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Opinion Article

## Some Considerations about a Possible Psychology of the Oppressed in Paulo Freire

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### Abstract

This article deals with the possibility of discussing a psychology of the oppressed arising from the conceptual legacy developed by Paulo Freire and the theoretical and practical implications derived from this assumption.

### Opinion

To state categorically that, at the current moment or phase of the capitalist system, nothing can be done about the consequences considered inevitable of the globalization of the economy, but to bow your head docilely because nothing can be done against the inevitable has my absolute refusal [1]. I have studied Freire's work for more than a decade and I confess that I have no doubt that the Patron of Brazilian Education founded a complex theoretical system that does not allow him to be reduced to the method of literacy of young people and adults developed by him in city of Angicos (Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil) in the 1960s. It is well known that Freire was exiled during the period of the Brazilian military civil dictatorship precisely because it also provoked in his students the desire to read and write the word without forgetting the importance of knowing reading the world that, for Freire, was as important as reading the word itself. According Freire, there are no oral illiterates, for example.

For, even though written language is fundamental to the individual's cultural and psychological development, by itself it does not guarantee the constitution of a critical and political worldview of objective and social reality. If that were so, that is, if knowing how to read and write was a fundamental condition for the emergence of critical thinking and behavior, there would not even be the possibility of the existence of people who are sometimes completely alienated from themselves and from society, even if they are literate. I can say that Freire invites us in his books to have a coherent behavioral attitude towards life, which is the perspective of the social transformation of ourselves and of history. If there was something that made Freire impatient it was the idea that existence and culture would be fatally immutable, fixed, immovable, previously determined. Freire makes us understand that the static attitude that crystallizes in an apathetic and loveless behavior, leads to the condition of human being stagnation. In other words, it implies not overcoming the exploited-explorer historical contradiction.

The individual, in a society that naturalizes exploitation and oppression or even eliminates them (in the field of ideology), tends to make us believe that racism, misogyny, hatred of minorities are natural and not cultural and historical processes, that is, subject to change. For this reason, knowing that you are oppressed and at the same time oppressive is a path that requires significant psychological, behavioral and attitudinal transformations. As a dual being, the oppressed starts to recognize that the oppressor inhabits him and this condition demands concrete answers to the psychological problems experienced by the psychically fragmented individual who daily acts as an oppressor master and sometimes to the oppressed slave, in a structurally elaborated and organized capitalist context. On this subject, *Freire (2019, p. 57)*, in his best-known work (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), has something very important to say: The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanistic and liberating pedagogy, will have two distinct moments. The first, in which the oppressed are unveiling the world of oppression and committing themselves, in praxis, to its transformation; the second, in which, when the oppressive reality is transformed, this pedagogy ceases to be that of the oppressed and becomes the pedagogy of men in a process of permanent liberation. In any of these moments, it will always be the deep action, through which the culture of domination will be culturally faced. At first, by changing the perception of the oppressive world by the oppressed; in the second, by the expulsion of myths created and developed in the oppressive structure and which are preserved as mythical specters, in the new structure that arises from the revolutionary transformation. At the first moment, the pedagogy of the oppressed [...] we are facing the problem of oppressed conscience and oppressive conscience; oppressive men and oppressed men, in a concrete situation of oppression. In the face of the problem of his behavior, his worldview, his ethics. The duality of the oppressed. And it is as dual, contradictory, divided beings that we have to face them.

In the quote above, Freire makes us understand that the oppressed is psychologically dual, fragmented into two kingdoms that are dialectically conflicting and irreconcilable, despite being tenuously inseparable, at least at some point in the subject's existential trajectory. Everything suggests that there is an ethical and philosophical foundation of the epistemological system built by Freire, a psychology of the oppressed that specifies some interesting points about the psychic possibility of liberation from the oppressor that commonly inhabits us. In Freire's thought, the oppressor is not necessarily the other person. That is, the oppressor stays in our conscience, in our psyche, in our behavior, oppression and the oppressor live with us day by day, minute by minute, second by second. It would be very naive to think that the oppressor is only embodied in a person, institution or social situation outside ourselves. The problem is that the psychological conduct of a person who does not yet know that he is oppressed, is precisely wanting to look like the oppressor, in all senses. I think it would be very important to stimulate studies in the area of social psychology that would reveal the whole plot and drama that involves the passage or transformation of the behavior of a person who was unaware of his exploitation into a critical and transforming individual of the world and of himself same. Obviously, the researcher should accompany these people and, using different methodological and psychological instruments, discuss the changes in attitudes that have occurred. It could be an innovative idea on my part. However, Freire, in his literacy method, has already done this work to a large extent.

In fact, Paulo Freire was not necessarily interested in following the psychological transformation of each person in particular, verifying the extent to which changes in their attitudes were transformed after being literate by him. Freire was more concerned, I believe, with the more general demystification of the oppressive reality experienced by the exploited, which is quite a thing, a colossal job, in fact! However, there were many moments when Freire personally witnessed the change in the psyche and in



the social behavior of workers who, when they read the socially contextualized word in a critical and political way, began to understand reality in a different way, becoming subjects engaged and aware of the outer and inner (psychological) world.

The critical process of political and semiotic awareness permeated by thought-language does not occur spontaneously [1-3]. It is not simple to understand that the culture that we help to consolidate daily, is the same that conditions us psychologically. The historical and cultural past and present are established and updated daily in a highly contradictory and complex relationship in each person. And this, in part, synthesizes what Freire means by awareness when he says that it is “an effort through which, when analyzing the practice we carry out, we perceive in critical terms the very conditioning to which we are submitted” [3]. Revealing these conditions that regulate and shape our behavior and our psyche is a possibility for those who had the social opportunity and endeavored to understand the objective reality in a critical way through a praxis that translates, according to Freire (2019b), in action-reflection on the world [3]. On this subject, we can read the following: The moment when individuals, acting and reflecting, are able to perceive the conditioning of their perception by the [social] structure in which they find themselves, their perception begins to change, although this does not mean a change in the structure yet. It is important to realize that social reality is transformable; that made by men, by men can be changed; that it is not something untouchable, a fate, before there was only one way: accommodation to it. It is important that the naive perception of reality gives way to a perception that is capable of perceiving itself; that fatalism is being replaced by a critical hope that can move individuals to an increasingly concrete action in favor of radical change in society [3].

The active and transforming subject of his reality can only act in a way to revolutionize the social structure if he first perceives himself as an agent of history and at the same time, conditioned by it. First of all, the oppressed must perceive himself as someone who is exploited and from then on be aware that he is the historical bearer of his liberation as much as he is also the means by which the oppressor can be liberated. However, as in the psychological clinic, the client is not always willing to see his own wounds, not every patient wants his psychic cure, which delays or makes the process of recovery more difficult. In this direction, in such cases, the same resistance that occurs in the psychotherapeutic dialogue is repeated, in which one of the poles refuses to take its alienation into its own hands to analyze it in its deepest reasons. Instead of the “archeology” of suffering, it is therefore preferred to “bury” suffering further [3].

The awareness of this psychological situation of the exploited can create the necessary conditions for the emergence of new behaviors that are related to the attitude of a human being who fights for freedom and for the conscious and concrete overcoming of the oppressive-oppressed duality. According to Paulo Freire (2019b), there is no absolute (complete) consciousness, this would go against his idea of human unfinished [3]. After all, as he said, nobody knows everything; nobody ignores everything. To have an absolute awareness of everything would be omniscience itself, something impossible for an individual. According to Freire (2019b), there are several “levels of consciousness”; different mental states in which the oppressed can experience in their daily toil for their survival in a “culture of silence” only felt by those who are in the “skin” of the exploited [3].

One of the forms of dominated consciousness, in these dependent societies [of the third world and the third world of the first world], is characterized by its almost “adherence” to objective reality or its almost “immersion” in reality. At this level, as we highlighted in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, the dominated consciousness does not take enough distance from reality in order to objectively and critically know it. We call this form of consciousness “semi-intransitive”. In its almost non-immersion in reality, this modality of consciousness fails to capture many of the challenges of the context or perceives them distorted. Its semi-intransitivity involves a certain obliteration imposed by objective conditions [...] this level of almost immersion, what we call “structural perception” of the facts, which implies a true understanding of the reason for the themselves. In this way, the explanation for the problems is always out of reality, sometimes in divine designs, sometimes in destiny, or also in the “natural inferiority” of men and women whose conscience is at this level. Semi-intransitivity is necessarily associated with fatalism, although this is not exclusive to semi-intransitivity [3].

In light of the above, it is clear that consciousness for Freire is also the understanding of existence as a whole and of all existing exploitation. The oppressed conscience almost does not allow the displacement of the activity by the subject. Freire (2019a) rightly states that the human animal is the only one that can separate itself from its activity [2]. As it cannot separate itself from its activity on which it cannot exercise a reflexive act, the [non-human] animal cannot impregnate the transformation, which it carries out in the world, of a meaning that goes beyond itself. Insofar as his activity is his adherence, the results of the transformation carried out through it do not overtake him. They do not separate

themselves from it, as much as their activity, which is attached to it; on the other, its decision point is outside of it: in the species to which it belongs. Because his activity is him and he is his activity, he cannot separate from it, while his decision point is in his species and not in him, the animal is constituted, fundamentally, as a “being closed in itself” [2].

The oppressed, marginalized by the social consequences of their exclusion, become a “Political Illiterate”, a useful alienated for the ruling class. In this sense, the conscience of the oppressed, in his psychological state, is more or less “closed in”. For, the possibilities of its existence often do not allow it to separate from its activity, criticizing it or reflecting it. In other words, it can be deduced from this that the less human beings reflect on what they do, or the less society allows them to reflect on their own living and working conditions (which is not the same as employment), the more dehumanized will be your psyche and your behavior. Behavior that, “closed in on itself”, can only understand things as inexorable or fatalistically determined. When the human being loses his capacity to transform, he loses along with it, his own humanity and the higher psychological functions that make him a producer of history and culture.

Among the “levels of consciousness” or different states of consciousness that the oppressed usually experiences, there is the “transitive-naive”. Freire says (2019b): If, at the level of “semi-intransitivity”, it is the vital problems that most easily stand out, at the level of naive transitivity, the capacity to capture [of the reality] expands and, not only what was not perceived becomes being, but also much of what was understood in a certain way is now understood differently [3]. However, there are no rigid borders between one modality and another of consciousness. Thus, in many cases, semi-intransitive consciousness remains present, in certain aspects, in the transitive-naive [...] transitive consciousness emerges as naive consciousness, as dominated as the previous one, but arguably more alert regarding the reason for be of the very ambiguity [...] of the consciousness of the [social] classes.

It is noted that Freire (2019a, 2019b, 2019c) does not treat human consciousness in a phased or mechanically sequenced or guaranteed way, as if a type of consciousness were to appear immediately after the elimination of the previous one, for example [1-3]. However, critical consciousness is one that enables transformation, the revolution of the social structure for liberation and the inter and intra psychological overcoming of the explorer-exploited dichotomy experienced carnally by the oppressed who, dehumanized by the social world, also dehumanizes inwardly as well.

We can certainly say that Freire provides some keys for understanding the psychological mechanisms involved in oppressed consciousness and the passage from one world-consciousness to another in a dialectical, conflicting and contradictory way. It is daring to say that the psychology of the oppressed initiated by Freire needs to be better developed and who knows, this writing may not encourage such an initiative?. We need to better understand the psyche of the oppressed, we need to understand how the human being is, among animals, the only one who can dehumanize. After all, no other animal becomes non-animal. A lion does not become a non-lion. A bee does not become a non-bee. The human animal is the only one who, to be human, needs to live in society with other people, in a culture that enables his psychological and behavioral development in the face of a world that without him (the human being), is devoid of aesthetics, ethics, love and hope.

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