterized by an internal dynamism of action-reflection.

## TOWARDS A PEDAGOGY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

In order to remain faithful to Freirean inspiration today, it is very important to contribute to the action of social movements. The first contribution that we, who are engaged in cultural work, inside, outside and across the university, can offer, is to actually recognize and give visibility to social movements. It is not an easy undertaking due to their characteristics: they arise, disappear and constantly regenerate and in this process there are losses, sacrifices and a waste of energy.

Generally, we consider the 70s as the epoch par excellence of social movements. But from the 70s to the present the forms of participation and struggle have multiplied<sup>7</sup>. Of course, many times they express themselves through unrecognizable channels and methods: they are fragmentary or intermittent. I think that, at least in Italy, this characteristic is due precisely to the great vitality that social movements knew during the 70s and mainly to the criticism they developed towards power and the system of representation. This very profound and lucid analysis caused the current distrust of social movements towards institutionalization processes. The price of this mistrust is precisely the intermittent of the movements. On the other hand, social movements are silenced by the same power of the neoliberal system, in which we live, in many different ways. For example, through a constant attempt at the appropriation

6 C. T. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles, in "Signs", n. 2, 2003, pp. 499-535.

7 Burgio G., *La politica della moltitudine. Il progetto pedagogico dei movimenti sociali*, in "Bollettino della Fondazione Nazionale Vito Fazio-Allmayer", n. 2, 2011, pp. 53-77.

of languages, struggles and themes in social movements, aimed at the annulment of every transformative outcome. Just think of the populist organizations and the extreme right groups that are spreading in Europe and beyond and which, like social movements, claim popular roots, arise from political instability and feed on the desire for change.

In public representation, there is a very problematic assimilation between social movements and these other formations, even if they are characterized by different and generally contrasting methodologies and objectives.

Therefore, making the distinctive features of social movements explicit is a theoretical task of pedagogy of social movements, with relevant political consequences. From a Freirian perspective, we must say first of all that, without critical education, there are no social movements. If the profound reasons for social phenomena are not investigated, if political emotions are exploited, if the fulfilment of directives established by others prevents the personal exercise of thought, we cannot say that we are facing a social movement. A social movement exists only where the concern for change is accompanied by a commitment, both personal and collective, with history and there is circularity between action and reflection.

To affirm that there can be no social movement without critical education is a significant starting point but we must go further in exploring this complex relationship. Hence, I propose four perspectives which, in relation to education, allow us to define social movements as: learning contexts; pedagogical subjects and transformation agents; knowledge decolonization laboratories; generative spaces of pedagogical theories.

I will illustrate these four perspectives briefly by referring to the studies in the field of pedagogy of social movements and to my own experiences of empirical research: in particular, a collaborative ethnography carried out from 2011 to 2015 with the *Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas* – MMC (Peasant Women's Movement) in the State of Santa Catarina, in the South of Brazil<sup>8</sup>. The research aimed at interpreting and strengthening the educational dimension of the MMC's political

8 M. Muraca, *Educazione e movimenti sociali. Un'etnografia collaborativa con il Movimento di Donne Contadine a Santa Catarina (Brasile)*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2019.

practices. Deriving from a concept created by Kapoor<sup>9</sup>, we can define this movement as a subaltern social movement of the South. It began in Santa Catarina in 1983, during the period of democratic transition, from four genealogical roots: the Brazilian peasant movement; Freirean popular pedagogy and the theology of liberation; agroecology struggles and female and feminist movements. Since 2004, it has been organized as a national movement, and nowadays, it is active in most Brazilian states and focused on agroecology. This is an ecological paradigm of agriculture that, in opposition to the agribusiness model, aims to promote justice in relationships between human beings and between human and non-human beings.

So, as I wrote before, social movements are primarily contexts of practical, symbolic, linguistic, reflexive, ethical, theoretical, cultural and political learning<sup>10</sup>. That is, in social movements we learn to participate and to organize ourselves; to critically interpret reality and to build a common language; to reflect on our own practice by elaborating knowledge; to coexist with others, cultivating values such as sharing and solidarity; to recognize and relate to different interlocutors within the public sphere; to value differences and to confront one another in a non-violent way. We also learn new content and analysis categories. Such learning can include formal education contexts. Just think of the Zapatista schools or of the Landless schools. But more often such learning concerns the field of non-formal education and includes meetings, assemblies, moments of socialization and narration of experiences, decision-making paths, campaign organization, task allotment, strategy development, etc.

The scientific literature points out the characteristics of the educational processes that take place in social movements:

- First of all, they are rooted in a broader social fabric, thus reconnecting mind and body, knowledge and experience, theoretical elaboration and struggles.

9 D. Kapoor, *Globalization, dispossession and subaltern social movement (SSM). Learning in the South*, in A. Abdi, D. Kapoor (eds), *Global perspectives on adult education*, Palgrave Macmillan, London-New York 2009, pp. 71-92.

10 M. G. Gohn, *Movimentos sociais na contemporaneidade*, paper presented at the 33rd annual meeting of the ANPED (Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Educação), 2010.

- They are dialogical and interactive. They are based on the awareness that nobody educates anybody else, nobody educates himself, people educate among themselves, mediated by the world.
- They hold together the transformation of the world and the transformation of people.
- They are concerned with differences, which can promote mutual growth or, on the contrary, produce inequalities, focused on gender, class, cultural belonging.

But social movements are not just learning contexts, they are also pedagogical subjects and agents of social transformation with respect to the society with which they interact. In this sense, they can be defined as a critical conscience of society, prophets of utopian possibilities of the future, promoters of hope, protagonists of humanist mundialization, the voice of people and otherwise voiceless situations. It is exactly their marginal and hidden position, their character of minority and unrecognized forces that allow social movements to interpret reality with lucidity and to understand the need to commit themselves to change<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, within social movements it is possible to build alliances, capable of going beyond individual efforts, which – as we know – are not sufficient to trigger change. In agreement with Mayo, then, social movements constitute “the broader general context in which educational initiatives of social transformation can be effectively implemented”<sup>12</sup>. As a third point, in relation to critical education, social movements can be considered as spaces for knowledge decolonization. Thanks to Latin American decolonial thinking, we know that coloniality differs from colonialism<sup>13</sup>. The latter, in fact, identifies a relationship of one nation’s domination over another and, following decolonization struggles, it no longer exists. Coloniality, on the other hand, is a model of power experimented for the first time with the conquest of America but still operating within the current global structure. It runs through all spheres of existence: the authors speak of coloniality of power, being, gender,

11 M. Contini, *Elogio dello scarto e della resistenza*, CLUEB, Bologna 2009.

12 P. Mayo, *Gramsci, Freire e l’educazione degli adulti*, Carlo Delfino, Sassari 2008, p. 85.

13 A. Quijano, *Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y America Latina*, in E. Lander (ed), *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales perspectivas latino-americanas*, CLACSO, Buenos Aires 2000, pp. 201-245.

nature. In particular, coloniality of knowledge refers to the imposition of Eurocentrism and the expulsion of other symbolic systems, rationalities and knowledges. It also indicates the penetration of coloniality into epistemological, academic and disciplinary perspectives. According to Quijano<sup>14</sup>, coloniality of knowledge has been, and continues to be, the most profound and lasting form of violence against indigenous peoples, especially in America and Africa. According to Walsh<sup>15</sup>, the decolonial category outlines a permanent path, in which positions, horizons, alternatives, transgressions and creations can be traced. This process takes place in spaces of marginality, resistance and struggle. In particular, the decolonial vocation of social movements is articulated in two moments: a deconstructive moment of dominant pedagogies, which are based on epistemological silencing and ontological denial, and a constructive moment of alternatives that emerge from radically different communities, genealogies, rationalities, knowledges, systems of civilization and life<sup>16</sup>.

4) As a fourth and final aspect, social movements constitute generative spaces of theory. This perspective questions the dominant academic-scientific canons, which sanction the primacy of theory and prescribe the modelling of practice in applying the theory. This is a reversal that the Freirian pedagogy has in common with other critical approaches. For Walsh<sup>17</sup>, for example, decolonial pedagogy is a thinking struggle and a struggling thought. On the other hand, in feminism, theory is generated to name the intuitions, positions, inventions and practices of the political movement of women<sup>18</sup>. This dimension directly involves research and its social responsibilities: in fact, action-research, collabora-

14 *Ibidem*.

15 C. Walsh, *Introducción. Lo pedagógico y lo decolonial: Entretejiendo caminos*, in C. Walsh (ed), *Pedagogías decoloniales: Prácticas insurgentes de resistir, (re)existir y (re)vivir. TOMO I*, Abya Yala, Quito 2013, pp. 23-68.

16 S. Motta, A. M. Esteves, *Editorial: The Pedagogical Practices of Social Movements*, in "Interface: a journal for and about social movements", n. 6, 2014, pp. 1-26.

17 C. Walsh, *Gritos, grietas y siembras de vida: Entretejeres de lo pedagógico y lo decolonial*, in C. Walsh (ed), *Pedagogías decoloniales: Prácticas insurgentes de resistir, (re)existir y (re)vivir. TOMO II*, Abya Yala, Quito 2017, pp. 17-45.

18 A. M. Piussi, P. Mayo, *Co-costruire apprendimento e conoscenze come bene comune: partnership tra università e comunità per la ricerca socialmente responsabile e trasformativa*, paper presented at the Università di Verona, 2011.

tive research and collective self-research experiences provide a privileged opportunity to activate theorizing processes within the movements<sup>19</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

With this paper I wanted to offer a contribution to the emergence of a pedagogy of social movements. In Brazil, this field of study has a significant history, especially thanks to Freirean pedagogy, which, as Streck put it<sup>20</sup>, is a pedagogy of movements in a wide variety of senses. Regarding Italy, this perspective is almost absent, even though some fundamental precedents can be found in the thematization of the link between pedagogy and politics by some historical experiences of popular education (e.g. the school of don Lorenzo Milani at Barbiana, the nonviolent movement promoted by Aldo Capitini and the initiatives of Danilo Dolci in western Sicily) and by critical pedagogies (among them: the thought of Antonio Gramsci, Problematicism and Pedagogy of Sexual Difference). According to Freire, one of the tasks of the popular educator is to show the possibility of hope, because without hope the struggle is a violent confrontation with a taste of revenge<sup>21</sup>. This paper aimed to strengthen our hope and our struggle, starting from the recognition of the social movements' daily, intelligent and often invisible commitment, that allows people, living beings and the planet itself to continue to live with a minimum of dignity, despite the violence and cruelty of the neoliberal system.

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20 D. R. Streck, *Uma pedagogia em movimento: os movimentos sociais na obra de Paulo Freire*, cit.

21 P. Freire, *A pedagogia da esperança: um reencontro com a pedagogia do oprimido*, Paz e Terra, Rio de Janeiro 2003.

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