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On Narrating Paulo Freire: Towards a Pedagogy of Dialogue Interview with Paolo Vittoria*

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Yasemin Tezgiden Cakcak: Paolo, your book titled Narrating Paulo Freire has been released in Turkey [Paolo Freire: Diyalogun Pedagogisine Giden Yol] along with translations into many different languages. In which languages was it published? In which language did you write it? How did it become so popular around the world?

Paolo Vittoria: First of all, thanks for the opportunity to talk both with Turkish readers and international readers of IJEP about my book. I wrote the book firstly in Italian, my native language. The original title was *Narrando Paulo Freire per*

* Turkish translation of this interview was published earlier in Eleştirel Pedagoji Journal (2017, vol. 53-54, pp. 110-115. To read an earlier article of Paolo Vittoria in IJEP, please see, Vittoria, P. (2014). Dialogue in Critical Pedagogy: Generative Word as Counter Hegemonic Action. *International Journal of Educational Policies*, 8(2), pp. 103- 114.

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una pedagogia del dialogo. It is a re-elaboration of my PhD thesis. To be honest, at the beginning, it seemed very hard to publish the thesis.

In Italy, Paulo Freire was considered mainly during the seventies. In these years, the movements of trade unions, students, workers, educators were opened to receive his political and educational thoughts. Afterwards, in Italy he was almost forgotten and he disappeared in the technicist and falsely neutral education. He was considered an author of the past.

Truly, Paulo Freire hasn't got any possible contribution for the technicism, the education of skills, credits, debits and competition. More than this, he is one of the main voices in the field of the pedagogy that strongly criticizes this model. Paulo Freire defines this model as "banking education". Finally, the PhD thesis was published by Carlo Delfino Editore, in 2008, thanks to the interest of an Italian scholar of Paulo Freire, Professor Fausto Telleri. Then it was very well received from the groups of critical education and informal social groups worldwide. After the first edition, the book was translated to Romanian, Portuguese, Spanish, English¹. Now, I am very pleased with the Turkish edition.

I tried to write the book using a simple language, narrating not only Paulo Freire, but my encounter with his ideas and experiences. I would also like to add that narration, in some cases, has the potential to express concepts like those of didactic and theoretical discourse. In the book I crossed these two characteristics and what emerges is a dialogue with the story and the thoughts of an extraordinary educator with whom I discovered a surprising empathy. Freire grasps some aspects of our being that cross borders: dialogue, critical consciousness, relationship between theory and practice, oppression, and fear of

¹ Vittoria, P. (2008) *Narrando Paulo Freire. Per una pedagogia del dialogo: pensieri dialoghi, esperienze*. Sassari: Carlo Delfino Editore. Vittoria, P. (2009) *Paulo Freire: Viata si Opera. Pentru o pedagogie a dialogului*. (Translated by Daniel Mara). Bucarest: Editura Didactica si Pedagogica. Vittoria, P. (2011) *Narrando Paulo Freire. Por uma pedagogia do diálogo*. (Translated by Marcia Wolff). Rio de Janeiro: Editora Universitária UFRJ. Vittoria, P. (2014) *Narrando Paulo Freire. Por una pedagogía del diálogo*. (Translated by Camila Valdés León) Xátiva: Instituto Paulo Freire de España – Ediciones Del Crec. Vittoria, P. (2015) *Narrating Paulo Freire: toward a pedagogy of dialogue*. (Translated by Christopher Tribe) London: IEPS Publications. Vittoria, P. (2017) *Paulo Freire - Diyalogun Pedagojisine Giden Yol* (Translated by Yasemin Tezgiden and Erdal Cakcak), Ankara: Kalkedon Yayıncılık.

freedom are existential conditions. To be honest, I couldn't foresee that the book would become so popular in the field of critical education. Now, I can suppose that one of the reasons is the political and existential character of Freire's ideas and my proximity with the soul of these ideas. Another question is that, although the dominant culture closely follows the competitive and technicist education, we need authors that seek education in human way. I have to add that this is a militant book that I could discuss in several contexts. So, it is a book opened to dialogue.

YTC: I believe what makes this book distinct from other books on Freire is the way you relate Freire's pedagogy to his personal journey. We see how Paulo, the child, became Freire, the philosopher, very clearly along the book. How did you get to make those connections?

Paolo Vittoria: in Freire, Recife and the Northeast of Brazil, his childhood places, are present. All of us have children inside. ... why not Paulo Freire? Freire remembers his childhood in several books such as *Pedagogia da Esperanca* or *Cartas a Cristina* or *Na Sombra desta Mangueira*² and others... So I simply tried to follow the path that Paulo Freire himself opened in his own words ... recounting his childhood. Describing childhood places and images.

In particular, his sensitivity to injustice, inequality, and the lack of education come from childhood. Paulo, as a child, suffering from injustice, found that his efforts as an educator completed his sensitivity.

No educator should forget his or her childhood. I think we are all educators. Some do it professionally, but informally we are all educators. Freire does not only forget his childhood, but often narrates it. He narrates *Recife*, *Jaboatão*, the mango trees, poverty, and misery around him. It would be impossible to think about education (also adult education) without childhood. Childhood is every new

² Freire, P. (2004) *Pedagogy of Hope. Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Bloomsbury (Original title *Pedagogia da esperança. Um reencontro com a pedagogia do oprimido*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1992). Freire, P. (1996) *Letters to Cristina: Reflections on my life and work*, translated by Donaldo Macedo with Quilda Macedo and Alexandre Oliveira. New York and London: Routledge. (original Title, *Cartas a Cristina: reflexões sobre minha vida e minha práxis*, 2003, Editora UNESP) Freire, P. (1995) *A sombra desta mangueira*. São Paulo: Olho D'Água.

beginning or starting over in our life. Every word we create. The experience of childhood is not only a biological condition, but an ethical position that faces the world in which we live. I also learnt the importance of childhood with my Argentinian friend and colleague who works at Estadual University of Rio de Janeiro, Walter Kohan. He has a very interesting point of view regarding childhood and education.

Childhood is part of our story. Paulo Freire is both man and child, like us.

Erdal Cakcak: Can you please talk about the process of your research in Brazil? How did you achieve to reach so many important people in his life from his second wife to his children as well as important documents?

Paolo Vittoria: The most important person I have met for my research and my intellectual curiosity is Donna Maria.

She is not directly present in the book because I met her before writing the book. When I first went to Brazil, I did not know a lot of things about the country or even the language. I was also disoriented in a different country, being so far away. Working as an educator in Naples, I was interested in learning about other social projects in other countries. So, I went to Brazil and there I was guest from a Brazilian family. Romulo, who coordinated the painting workshop in a social project, is until now a very close friend. His mother, Maria, is a woman of extraordinary wisdom; she taught me Portuguese and a lot about Recife, Brazil, education. Meeting Maria was the most significant encounter, in my experience. She has a low level of schooling but her knowledge is of deep experience and wisdom: she has a great humanity. Maria, an elderly woman with five sons, who always faced difficulties with great dignity and love, treated me like a son, taught me to live my ideas with intensity, to believe in myself, not to hide my feelings. She fights against poverty, but she is the richest person I have ever met.

In my conversations with Maria, I gained strength and I learned to better organize my curiosity and intellectual interests. Freire writes about naive and epistemological curiosity. So, mainly thanks to Donna Maria and her family,

years after I became a professor in Brazil, at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

Another important thing is that, in my opinion, authentic research cannot be only in the office. It needs to move our interests, to search for information, using dialogue, interviews, narration, images. We cannot wait for the data from software. Research needs to put our ideas into practice. Challenging our own ideas. Historical-pedagogical research needs to work using documents, journal articles, pictures. I had the opportunity to meet Paulo's familiars such as Nita Freire, Lutgardes Freire, educators that worked with him like Marcos Guerra, Valquiria Felix, ex pupils of Freire in Angicos, a small city of *sertão*. I have to thank everyone for their helpfulness and kindness.

At every meeting, from every document, at every interview, from every reading, from every photo I learnt more about Freire and myself. And I did not stop.

YTC: Why did you decide to study Freire's philosophy in the first place? What is the influence of Freire on your own educational philosophy and your own personal adventure? Can you tell us your own personal and pedagogical story briefly?

Paolo Vittoria: I encountered Freire's literature just in his native town, Recife, but almost by chance. I was walking in the streets of the old city to go the social project I was visiting and I stopped in an old bookshop and bought the book *Educação e Mudança*³. I had just heard about the educator Paulo Freire. I literally came upon that book by chance. I began to historically understand the reasons for inequalities, poverty, misery, of the *favelas*, the barracks between rivers and sewers, homes without sanitation, and so many barefoot children. The answer was in the historical process of colonization, which creates an education that Freire considers as reproductive of social inequalities. I understood the enormous power of education, but also its dramatic limits and its ragged contradictions. That

³ Freire, P. *Educação e mudança*, Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 2003, p. 19. (Originally published in Spanish as *Educación y cambio*, Buenos Aires: Búsqueda, 1976)

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reading changed me internally. Because education is something that lives primarily inside us: it is our consciousness. My conscience opened up through experience and what the book gradually communicated to me. I found an extraordinary empathy with Freire's thought. At times I felt that Freire used the exact words I would use to express something I had thought for a long time and for which I had not yet found the form of expression. I found his writing simple, straightforward, sincere. Back in Italy, I proposed Freire as the subject of my doctoral research. As I said before, it seemed a courageous choice, given that, with rare exceptions, Freire had been forgotten in the Italian cultural world and was often seen with a touch of "Eurocentric tropicalism".

Then came my emigration. At the time, I went to live in Rio de Janeiro, first through a post-doctorate, and then as a university professor at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). I have worked at UFRJ for almost ten years. I learnt a lot in this university, with my colleagues, my students and the social movements. However, in recent years I began to feel, with some force, what I would name "Ulysses Call", the journey back to my roots. I needed to experiment my thinking and practice in my home city, Naples. So, this year I'm back at Federico II University of Naples. It was not easy, because as Ulysses' story metaphorically teaches, returning to one's roots is the hardest trip. In practice, now I feel as a return migrant. When you live for so long time in another place, you never leave the emigrant experience, even if you return to your land. You feel like a stranger, foreign somehow. I do not find it a bad condition because you always look curious, interested, never superficial. Actually, it is a critical condition, but ideal for developing reflective and educational thought. We can call this feeling as "foreignness".

Freire's influence on my thinking and my educational practices is, therefore, quite profound, also due to the entire experience by which it was characterized. Obviously, my thinking does not stop at Freire: I also owe a great deal to the pedagogy of social movements such as Landless Movement; the theater of the oppressed of Augusto Boal; the creative pedagogy of Rubem Alves; the political-educational philosophy of Gramsci, but also that of educators such as Danilo

Dolci, Aldo Capitini, Bruno Ciari, Ada Gobetti, Lorenzo Milani. The educational thought of Janusz Korcack. The vast field of critical pedagogy in Europe and popular education in Latin America.

EC: You write that Freire did not want to leave a handbook or a manual to be strictly followed. He wanted to be reinterpreted and reconstructed in different contexts. Do you think his followers are able to follow his advice? How is Freire perceived around the world?

Paolo Vittoria: No, many people have not understood it, even when he was alive. Otherwise he would not have said it. Freire did not want to be followed in a dogmatic manner, but to be reinvented, as he reinvented himself in his life. Moreover, when he simply says that education can help us to be more, "*ser mais*", it is not to be confused with a pedagogical version of the "superman". It is a simple and humble tendency to learn and learn more humbly from every experience. If we learn from experience and we modify our thought, it becomes very contradictory to repeat ourselves mechanically. This obviously makes sense also in a social pedagogical key. It is not to be forcedly innovative. Starting from people, from cognitive, social, emotional conditions and not from a universal method supposedly valid for everyone, we enhance dialogue, mutual encounters, reciprocal confrontation, which is the basis of Freire's educational philosophy. Many people have not understood it, even in Brazil, probably because they have not read Freire rigorously.

If I do not make an effort to know another person, how can I really understand him or her? If I do not listen to a person, how can I respect his or her thoughts? This can also happen with an author. If we do not read Paulo Freire, how do we think we know him?

For this, as Nita Freire said in the interview contained in the book: "To reinvent Freire we must know his thoughts rigorously." Scientific and cognitive rigor is a fundamental principle for existential, political, educational transformation. In my opinion, this is what it means to "reinvent Paulo Freire".

YTC: You wrote that Freire's childhood in Recife had a remarkable influence in his philosophy. He witnessed social injustice, dehumanization of the poor and the black population, which somehow led him to discover Marx. In his philosophy, he somehow manages to synthesize Marxist ideas with liberation theology, which seems to be contradictory at first look. Is it what makes Freire's philosophy unique?

Paolo Vittoria: Yes, it is true. Freire wrote and stated in several interviews that his efforts, due also to his Christian sensitivity, with rural and illiterate populations, excluded from access to education, led him to read Marx. Literally, it is as if the workers and the peasants of Recife had said to him ... “look, Paolo, do you know Marx?”. In this manner, he tells us two things: the first is that he was led to the theory from practice, and this, from an epistemological point of view, holds a very deep meaning. He did not study Marx to then apply these studies to people: rather, he tried to study the reasons for the social, political, psychological, and education situation of the contexts and with the people involved. The second is that he does not consider the interpretation of Marx as incompatible with Christianity. This confluence of ideas is part of the field of Liberation Theology, of ecclesiastic communities in Brazil and also of the Landless Workers’ Movement. Freire was influenced by these movements, as he influenced them. Also, the original Christianity was not a state religion. Up to the institutionalization of Emperor Constantine, the places of worship were in the simple homes of the people, or underground, hidden from imperial persecution. Even more so, they were in hard-to-reach places.

In parallel, the original idea of socialism was not in the palaces, in the horrific and “effervescent” military parades, in the militarization of thought, or in the secret services. The original socialism was in the resistance against fascism, authoritarianism. Consciences united for social justice.

If we consider them as original ideals, why should they be in contradiction to each other? On contrary, if we think of them as historical arms of the state, they

contradict their own principles and, therefore, can only be contradictory in internal and external relations.

In my opinion, we have not yet invented an organization of state that is compatible with socialism. I also think that a State that does not guarantee freedom of worship and has nothing to do with the principle of freedom. One thing is religion. Another thing is the state. One thing is socialism, another thing is the state. Moreover, Marx's theory itself originally tended towards the overcoming of the state, a degree of socialism that has never been reached. In this sense, the theory was not positively received through history, but the principles that characterize it, in my opinion, are more than valid and necessary for the particularly difficult times in which we live. Naturally, this topic needs more space to be properly discussed. History cannot be erased.

I believe that socialism is search of equality, solidarity, collective and community organization, the union between thought and action, between manual and intellectual work.

In the dark times we live, we have to search new forms of create communitarian actions. Without community we don't have hope, but only illusions. This is the issue of new book on which I am currently working.

I think that Freire, as well as many other people, have taken the revolutionary aspects of the theology of liberation. Other authors do the same in other religious contexts.

YTC: As your book manifests, Freire and his literacy project was stopped by the military government after the coup in Brazil in 1964. Freire was sent on an exile. He had to live away from his homeland without passports in different countries. Ironically enough, when he went to the USA, the power which led him to fled his country, he started to become well-known around the world. Still today, he has a great reputation in US academic circles. While Freire is being over-referenced in academic circles, I somehow feel that Freire's philosophy is kind of being stripped of its essence. Do you observe something similar?

Paolo Vittoria: We have to consider history in a complex and not *univocal* way. The fact that US foreign policy has certainly supported the coups in Latin America, and also in Brazil, does not mean that all men and women living in that country are imperialists or blunders of capitalism or neoliberalism. Freire, exiled for this historical process, was welcomed in the US. This is a terrible contradiction. But he was in direct contact with people that are politically critical toward to capitalism, such as Donaldo Macedo, Henry Giroux, and Peter McLaren. During these encounters, the critical pedagogy movement, of which we are part, was born.

The United States is a contradictory place, because while they retain (at least until Trump) some internal “apparent” freedom, so much so that it was historical country of migrations, in external political they are invasive, imperialist, and colonialist. But the US is not alone: France and the UK are also similar. This contradiction reaches its most profound level of hypocrisy when we think about Guantanamo or the death penalty still in force in many US states. The United States was only one passage of Freire's exile. Let's not forget the five years in Chile, the ten years in Switzerland with experiences in Africa, Europe, and Asia.

But I think that Freire was exiled twice. The first was in the 1964 military coup. The second exile is what makes him a mere academic exercise and not an inspiration for existential, social, and educational transformation, censoring his political thought and making him an abstract idealist. Freire has to be thought between practice and theory. He has always done what he said and re-thought what he did. If we create a distance between saying and doing, theory and practice, we have certainly already misunderstood Freire. We are exiling him again.

EC: Despite attempts to neutralize Freire's pedagogy, Freire is still considered to be a very important educational philosopher around the world. What about in his home country? Is his impact visible in the education system in Brazil right now?

Paolo Vittoria: The best and most dangerous way to neutralize Paulo Freire's pedagogy is not to criticize it (that is more than legitimated), but to declare the neutrality of education, which would be to assert the neutrality of knowledge, science and research. Freire, on the contrary, declared the false neutrality of education. Considering that education is not neutral, this does not mean being sectarian or fanatically ideological, nor putting education at the service of its own beliefs. On the contrary, it means making choices, taking positions, defending ideas, but, as Freire writes in the preface of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, without falling into sectarianism, and being always opened to dialogue and confrontation. Education is based on ideas and in declared neutrality there are no ideas.

Brazil is going through a particularly critical, painful moment. Winds of authoritarianism are passing through the country. Brazil is very divided and fractured. Those who turn to neoliberalism, authoritarianism, a society devoid of ideals, continue to pursue Freire to make a caricature of him, to consider it philosophical education dangerous. Those who are defending democracy, popular education, social movements, and social justice, find Freire as a reference. It is a period of instability. We can consider that Dilma Rousseff's Government nominated Freire as a patron of Brazilian education. I also remember that I was present at the ceremony where his second wife, Nita Freire, received, in Paulo's name, the Human Rights Award from the Brazilian government. A few months later, there was the impeachment of Dilma, the parliamentary coup of neoconservative groups, and the wind changed.

YTC: *Are there any other notes or anecdotes you would like to share with the Turkish and international readers of IJEP?*

Paolo Vittoria: When Nita Freire was in our house in Rio de Janeiro for a dinner, I told her that I missed the chance to meet Paulo during my life. I started to study Paulo in 2005 and he had died in 1997. Nita said me "Paolo would like you very much for your ideas and the courage you have in your choices". This was the best recognition that I could receive. Paulo Freire isn't only the object of my studies,

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but like a comrade, a great inspiration of my ideas about education, of my human transformation. I think that this feeling is present in my book, although it is not always explicit.

Now it is a pleasure and an honor to share these reflections with my Turkish colleagues. It will be very important to build common international activities and projects to comradely cultivate this friendship and collaboration.

YTC: Thank you for this nice book which helps us to understand Freire better and for answering our questions.

Paolo Vittoria: Thank you.

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