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ANALYZING THE BRAZILIAN ANTI-FREIRE MOVEMENT THROUGH FREIRE'S FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Paulo Freire is considered one of the world's most notable thinkers in the field of education. Even so, an increasing political polarization in Brazil, his home country, has led to the development of a movement against him and his work. In this essay, I analyze the Brazilian anti-Freire movement, using his framework, as an imaginative exercise of a dialogue between him and its arguments. I reviewed the main discourses of the movement and, through content analysis, categorized them in three categories: ideological disagreement, contradiction, and groundless. Next, I analyzed the arguments, relying on Freire's theories. I concluded that this phenomenon ends up confirming his theories. The resistance to changes in the traditional educational system reflects his concept of fear of freedom. For the oppressors, his pedagogy is dangerous because it threatens their position of power. Furthermore, while the oppressed reproduce the dominant ideology, they are part of this reactionary movement.

Résumé

Paulo Freire est considéré comme l'un des penseurs les plus éminents dans le domaine de l'éducation. Cependant, une polarisation politique croissante au Brésil, son pays natal, a mené au développement d'un mouvement s'opposant à lui et à son travail. Dans cet essai, j'analyse le mouvement anti-Freire brésilien à travers le cadre de Freire lui-même sous forme d'un dialogue imaginaire entre lui et ses arguments. J'ai donc examiné les principaux discours du mouvement et, à la suite d'une analyse de leur contenu, je les ai divisés en trois catégories : désaccord idéologique, contradiction et absence de fondement. J'ai ensuite analysé les arguments dans le contexte des théories de Freire. Ma conclusion montre que ce phénomène confirme les théories de Freire. La résistance au changement dans le système éducatif traditionnel reflète son concept de la peur de la liberté. Du point de vue de ses oppresseurs, sa pédagogie est dangereuse car elle menace leur pouvoir. Bien que ceux qui sont opprimés reproduisent l'idéologie dominante, ils font partie du mouvement réactionnaire.

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Keywords

Paulo Freire, critical pedagogy, popular education, political polarization

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian popular educator and philosopher, considered one of the world's most notable thinkers in the field of education. His work influenced many activists, politicians, and scholars, including bell hooks, Michael Apple, and Henry Giroux (Peters & Besley, 2015). Due to his seminal work on critical pedagogy, he received many honours, including 41 doctorate degrees *honoris causa* from universities in Europe and the Americas (Gifalli, 2015). Although his original work focused on adult literacy, it impacts other areas including social work, community development, and community health. Institutes and organizations dedicated to his legacy are active in Austria, Brazil, Canada, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Freire Institute, n.d.). Freire's most famous book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1968/2005), first published in Spanish (as *Pedagogía del oprimido*) in 1968 and translated to many languages, is one of the foundational texts of critical pedagogy, and its English version is the third-most-cited book in the social sciences (Green, 2016). For many Brazilian citizens, he is the reason for great pride, but this is far from being a unanimous view.

In the last decade, Freire's name became more popular among the Brazilian population, expanding beyond the academic environment in his country of origin. Even though this can be considered important for the dissemination of his thoughts and ideas on popular education, it did not happen without controversial consequences. An increasing number of people started to express their positions against him, including representatives of organized movements and elected politicians.

Background

I am Brazilian and I might say that my interest in educational studies was profoundly influenced by Freire's work. In 2012, I had the opportunity to work as a volunteer in an adult literacy project with the Homeless Workers' Movement in Sumaré, São Paulo, Brazil, which was mainly based on *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It was the first time I had been introduced to Freire's writings. After that, I took a continuing education course on adult education in Brazil, and I remember the teacher saying that despite Freire's international notability in the educational field, at that time his work was not much known in Brazil, even among education professionals. In the same year, however, he was given a higher profile when he was declared the patron of Brazilian education through Law No. 12,612, sanctioned by the former president Dilma Rousseff. At that moment, Brazil was facing an increasing political polarization (Stuenkel, 2021) due to the rise of an anti-Workers' Party movement fomented by major media corporations (Davis & Straubhaar, 2020). This led to a conservative and far-right political fanaticism and, eventually, to the election of President Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 (Duarte & César, 2021). In 2021, the centennial of Freire's birth, his name became even more in evidence. Popular television shows were dedicated to debating his legacy (Jovem Pan, 2021). Because of his relationship with the Workers' Party since its foundation (Gadotti, 2021), he also became a target of attacks from part of the Brazilian population.

As I already mentioned, my educational practice is profoundly influenced by Freire's theories. Therefore, I have no intention of hiding that my beliefs are also pretty much

aligned to his thoughts. Furthermore, for this study I selected what I found to be the most used arguments against him based on my own experience and an initial scanning through popular media and social networks. I do not suggest in any way that this approaches a comprehensive review of the criticisms of his work. For example, it was not in the scope of this study to include academic and scholarly critiques. Even so, the discussion presented here can contribute to the academic debate on populist strategies and exemplifies discourses used by right-wing and conservative movements.

Objective

In this exploratory essay, I analyze the recent Brazilian anti-Freire movement using Freire's pedagogical and theoretical framework. Although I could do it through other political, philosophical, sociological, or psychological frameworks, I chose to use his own work to dialogue with this movement as an imaginative exercise on how he would respond to the discourses against him. The article is organized in the following manner: first, I present Freire's central contribution to the development of critical pedagogy. Then I briefly explain the anti-Freire movement in Brazil. Further, I describe the methodological approach that I used in this study. Finally, I present the analysis of the main arguments used by representatives of the anti-Freire movement.

Freire's Critical Pedagogy

Before presenting the discourses and attacks carried out against Freire, it is important to introduce his pedagogical and theoretical framework that underpins this text. Although some of the thoughts that would constitute his concept of critical pedagogy were already published in previous texts (see Freire, 1967/1973), his main ideas were synthesized in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published for the first time in 1968, while he was in exile in Chile. Very briefly, he proposed that education is part of the process of becoming a human being and, therefore, is intrinsically political and cannot be neutral. Thus, a "banking concept of education" (Freire, 1968/2005, p. 72), based on teachers making deposits into students, is an instrument for maintaining the condition of oppression by dehumanizing them—both students and teachers—so they cannot be subjects of their own histories and lives. Instead, he proposes a liberating education based on dialogue and problem-posing, which, by allowing the development and exercise of critical thinking collectively, would overcome the teacher-student opposition. This would allow people to raise consciousness on their own condition, to become aware of their incompleteness, to read the world, and ultimately to overcome the oppressor-oppressed opposition.

Freire's philosophy of education was the basis for a literacy method that was first experienced in 1962, when 300 rural workers were literate in 45 days (Weffort, 1967). For that method, Freire (1967/1973) suggested that literacy could not precede critical thinking. Both should happen at the same time. In his words, "reading the word implies continually reading the world . . . [T]his movement from the world to the word and from the word to the world is always present" (Freire, 1983, p. 10). Thus, in his view, it is necessary that educational practices are based in the students' context so they have concrete meaning, which can be achieved through dialogue and critical reflection on generative themes (Freire, 1968/2005).

The Anti-Freire Movement in Brazil

In this study, the term *movement* is employed to refer to what can be considered a form of social movement. According to Opp (2009), there is no closed definition of the term, although in general there is a consensus in some respects. In the broad sense, a *movement* is “a collectivity of actors who want to achieve their goal or goals by influencing the decisions of a target” (p. 40). For McCarthy and Zald (1977), “using the broadest and most inclusive definition, a social movement includes all who in any form support the general ideas of the movement” (p. 2). However, the term *social* in social movement is often associated with changes toward more social justice and greater equalities, while the movement on which I focus in this study has opposite goals. For that, according to Lo (1982), it can be considered a counter-movement or a right-wing or conservative movement.

In this sense, the concept of *anti-Freire movement* that I employ here does not refer to a formally organized movement, although some institutionalized organizations, such as Escola sem Partido (Knijnik, 2021), Movimento Brasil Livre (Vrydagh & Jiménez-Martínez, 2020), and Jair Bolsonaro’s 2018 electoral campaign committee (Campos & Anderson, 2021; Lopes, 2021) explicitly adopt discourses and agendas against Freirean thinking. Thus, the anti-Freire movement encompasses the mentioned movements and all those who support ideas and discourses to influence policy makers, educators, and the public to come out against Freire’s pedagogy. According to Mendes et al. (2020), it is “part of the neoliberal strategy to occupy power and deepen the neoliberalization of Brazilian society and education” (p. 575). Therefore, it is a right-wing movement that aims to influence decisions on educational policies and practices.

Vasconcelos et al. (2023) pointed out that the discourses of the current Brazilian anti-Freire movement are almost identical to those of the military dictatorship inquisitors that led him to be arrested and exiled in the 1960s. Thus, it is hard to estimate the broadness of the movement. As far as I know, no serious survey or study has ever been conducted on this phenomenon. In September 2021, the television broadcaster Jovem Pan held an online poll with the question “Do you think Paulo Freire is responsible for the current deficit in Brazilian education?”, resulting in a “yes” response of 89.9% (Jovem Pan, 2021, 54:41). The number of participants, however, was never disclosed. It is also worth noting that the station is known to attract a very biased audience due to its explicit support for the former president Jair Bolsonaro (Soprana et al., 2022). Even so, the results do underscore the potential breadth of the anti-Freire sentiment in Brazil.

The current political polarization and fanaticism in Brazil (Duarte & César, 2021; Stuenkel, 2021) may provide an indication of how large the movement is. In the last few years, Bolsonaro and some allied ministers, congresspeople, and senators have proclaimed notorious attacks contrary to Freire (Woods, 2020), and in a poll held in October 2022, with 2,912 participants in 181 cities, only 27% of the respondents said that they always trusted in the president at that time (Galf, 2022).

Methodological Approach

As this is an exploratory qualitative study, the data I used to analyze the anti-Freire movement was collected using a non-probability sampling method, focusing on the discourses

found in popular and social media that represent the main arguments against Freire. The data collection process, which is described in the next section, employed a mix of convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling techniques (Gerlitz & Rieder, 2013).

For data analysis, I used interpretive content analysis (Ahuvia, 2001). According to Drisko and Maschi (2016), in interpretive content analyses, summaries and interpretations are preferred over word counts or other quantification techniques used in basic content analysis. I chose this approach because the aim of this work was to comprehend the qualitative aspect of the arguments against Freire, rather than frequencies or other quantitative information. As a form of latent content analysis, it is a more flexible methodology that is not restricted by coding rules and that takes the context more into account (Ahuvia, 2001).

As a form of qualitative analysis, even though it can be considered to involve a degree of subjectivity, I followed a systematic and transparent procedure (Drisko & Maschi, 2016), which is described in the following section. Freire's (1967/1973, 1983, 1994/1996, 1996/1998, 1968/2005, 1992/2014, 2000/2016) conceptual and theoretical framework was used for the analysis.

Arguments Against Freire

In order to analyze the anti-Freire arguments in Brazil, I collected data by looking for texts and publications against him in popular and social media. This was done through the following procedure:

1. I searched for the phrase “Paulo Freire” in three Brazilian media portals that assume declared conservative positions, namely Jovem Pan, Gazeta do Povo, and Crusoé.
2. After that, I followed the hyperlinks from the articles and stories I found in the portals to find related texts.
3. Further, I searched for the phrase “Paulo Freire” in the Brazilian fact-checking websites Boatos.org and Aos Fatos.
4. Finally, I searched the same phrase in the Twitter accounts of Brazilian people who I knew to have publicly declared themselves to be anti-Freire: former Minister of Education Abraham Weintraub, comedian and TV host Danilo Gentili, and Jair Bolsonaro's sons Flávio, Carlos, and Eduardo.

As I observed that the same pattern of discourses and arguments was repeated in most of the sources I reviewed, and given the scope of this study, I considered the 24 different references that I gathered to be sufficient. The intention was not to include scholarly criticisms, but to focus on representative arguments of the anti-Freire discourses.

To facilitate the content analysis, I read and coded the arguments I found in each source inductively. After that, I organized them into categories, in descending order of relation to Freire's work. This was done because even though some discourses are direct criticisms of his works, others are based on a partial interpretation or misunderstanding of his thoughts, and others have no relation to his theories. The heuristic classification of the arguments, shown in Table 1, is based in three categories: ideological disagreement, contradiction, and groundless. Next, I analyze the arguments by following the classification.

Table 1
Heuristic Classification of the Arguments Against Freire

Category	Main point	Source(s)
1. Ideological disagreement	Marxism	Castro (2017a); Simplicio & Haase (2021); Souza (2021)
	Revolutionary leaders	Castro (2017a); Guzzo, (2021); Simplicio & Haase (2021); Souza (2021)
	Freedom	Narloch (2020)
2. Contradiction	Purpose of education	Castro (2017a, 2021); Narloch (2020); Serrão (2021); Simplicio & Haase (2021); Souza (2021); Vargas (2019)
3. Groundless	Indoctrination	C. Bolsonaro (2020); Castro (2017a, 2017b); Frascolla (2020); Guzzo (2021); Sabino (2019); Simplicio & Haase (2019, 2021); Souza (2021)
	Sectarianism	Cunha (2019); Sabino (2019); Simplicio & Haase (2021)
	Idealism	Cunha (2019)
3. Groundless	Plagiarism	Castro (2017b, 2021); Cunha (2019); Serrão (2021)
	Fake news	E. Bolsonaro (2019a, 2019b, 2019c); Crusoé (2019); Matsuki (2021, 2022); L. F. Menezes (2019); Sabino (2019); Serrão (2021); Weintraub (2020)
	No argument	Gentili (2018); Provoca (2019); Vargas (2019); Weintraub (2019, 2020)

Note. The categories are classified in descending order of relation to Freire's work.

Ideological Disagreement

In my interpretation, all the discourse I reviewed has an ideological motivation insofar as it was built on right-wing movements against left-wing politics in general, and the Brazilian Workers' Party specifically. Nevertheless, I organized in this category those that were *solely* based on divergences in political, moral, and philosophical concepts, categories, thoughts, and systems of representation (Hall, 1986).

Marxism

Marx's influence on Freire's work is obvious, especially for his method of analysis and the concept of class struggle. Since his first book (Freire, 1967/1973), he never tried to hide this influence. But in some of the criticisms against the Brazilian educator (Castro, 2021; Simplicio & Haase, 2021; Souza, 2021), this single fact is considered a demerit for his work. Interestingly, Freire (1968/2005) was aware that this would happen and advised about this:

I am certain that Christians and Marxists, though they may disagree with me in part or in whole, will continue reading to the end. But the reader who dogmatically assumes closed, “irrational” positions will reject the dialogue I hope this book will open. Sectarianism, fed by fanaticism, is always castrating. (p. 37)

Indeed, these accusations based on the Marxist influence on Freire’s work, by not presenting a rationale for considering it a point against his theory, assume an anti-dialogical position and do not contribute to any subjective or objective transformation. Conversely, as Freire would explain further in *Pedagogy of Hope* (Freire, 1992/2014), his work was also criticized by Marxists for not being Marxist enough: “For example, they would cite my supposed failure to assign sufficient importance to the class struggle, or my ‘idealism,’ or the dialogue that, according to some of them, seemed to smack of ‘democratism’ or humanism” (p. 175). In this latter book he also refused the title of Marxist and defined himself as a “progressive postmodern” (p. 122). Criticizing the arrogance of some Marxists, he wrote that “what is becoming needful, among other things, is that Marxists get over their smug certainty that they are *modern*, adopt an attitude of humility in dealing with the popular classes, and become *postmodernly* less smug and less certain—progressively postmodern” (p. 86).

Considering this, it is clear that Freire sympathized with Marx and was influenced by his theories for analyzing reality, but was not strictly attached to all of the latter’s ideas, especially because of the sectarianism and authoritarianism that Marx’s followers propagated (Freire, 1992/2014, p. 86). Thus, delegitimizing Freire’s work due to Marxist influence without discussing the reasons and without understanding its extension and critiques seems to be a void accusation due to ideological disagreement.

Revolutionary Leaders

Another common attack against Freire’s work is due to his references to famous revolutionary leaders, namely Mao Tse-tung, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, and Vladimir Lenin. According to Souza (2021, para. 5), “Freire ignores the blood of innocents shed by these tyrants and murderers, responsible for cowardly genocides and produces a socialist pamphlet with little or no pedagogy.” Again, I consider these critics founded solely in ideological divergence, as I see no contradiction in Freire’s writings. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1968/2005), most of the citations to those leaders referred exclusively to their revolutionary thoughts. For example, Mao is quoted for his ideas on dialogical education, while Lenin is mentioned for his statement on the revolutionary praxis, and Fidel’s leadership during the struggle against Fulgencio Batista’s dictatorship is used to explain the importance of dialogue and identification. Taken together, I see Freire using the thinking of these leaders in a highly contextualized way, instead of propagating or ignoring authoritarian actions taken by them.

As a matter of fact, Freire (1968/2005) criticized some of these revolutionary leaders for not making a real revolution due to the lack of a pedagogical approach. “Many of these leaders, however . . . have ended up using the ‘educational’ methods employed by the oppressor. They deny pedagogical action in the liberation process, but they use propaganda to convince” (p. 68). According to Freire (1968/2005), this changes who is in the oppressor position but does not liberate anyone:

Rationalizing their lack of confidence in the people, the leaders say that it is impossible to dialogue with the people before taking power, thus opting for the antidialogical theory of action. Thenceforward—just like the dominant elites—they try to conquer the people: they become messianic; they use manipulation and carry out cultural invasion. By advancing along these paths, the paths of oppression, they will not achieve revolution; or if they do, it will not be authentic revolution. (p. 166)

Further, Freire (1992/2014) added that “the element of failure in the experience of ‘realistic socialism,’ by and large, was not its socialist dream, but its authoritarian mold—which contradicted it, and of which Marx and Lenin are also guilty, and not just Stalin” (p. 86), thus demonstrating his disagreement with the authoritarianism of such leaders, which also included Marx.

Finally, regarding Guevara, it is true that Freire recognized his participation in killing people (Simplicio & Haase, 2021), while admiring his capacity for loving (Castro, 2021; Guzzo, 2021), as he wrote (Freire, 1968/2005): “The revolution loves and creates life; and in order to create life it may be obliged to prevent some men from circumscribing life” (p. 171). The educator’s position here is very clear: in revolutions, sometimes death is necessary. In the same way, when Freire described Guevara having advised about mistrustfulness in revolutionary processes, I see that Freire was “merely being a realist” (p. 169). However, to reinforce the point: Guevara’s biographer Jon Lee Anderson described him not as cruel, but as a very strict person who had hard times in the guerrillas with traitors and deserters (C. Menezes, 2015). He did no less or more than any soldier faced with life-or-death situations and did not rejoice in killing, but assumed it as a necessary evil of war.

The relation of Freire’s thinking to revolutionary leaders needs to be well understood in terms of what he agreed to and what he did not endorse. Throughout his work, he aims at liberation from the oppressor-oppressed condition, having dialogue as one of the fundamental principles. Dialogical action is incompatible with any kind of sectarianism, fanaticism, or authoritarianism; thus, it is obvious that even when he agreed with some of these leaders’ thoughts, he did not support dictatorships or tyranny.

Freedom

An irreconcilable discourse against Freire was made by Narloch (2020), who considered the notion of defending freedom to be a problem. He argued that Western parents are raising indolent and undisciplined children without self-control. Meanwhile, in Chinese preschools, which would be based on authoritarianism, no creativity, and no Freire at all, children are supposedly disciplined. By observing children in São Paulo, Narloch concluded that the Brazilian indolence lacks the Chinese authoritarianism.

Interestingly, Freire (1968/2005) extensively discussed the fear of freedom. Just as an example, he said that “the oppressed are afraid to embrace freedom; the oppressors are afraid of losing the ‘freedom’ to oppress” (p. 46). In addition, he wrote:

The dominant elites utilize the banking concept to encourage passivity in the oppressed, corresponding with the latter’s ‘submerged’ state of consciousness, and take advantage of that passivity to ‘fill’ that consciousness with slogans which create even more fear of freedom. (p. 95)

Narloch (2020) seems to have misunderstood the concept of freedom that Freire

defended. The educator never proposed a lack of limits in self-discipline or self-control. Freire (1968/2005) referred to freedom as humanization, as a liberation from “injustice, exploitation, oppression, and violence of the oppressors” (p. 44). In his last book, *Pedagogy of Indignation*, Freire (2000/2016) wrote:

It is even necessary to make clear, through lucid discourse and democratic practices, that will is only authentic within the actions of subjects who take responsibility for their *limits*. A will without limits is a despotic will, one negating of other wills and, ultimately, negating of itself . . . To me, it brings a feeling of pity and concern, when I interact with families who experience the “tyranny of freedom,” where children can do everything. (pp. 8–9)

As one can deduce from this quote, Freire’s concept of freedom is not related to the ability to satisfy the individual will, but is much more aligned to an existentialist concept of freedom:

When I recognise, as entirely authentic, that man is a being whose existence precedes his essence, and that he is a free being who cannot, in any circumstances, but will his freedom, at the same time I realize that I cannot not will the freedom of others. (Sartre, 1946/1948, para. 30)

Thus, discrediting Freire for advocating for freedom seems to reveal a phenomenon well-described by himself: the fear of freedom.

Purpose of Education

The arguments that are specifically against Freire’s pedagogy are related to different views on the purpose of education, but also to a misunderstanding about his work. They stated that, due to Freire’s influence, students are not taught correctly the language’s grammar, which makes it difficult for them to enter the job market (Castro, 2021), and that students learn to fix the world but not the multiplication table (Simplicio & Haase, 2021), advocating an education geared toward the labour market. Others argued that Brazil having a low position in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)’s Programme for International Student Assessment is due to teachers being trained in his method and, thus, not teaching the necessary curriculum (Castro, 2017a; Narloch, 2020; Vargas, 2019). Serrão (2021, para. 5) argued that the Jesuits were the real educators, because they made the nation literate. In all these cases, they are reaffirming what Freire was against: the banking concept of education.

The misunderstanding about Freire’s pedagogy is shown by the fact that they refer to the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as if it were supposed to be a teaching manual. In my interpretation, the “Paulo Freire method,” described in his first book (Freire, 1967/1973), was never intended to be a step-by-step guide for school teaching, but a popular education experience report that exemplified his pedagogical principles and approach. I think that the misinterpretation of his example as a manual is because the term *pedagogy*, in Brazil, is mainly used to refer to teaching methods. However, in a broader sense—and this is how Freire’s writings should be understood—it also means an educational philosophy. Although I am pretty sure that Freire would not be concerned about education meeting OECD expectations, and he would not consider entering the job market as its main purpose, he never considered that liberation through education was “to promote students even

if they have not learned the programmed content satisfactorily" (Souza, 2021, para. 7), nor did he argue that knowledge acquisition was unimportant. This is clearly observed in a further work, where Freire (1994/1996) gave an example of dialogical, problem-posing, meaningful educational practice at school:

A small group of science professors . . . introduced the study of measurement, counting, and geometry through the process of constructing and flying kites with the children from the city's slum, São Marcos. The joy and pleasure everyone experienced in this act of teaching-learning did not make it any less systematic, scientific, or appropriate for the children. (p. 208)

In the same book he wrote about evaluative measures, the problem of school dropouts, and advising graduate students. In *Pedagogy of Freedom* (Freire, 1996/1998), written for teachers, he proposed a series of principles for the educational practice.

Freire (1968/2005) considered that the banking concept of education is inherently connected to an oppressive society, as it reproduces and maintains the social order that keeps the oppressed apart from their humanity. He did not advocate against any kind of knowledge, but he did argue for a critical form of achieving it. Also, he acknowledged that banking education serves the interests of those

who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed . . . Thus they react almost instinctively against any experiment in education which stimulates the critical faculties and is not content with a partial view of reality but always seeks out the ties which link one point to another and one problem to another. (pp. 73–74)

In addition, the absence of critical reflection makes the banking education not even effective for cognitive development. As Freire (1968/2005) argued, "In the name of the 'preservation of culture and knowledge' we have a system which achieves neither true knowledge nor true culture" (p. 80).

Therefore, I contend that those who attempt to discredit him for any lack of knowledge that students may have either did not understand what his point was, or are just defending the status quo.

Contradiction

In the category of contradiction, I included arguments that denounced Freire for what he was against. In some cases, his critics did not seem to be aware of what he advocated for; in others they accused him of being incoherent. In this sense, they actually agreed with him on issues that he considered to be a problem: indoctrination, sectarianism, idealism. However, they accused Freire of promoting these same issues.

Indoctrination

By far, indoctrination is the main argument used by the anti-Freire movement (Guzzo, 2021; Sabino, 2019; Simplicio & Haase, 2021; Souza, 2021). According to Castro (2021), Freire stated that teaching should be at service of ideology, opening the doors for political preaching in classrooms. Frascola (2020) argued that, according to Freire, teachers could feel free to let students be semi-literate and try to convert them for the revolution. Carlos

Bolsonaro (2020) affirmed that Freire's method instructed teachers to co-opt naive people to become slaves and to sympathize with socialism.

Again, the emphasis on dialogue is one central characteristic of Freire's pedagogy. The liberation of the oppressed could not be achieved through domination. Conversely, he considered indoctrination to be a form of maintaining the condition of the oppressed; therefore, it could not be used for overcoming this condition (Freire, 1968/2005):

The oppressors are the ones who act upon the people to indoctrinate them and adjust them to a reality which must remain untouched. Unfortunately, however, in their desire to obtain the support of the people for revolutionary action, revolutionary leaders often fall for the banking line of planning program content from the top down. (p. 94)

Sectarianism

Following a similar line of thought, other discourse claims that Freire's critical pedagogy is contradictory for not being open to critics (Simplicio & Haase, 2021), that the declared freedom is put aside (Cunha, 2019), and that his method is inflexible and meaningless, which pushes people away from it (Sabino, 2019). These arguments oppose the dialogical and problem-posing education that Freire (1968/2005) advocated, which should always be open:

In contrast with the antidiagonal and non-communicative "deposits" of the banking method of education, the program content of the problem-posing method—dialogical par excellence—is constituted and organized by the students' view of the world, where their own generative themes are found. (p. 109)

As a matter of fact, Freire (1968/2005) declared in the preface of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that he was open to critics: "I will be satisfied if among the readers of this work there are those sufficiently critical to correct mistakes and misunderstandings, to deepen affirmations and to point out aspects I have not perceived" (p. 39). Indeed, in his later book *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire (1992/2014) acknowledged some of his mistakes that some critics pointed out, and responded to others with which he disagreed, in a dialogical action. For example, he recognized that he used sexist language when writing his most famous book, and he would not do it again in his further writings.

Finally, in my view, the idea that Freire's method is inflexible comes from a misinterpretation of his proposals, as I mentioned before. It is based on the belief that his experience report was a guide for teaching that should be followed step by step.

Idealism

In the preface of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1968/2005) predicted that "some will regard my position vis-à-vis the problem of human liberation as purely idealistic" (p. 37). Indeed, Cunha (2019) suggested that Freire had a utopian worldview that distorted reality and was not concerned whether his ideas concretely related to the reality. In regard to this, Freire (1968/2005) argued that

some may think that to affirm dialogue . . . is naively and subjectively idealistic. There is nothing, however, more real or concrete than people

in the world and with the world, than humans with other humans—and some people against others, as oppressing and oppressed classes. (p. 129)

Not only were his theories based on a critical analysis of reality, but they were also grounded in his actual practice: "In my experience as an educator with the people, using a dialogical and problem-posing education, I have accumulated a comparative wealth of material that challenged me to run the risk of making the affirmations contained in this work" (p. 40).

One of Freire's criticisms of banking education was that it distorted reality: "The fact that individuals in a certain area do not perceive a generative theme, or perceive it in a distorted way, may only reveal a limit-situation of oppression in which people are still submerged" (Freire, 1968/2005, p. 103). Thus, his desire for an education that would unveil the objective reality was central to his pedagogy:

Equally appropriate for the methodology of thematic investigation and for problem-posing education is this effort to present significant dimensions of an individual's contextual reality, the analysis of which will make it possible for him to recognize the interaction of the various components. (p. 104)

Further, Freire (1992/2014) recognized some idealist thoughts, and reinforced the need for an authentic praxis:

I spoke of *conscientização* because, even with my slips in the direction of idealism, my tendency was to review and revise promptly, and thus, adopting a consistency with the practice I had, to perceive that practice as steeped in the dialectical movement back and forth between consciousness and world. (p. 95)

Thus, calling Freire an idealist is, at least, misunderstanding the main point of his whole work.

Groundless

For the last category, I selected the arguments that are not related to the contents of Freire's writings. In some cases, these seem to be a form of trying to debunk or invalidate his work for reasons other than its contents, such as accusing him of plagiarism, or reproducing hoaxes and fake news about his life and work. In others, it seems that the person does not have any idea about Freire's contributions and just repeats a motto that he is the cause of all educational problems in Brazil, even without any arguments.

Plagiarism

Some representatives of the anti-Freire movement do not really disagree with his ideas. Thus, they accused the Brazilian educator of plagiarism and lack of novelty. For example, Cunha (2019) reminded readers that constructivist theories already proposed to value students as central to their learning process and considered teachers to not be the owners of knowledge. Castro (2021) went beyond and argued that an education that is not focused exclusively on professional qualification was proposed 2,500 years ago by Aristotle.

Their statements are not false, but they do not discredit Freire's work, as those ideas were never considered to be the innovation of Freire's thinking. Rather, I argue that his

contributions were much more in terms of analyzing the relation between the condition of oppression in society and the banking concept of education, proposing a method to overcome the situation through critical thinking and *conscientização*. The foundations of a critical pedagogy were the actual innovation of his work.

Another repeated accusation of plagiarism against Freire is that his adult literacy method was originally developed by the American educator Frank Laubach, and that it was already being used in Brazil when Freire allegedly copied it (Castro, 2021; Serrão, 2021). With this argument, the critics consider that Freire's method was about using images, orality, and syllabic division to build words. This, added to an intended neutrality, was the main characteristic of Laubach's literacy method (Rodrigues, 2014). Indeed, the literacy experience reported in Freire's first book (Freire, 1967/1973) used similar activities, but the focus—and the difference—of the method was in the culture circles, generative themes, dialogue, problem-posing, and critical thinking. Because it was grounded in a constant movement of reflection and action, his educational philosophy proposed that the practice should always be connected to the contextual reality, which was not the intention of Laubach's method. Freire's pedagogy is not solely a literacy method, but a form of achieving a critical comprehension of reality: "Reading is not exhausted merely by decoding the written word or written language, but rather anticipated by and extending into knowledge of the world. Reading the world precedes reading the word" (Freire, 1983, p. 5).

Freire's problem-posing method was actually the opposite of Laubach's in terms of a supposed intention to be neutral (Freire, 1967/1973): "We wanted to offer the people the means by which they could supersede their magic or naive perception of reality by one that was predominantly critical, so that they could assume positions appropriate to the dynamic climate of the transition" (p. 40). Hence, the accusations that Freire plagiarized any prior educator are not proven. He surely did have influences from other thinkers and practitioners in developing his work, but he never claimed to have created what they accuse him of having plagiarized.

Fake News

More recently, the use of social media as a quick and easy way to spread information intensified the propagation and reproduction of fake news. Some examples involving Freire included: allegations that he had never been a teacher and his only teaching experience was in Landless Workers' Movement settlements (Matsuki, 2021; Serrão, 2021); that no other country in the world considers his pedagogy relevant (E. Bolsonaro, 2019b, 2019c; Crusoé, 2019; Weintraub, 2020); that the failure in Brazilian education is due to his method being applied in the public schools (E. Bolsonaro, 2019a; L. F. Menezes, 2019; Sabino, 2019). There is nothing to argue against these affirmations besides the fact that they are all false.

Although Freire did not witness the intensive use of social media, he was aware of the dangers of media communication technology, and was alert to how mass media was used to reinforce myths that maintain the oppressors' power, "the internalization of which is essential to the subjugation of the oppressed," and which "are presented to them by well-organized propaganda and slogans, via the mass 'communications' media—as if such alienation constituted real communication!" (p. 140). His last writings (Freire, 2000/2016) contained further warnings against all forms of communications media:

A critical reading of the world implies the exercise of curiosity and its ability to challenge in order to know how to defend oneself from the

traps ideologies, for example, will place along the way. I mean ideologies subtly propagated by the so-called communication media. My struggle, for this reason, is for an increase in this criticalness with which we can defend ourselves from such alienating forces. (p. 91)

The propagation of hoaxes and fake news about Freire to delegitimize his legacy ends up confirming his concerns: communication media is used for banking education as a way to prevent a transformation of reality. When they have no arguments with which to attack him, some critics make use of false information.

No Argument

The last set of discourses against Paulo Freire are literally groundless—they have no arguments at all. For example, without any other detail or rationale, the former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro said that Freire is a moron (Vargas, 2019); Gentili (2018) suggested that he caused damages to the schools, and that he sounded like an embezzler (Provoca, 2019). More than once, the former Minister of Education made comments on how ugly he thought Freire was (Weintraub, 2019, 2020). By searching for “geração Paulo Freire” (“Paulo Freire generation”) on Twitter, it is also easy to find hundreds of people who blame Freire for the Brazilian educational problems without any argument.

I see this narrative as an uncritical reproduction of an anti-dialogical action. Once again, having no rational arguments against him, they call him names and personally attack him in a way that does not allow any openness to dialogue. As Freire (1968/2005) described: “In the antidiagonal theory of action the dominators are compelled by necessity to divide the oppressed, the more easily to preserve the state of oppression” (p. 172). This form of attack demonstrates that the intention to oppose Freire precedes the discussion of his ideas.

Conclusion

It is not surprising that the notability of Freire and his contributions to the educational field would raise criticisms and oppositions. The author himself expected that and was open to dialogue about his theories, as he stated in the preface to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: “I will be satisfied if among the readers of this work there are those sufficiently critical to correct mistakes and misunderstandings, to deepen affirmations and to point out aspects I have not perceived” (Freire, 1968/2005, p. 39). In addition, due to the political nature of his work, and because he was challenging the structures of oppression through his pedagogy, he was also aware that there would be reactions from those he called *sectarians*. As Vasconcelos et al. (2023) observed, defamatory attacks against Freire were taking place since the first years of his educational practice. Even so, as far as I could find, there is no previous study analyzing the arguments used in the anti-Freire discourses through Freire’s framework.

Using Freire’s pedagogy and theories to analyze the anti-Freire movement discourses, as a form of dialogue between both, two main conclusions emerged for me. First, the discussion of his work in the texts found is almost absent. In the cases where it exists, the discussion is based on a very shallow or partial interpretation of his pedagogy. There is not a really critical reflection—the opposition to Freire seems to be more important than the debate on his thinking. This reveals a sectarianism among the participants of the movement—in some cases assumed, in others disguised as critical analysis. Rather than

accepting Freire's proposal to dialogue, the representatives of the anti-Freire movement try to invalidate all of his work.

My second conclusion is that the arguments used by the movement against Freire end up confirming his theories. The resistance to changes in traditional education, still predominant in the Brazilian educational system, reflects the fear of freedom that Freire talked about. For the oppressors, Freire's education for freedom is dangerous (Vasconcelos et al., 2023). At the same time, while the oppressed reproduce the dominant ideology, they are part of this reactionary movement. This not only confirms Freire's reading of the world, but also reinforces the need for a pedagogy that ultimately leads to the overcoming of the oppressor-oppressed contradiction.

As an exploratory essay, this study was limited in scope, as I did not aim to perform a comprehensive review of the criticisms of or oppositions to Freire's work. I would recommend further research on the consequences of anti-Freire discourses, exploring their impacts on public policies in Brazil, and the propagation of such discourses in other countries, for example. Nevertheless, I hope this study can contribute to the research on conservative and reactionary movements and how they articulate in populist strategies against progressive movements, even in academia.

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