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Literacy, Social Movements, and Class Consciousness: Paths from Freire and the São Paulo Experience

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# Literacy, Social Movements, and Class Consciousness: Paths from Freire and the São Paulo Experience

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*During a socialist administration in São Paulo, Brazil, from 1989 to 1992, a movement for literacy training of youths and adults (MOVA) and for a curriculum reform was established in the city's elementary schools. This article describes the socialist educational projects and Freire's work in São Paulo. It provides both a theoretical discussion of the projects' Freirean premises and a narrative of the experience of a particular group of literacy learners in one São Paulo favela (shantytown). The authors demonstrate a special concern for the articulation between the public sector (i.e., a government agency) and various social movements, as manifested in the MOVA literacy movement. The conclusion calls for "long life" to the creative imagination that inspires and propels such projects of education for social change. LITERACY TRAINING, PAULO FREIRE, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS*

## **São Paulo, Social Movements, and Literacy Training: Popular Education in Power**

With support from the National Academy of Education Spencer Fellowship (1990–1992), Carlos Alberto Torres studied literacy-training policy formulation in the municipality of São Paulo, Brazil, during the socialist administration of the Workers' Party, or Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), which held the municipal government from 1989 to 1992. The PT mayor, Luiza Erundina de Sousa, appointed Paulo Freire as Secretary of Education in 1989. Freire resigned from this position in May 1991, in order to resume writing and lecturing, and continued as an *ad honorem* educational advisor to the Municipal Secretariat of Education. This collaboration is confirmed by Freire's signature—jointly with Mayor Erundina de Sousa, and the new secretary of education, Mario Sergio Cortella—to a public document addressed to the city's educators, published in the *Diário Oficial do Município de São Paulo* (Municipal Secretariat of Education 1992b), long after his resignation.

During his tenure as Secretary of Education, Freire implemented drastic changes in municipal education, including a comprehensive curriculum reform in the K–8 grades, new models of school management through the activation of School Councils—including teachers,

principals, parents, and government officials—and the launching of the Movement of Literacy Training for Youths and Adults, or Movimento de Alfabetização de Jovens e Adultos (MOVA), built on participative planning and delivery with support from nongovernment organizations or social movements (Torres 1992, 1994a, 1994b; Freire and Torres 1994).

Torres's research focused on the articulation between the public sector and social movements. Using ethnographic methods, nonparticipant observation, structured interviews, survey research, and discourse analysis in documenting the São Paulo experience, we have reached some preliminary results in our study of the Municipal Secretariat of Education's extensive educational reform efforts.<sup>1</sup>

Fascinating as Brazilian educational history is, the PT's electoral victory signified a unique experience in local (municipal) governance in São Paulo by a mass party. The complexities and historical ironies embodied in the PT—a party that portrays a socialist ideology—are well captured by J. Humphrey, who observes that:

the Workers Party in Brazil is curiously out of step with both world and Brazilian political trends. It is a mass party with a commitment to socialism which has grown out of the labor movement and grass-roots activism during the 1980s. It is a party which has huge electoral success in a country where the labor movement has been weak and political parties have had little grass-roots organization. [1993:347]

This short article describes the overall educational project of the PT and the work of Paulo Freire in São Paulo, and documents how a model based on class analysis and a commitment to socialism makes use of literacy training as a means of political struggle, in new and unexpected ways. In so doing, however, the MOVA model in São Paulo is not blind to the contradictions and tensions emerging in any reformist attempt. The first section outlines the major features of the PT's educational policies. The second section describes the pedagogical philosophy of conscientization underscoring the Freirean model which inspired the PT's educational work in São Paulo and explains how this emancipatory educational paradigm and Freire's unique epistemological stance embodies the principles of popular education in Latin America. In that context, the third section offers a narrative of the experience at a micro level, focusing on the practice of a particular literacy training group in a shantytown of São Paulo. The concluding section offers an afterthought on emancipatory educational practices.

### **Building MOVA and Constructing a Popular Public School: The São Paulo Experience**

Truly, only the oppressed are able to conceive of a future totally distinct from their present, insofar as they arrive at a consciousness of a dominated class. The oppressors, as the dominating class, cannot conceive of the future unless it is the preservation of their present as oppressors. In this way, whereas the

future of the oppressed consists in the revolutionary transformation of society, without which their liberation will not be verified, the oppressor's future consists in the simple modernization of society, which permits the continuation of its class supremacy. [Freire 1972:32]

The underlying motto of Freire's administration of the Municipal Secretariat of Education was the collective construction of an *escola pública popular* (popular public school) that guarantees the school's autonomy in the definition of its own pedagogic program. All the schools of the municipal system were given the option to either formulate their own independent project or to subscribe to the secretariat's proposed Interdisciplinary Project.<sup>2</sup> This choice was made at each municipal school by a democratic consensus of school administrative personnel, teachers, and parents represented in the school councils.

On another front, given the high rate of illiteracy in Brazil (19 percent of the population over age 15), it was an imperative for the PT secretariat to include in its proposal for democratizing the city's education an explicit policy of support for the social movements that for the past three decades—beginning with the Movement for Popular Culture led by Freire in the early 1960s—have worked with the poorest sectors of the population (many of which are immigrants from the Northeast, the poorest region of Brazil and the home region for Freire and Mayor Erundina). This intent materialized immediately in the first months of Freire's administration in the development of MOVA. This historic effort to democratize literacy is unique in that the state, represented by the municipal government, lent financial resources and technical expertise to social movements already active in the area of literacy training and political conscientization of the popular sectors, rather than imposing a particular program of literacy training and/or creating a separate entity or movement parallel to already existing grassroots efforts.<sup>4</sup>

In October 1992 in the official organ of the municipal government, *Diário Oficial do Município de São Paulo*, Mayor Erundina, Freire, and Freire's successor, Mario Sergio Cortella (1991–1992), signed a letter addressed to "those who together with us construct a public education of quality for São Paulo." In this letter the city's educators are reminded of one of the initial statements made to them in February 1989, made by Freire, when the PT first took hold of the Municipal Secretariat of Education. Freire wrote:

We should not call the people to school to receive instructions, postulations, recipes, threats, reprimands and punishments, but rather to participate in the collective construction of knowledge, which goes beyond the knowledge of past experience and takes into account the necessities of the people and turns that knowledge into an *instrument of struggle*, making possible the people's transformation into subjects of their own history. The popular participation in the creation of culture and of education breaks with the tradition that only the elite is competent and knows what the necessities and interests of society are. The school should also be a center for the irradiation of popular culture,

at the service of the community, not to consume it but to create it. [Municipal Secretariat of Education 1992a:1, emphasis in original]

The same letter goes on to recount the achievements of the PT's project for municipal educational reform during its four-year tenure, citing the construction of 65 new schools and the renovation of 178 of the total of 691 municipal schools and the extension of preschool education to 145 thousand more children, as well as literacy training to 312 thousand adults and youths. They point to one of the major accomplishments of the administration: the passing of a new municipal legislation, *Estatuto do Magistério*, that protects teacher salaries and promotes the professional valorization of teachers. The authors of the letter point also to the fomentation of school autonomy through participative planning and administration. They affirm that it is through such a process of the construction of the autonomy of local schools that the planning of municipal education "stops being the domain only of technicians and specialists, making progressively more explicit the priorities and necessities, the difficulties and the interests of various social groups, and the limitations of the municipal government as a sphere of power, [hence making the autonomy of the schools] an excellent instrument for the construction and affirmation of citizenship." But the mayor and the former and present secretaries of education conclude by asserting that, although they are "certain that this process was not free of errors, [such mistakes] cannot be taken in isolation, for they are situated within the framework of a politics that seeks the valorization of public education" (Municipal Secretariat of Education 1992a:2). It is this same emphasis on the historical process of education as an instrument of popular struggle which was expressed by some of the leaders of the social movements that collaborated with the secretariat, in MOVA. When asked how the relationship between social movements and the state (particularly the Municipal Secretariat of Education) is carried out under the PT administration, they responded:

Since when did we participate in something so beautiful?

The government of Ms. Mayor Luiza Erundina is an administration oriented toward the popular masses. . . . She had already worked here in the region [the impoverished periphery of the city]. . . . This government opened up a space to our movements.

[MOVA] was built upon the basis of Paulo Freire's ideas. Past experiences such as MOBREAL and Suplência [a sort of adult night school] do not reach the quality of MOVA. [MOVA] works with our reality, investigating the reality of the community. . . . MOVA is the conquering of our rights; it is not a mere "opportunity" handed down to us.

Under the PT administration, for the first time a new experience reached the population of the city, together [the municipal government and social movements], despite the difficulties confronted, have tried to get it right.

[From field interviews, September 1992]

When asked to speak to the future of MOVA (given the imminent possibility that the municipal government could change)<sup>5</sup> and to that of social movements in Brazil in general, one MOVA activist insisted: "As long as there are people, there will be a movement" (from an October 1992 interview). In all its simplicity, this statement demonstrates the inherent grassroots nature of the PT political organization and anticipated the fluid, albeit at times conflictual, relationship between the state and social movements which the PT administration in São Paulo achieved.

### The PT Political-Pedagogic Agenda and Its Freirean Roots

We have worked only four years at constructing, while the Right has worked 400 years at destroying. . . . It is always the case that we never learn everything at once, but that we are constantly learning. . . . Without a doubt this administration opened up space for that learning process to occur.

—Leader of a São Paulo grassroots movement, 1992

In accordance with the PT's grassroots tradition, instead of imposing a reform package upon the schools and the social movements that agreed to work in the MOVA coalition, the PT secretariat insisted on the autonomy of both. However the PT does promote a specific political-pedagogical agenda that entails establishing within the schools and literacy movement a Freirean pedagogic practice within an emancipatory curriculum paradigm (Damasceno et al. 1989). To this end, the secretariat, in collaboration with university specialists, developed for the municipal schools the Interdisciplinary Project (Inter Project). Inspired by various educational approaches and theories (e.g. Cagliari 1989; Campos 1989; Campos and Freire 1991; Fazenda 1979; Ferreira 1985, 1988; Ferreira and Teberosky 1979; Freire and Torres 1994; Japiassú 1976; Piaget 1989; Vygotsky 1978; Weisz 1985), the Inter Project held as its basis of theory and praxis Freire's methodology of *thematic investigation*. The Freirean model calls for investigating the reality of learners in order to discover the *significant situations* of their lives that can be used as *generative themes* in the organization of knowledge within an interdisciplinary curriculum. This process is undertaken collectively (by the school community or by literacy workers and learners) and aims at the construction of a locally relevant curriculum that, at the same time, relates that local reality to a broad range of individual, community, and societal problems (e.g. interpersonal relations in the family; peer group relations in school; race, gender, and class relations in society; public transportation; electoral politics; issues of public health; crime and public safety; air and water contamination in an industrial city like São

Paulo). This model also calls for a dialogical approach to teaching which favors active learning (as opposed to the passive variety) and collective discussion and debate (as opposed to lecturing) in an ongoing process that leads to raising the critical consciousness of the learners.

This educational model and its political-pedagogical principles were actively disseminated by the PT secretariat to teachers in the schools and to literacy workers participating in MOVA, through the publication of a series of pamphlets (*Cadernos de Formação*) that were used as the basis for discussion and debate in regularly scheduled seminars and teacher-training groups (Grupos de Formação). Pedagogic Coordinators in schools that voluntarily opted to join the secretariat's Inter Project were trained by secretariat personnel at the Nucleus de Ação Educativa ("Nuclei of Educational Action")—the newly formed regional administrative centers that replaced the former Delegacias de Ensino (schooling precincts that carried out more of a "policing" role). Literacy-group "supervisors," elected by their respective social movements, met regularly for training with a MOVA coordinating team of the secretariat. The supervisors, in turn, met regionally with each other to coordinate their literacy training efforts, and weekly with the literacy workers in their respective organizations to provide pedagogic orientation. The secretariat also organized, for the first time in the history of the city, two Congresses of Municipal Educators (held in 1991 and 1992) as a further means of communicating its political-pedagogic project and giving educators a forum for sharing and discussing their experiences with their peers. Overall, the model articulated by the secretariat was inspired by Freire's political philosophy of education, in the context of debates in Brazil on the role of education for social and political empowerment.

### Popular Education, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and Conscientization

What has made Freire's political philosophy of education so current and universal, placing him and some of the *generative themes* suggested by his method at the center of educational debates in critical pedagogy for the last three decades? Influenced by the work of psychotherapists such as Franz Fanon and Erich Fromm, Freire argues, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), that few human interpersonal relations are exempt from oppression of one kind or another; by reason of race, class, or gender, people tend to be perpetrators and/or victims of oppression. He points out that class exploitation, racism, and sexism are the most conspicuous forms of dominance and oppression, but he recognizes that there exists oppression on other grounds such as religious beliefs or political affiliation.

Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was influenced by a myriad of philosophical currents including phenomenology, existentialism, Christian personalism, humanist marxism, and Hegelianism. Freire's new philosophical synthesis calls for dialogue and ultimately social awareness as a way to overcome domination and oppression among and

between human beings. Freire's epistemological and pedagogical contributions have been very important for the constitution of different models of popular education.

The term *popular education* was first used in 19th-century Latin America to designate public schooling, that is, free compulsory education for everybody. In the early 1960s, popular education was associated with radical factions within the Latin American Left, and particularly with Freire's work in Brazil. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* constitutes an intellectual and political manifesto of that time. Popular education starts from a political and social analysis of the living conditions of the poor and their outstanding problems (e.g., under- and unemployment, homelessness, and street children) and attempts to engage the poor in individual and collective awareness of those conditions. This strategy takes into account, in the design and operation of educational programs, the collective and individual experiences of the poor, disenfranchised, and oppressed. And it is precisely this experience that is understood as previous knowledge; that is, such knowledge is viewed as the starting point for the formulation of basic programmatic actions, both educationally and politically.

Conscientization, the neologism widely disseminated by Freire in his writings, constitutes a central aim of popular education. Conscientization goes beyond the mere acquisition of new knowledge for social awareness and becomes a political program that links, in a Gramscian fashion, cultural politics to class struggle. More contemporary though, conscientization as cultural politics has been redefined to account for nonclass forms of exclusion, including gender, race-ethnicity, minority religious affiliations, rural-urban disparities, and sexual preference.

Popular education stresses working in groups rather than individualistic approaches and emphasizes collaboration rather than competition. Despite its political aims, popular education tries to develop concrete skills or abilities including literacy or numeracy and strives to arouse pride, a sense of dignity, personal confidence, and self-reliance among the participants. Finally, these programs are usually originated by non-governmental organizations, churches, social movements, community organizations, and political parties, but they can also be originated by governments, as in Colombia and the Dominican Republic, with projects related to integrated rural development, or as in Sandinista Nicaragua, with the collective of popular education (Arnové 1986; Torres 1990). Popular education projects may be directed toward adults as well as children. Examples in the United States can be found in the newsletter *Seeds of Fire* from the Network of North American Popular Educators, or in the recently created Popular Education Graduate Program at the Lindeman Center, Northern Illinois University, in Chicago (Torres and Fishman, in press).

Let us now look through a small window and observe what happened in the literacy-training working groups in São Paulo.



### The Contradictions of Literacy Training: From Theory to Praxis (A Narrative)

The literacy group visited was made up of residents of the *favela* (shantytown) located in the southern peripheral region of São Paulo.<sup>6</sup> A 27-year-old male literacy monitor (adult education teacher or facilitator, working in MOVA), named Vinicius, met me at the southernmost station of the subway line. We then took a 15-minute bus ride over ill-kept roads to reach the favela. While waiting at the bus stop, after the literacy class, several buses drove past us, even though we signaled for them to stop. Vinicius explained to me that many bus drivers are afraid to pick up passengers in front of the favela in the late evening, an indication of the violence that most Brazilians associate with favela life.

After walking over open sewer channels and through narrow corridors created by the makeshift plywood, zinc, cardboard, and precariously constructed brick walls of the favela dwellings, we reached an open paved area where children were playing soccer. On that cold winter evening many wore short sleeves and sandals. As we approached them, a young girl began to announce our arrival, running around and singing out, "O professor chegou, o professor chegou (The teacher is here)!" Vinicius pointed to the small one-room structure that was the community center where the literacy classes were held three nights a week from 8 pm to 10 pm. Inside, a boy had already begun to enthusiastically arrange the desks before the arrival of the adult literacy learners. The center was constructed by the favela residents to provide a space where they could realize community organizational meetings, as well as social events like weddings and baptisms. In front of the community center stood a public telephone that residents had gained by submitting a petition to the city.

The group began to assemble in the classroom. One woman was dragged in by her niece (the girl that announced our arrival). The girl pulled on her aunt's arm and coaxed her to take a seat. The class got off to a slow start as people socialized among each other while others sat silently. Not including myself and the monitor, four men and seven women between the ages of 30 and 60 were present. (According to the monitor a few students were absent that day.) I was introduced as a North American teacher who is there to observe and learn about their literacy program. This captured the attention of the group. At this point the monitor—whose teaching style began to reveal itself as relaxed and dialogical—oriented the discussion toward a specific theme.

In an interview, Vinicius expressed his uncertainty with how to go about structuring his literacy lessons. Although he teaches history at a public high school, this was his first experience with adult literacy teaching—he had been working with this group since March 1990 (approximately five months prior to this interview). As an activist in a grassroots social movement and a sympathizer of the PT, he felt that his participation in the MOVA project was an essential part of his political

activity, as an educator committed to the service of the popular sectors.<sup>7</sup> He was confident, however, that in its collective educational experience the class would help him to develop a methodology coherent with the learners' interests and needs. He stated that the most important aspect of his work with the literacy group was the "collective regeneration" of the students' own self-concept through the process of their reflection upon the world and themselves, their free expression of that world, and the problems of their everyday lives. Interestingly, one of the secretariat's pamphlets for the methodological orientation of literacy workers, *Reflexões sobre o Processo Metodológico de Alfabetização, Caderno de Formação* 3, states, in a similar fashion to Vinicius's articulation of the process of "collective regeneration," the following: "All the literacy activities should be based upon the text, on the social purpose that the literacy learners make of the language, that is, of their 'discourse,' when it is they who speak and write, and from the 'discourse' of the authors, when it is they [the literacy learners] who write" (1990:7).

The learners interviewed at this MOVA literacy group, or "nucleus," expressed satisfaction at the way their teacher was conducting the lessons. He was described as patient and respectful with them.

The two literacy classes I observed followed a cyclical structure that involves five stages. First, the monitor directs a group discussion around a theme that either he presents or emerges from the group. Next, the monitor focuses on vocabulary that emerges from the group's discussion to initiate writing activity among the students (i.e. he would write these words on the blackboard). Once a series of words that have arisen from the dialogue are written on the board, the students compose freely (according to their different levels) as the monitor circulates to provide guidance to the learners in their attempts at constructing written versions of their previous oral expressions. In the next stage, the monitor asks students to read back their compositions and writes some of their phrases on the board. In the final stage of the cycle, other students are asked to read the words or phrases on the board. From that point discussion continues with the generation of a new set of vocabulary and the initiation of a critical literacy learning process begins again. It is important to point out that during this open process of oral and written language expression there is little or no emphasis on grammatical structure or phonetic associations of letters or syllables (i.e. spelling) except for an occasional clarification made by the monitor.

The first literacy session, for example, began with the spontaneous discussion of how the favela came to be formed, as each student related their individual history coming to São Paulo, from the Northeast, and settling into the shanty town. A middle-aged woman—one of the more articulate literacy learners in the group—told of how the community had attempted to get legal permission to occupy the land:

We [the community] ran around every where with a signed paper [a petition]—we even had the documents for the land—and we went over to the city

hall. . . . We live here even though we know there is an owner, but no one knows who that owner is. . . . If only everybody would act together, with a lawyer, to better [our] conditions. We would like to have a lawyer explain everything just right to us; we do not want to live this way. There is no light or water. We would like some kind of guarantee. That is what we would like.

At this point the monitor interjected with the suggestion that the group write about their own history: "How is it that you arrived here? How long ago was it? What brought you to the city?" The students then began to write words or phrases depending on their individual levels, which according to the monitor ranged from virtually completely illiterate to semiliterate. One woman had difficulty writing the name of the city in Bahia from where she comes (Palmares). She wrote it out slowly under the teachers guidance and read it back joltingly: "Pal-ma-res."

After about fifteen minutes, the monitor elicited a phrase written by one of the more advanced students, "eu trabalhava na roça (I worked in the fields)," and wrote it on the board in both cursive and print ("so that they learn to read both," he said). He read the phrase back to the class and then called on individuals to do the same. At this point another discussion evolved about who had done farmwork and the different kinds of crops with which many of them had worked. From that discussion the monitor extracted new vocabulary from the literacy learners (e.g. *milho* [corn], *café* [coffee], *mandioca* [manioc], *arroz* [rice]) and wrote it on the board repeating the cycle of *discussion-writing-reading-writing-discussion*.

The final part of the evening was dedicated to deciding what the group would buy with the monies allocated to them by the secretariat. Several suggestions arose, including buying chalk, notebooks, and books and magazines to read, and setting up a bulletin board to display students' work.

In the second literacy class I attended, 15 literacy learners participated. The session's theme focused around the comparison of Brazil to the United States (as suggested by the monitor since I was there to contribute to the discussion). Ideas that emerged from the group included:

It is better there [in the United States] than it is here. I think it is a rich country.

I think that the foreigner is more intelligent than the Brazilian.

In Brazil things are much more laid back. There they have more money, more intelligence. . . . They have more wealth, and so it's a problem of there being more movement over there than there is here in Brazil.

After I spoke briefly with the group about the problems we face in the United States (e.g., homelessness, racism), the monitor wrote the words *Estados Unidos* and *Brasil, país rico* (rich country) and *país pobre* (poor country) on the board. The question arose as to what constitutes a poor or rich country. The group came to the conclusion that Brazil was in

reality a rich country but that its wealth and privileges are in the hands of a few. One student succinctly articulated this contradiction, relating the following axiom: "é o pedreiro quem faz a obra e o engenheiro quem fica com a fama (it is the worker who builds the project and the engineer who goes away with the fame)." Another added, "Yes, we build houses but don't have anywhere to live." Reflecting the discussion that ensued within the literacy group around class relations of power and domination, privilege and disadvantage, in Brazilian society, the monitor wrote on the board the words *fazenda*—*fazendeiro* (ranch—rancher) and *indústria*—*industrial* (industry—industrialist), which the students copied in their notebooks. And from there, the cyclical process of dialogue and writing continued—the reading of the world and the word (Campos and Freire 1991; Freire and Macedo 1987; Torres 1992a)—until the end of the class.

How did the students come to revise their initial intuitions about their own subordinate condition vis-à-vis the United States? This process of critical understanding was the result of the dialogue that evolved in the group under the guidance of the monitor. This dialogue challenged the common sense of the group, particularly by emphasizing the disparities between the human, cultural, and economic endowments of Brazil, and the disproportionate power of the elites in the use of those resources.

The contrast between the material conditions of Brazil and the United States was part of this common sense. For the literacy learners, the importance of mass media and the images of comfort and the "good life" portrayed around North American lifestyles—so contrasting with these Brazilians harsh conditions—helped to romanticize in their own common sense the situation in the United States. When O'Cadiz introduced the issues of racism and other disparities and social problems experienced in the United States, the participants of the dialogue began to demystify this Hollywood-like view of the world and then turned critically to look at their own contradictory reality in Brazil.

With respect to their educational history, most students in the group had at least a few years of formal schooling. The reasons most cited for not having continued their education were work and marriage:

I studied when I was very small; I think I wasn't even ten years old. I then went to work in the fields, and I thought that [school] had no importance and studied no more.

I studied in the countryside, but our school was backward; we studied and worked in the fields. Back then we were willing to learn but there was no way [to continue to study].

Father said, "What good is studying if you're not going to learn anything worthwhile; you'll only learn to write a bunch of foolishness." Then my oldest brother said, "Let's let her study, at least until she learns to write her own name."

I had 70 days of study, and that was all I studied over there in Bahia. After my boyhood, I began to work. Soon I married and then things got harder—just to work, to live—and so study I knew no more.

When asked what it was like to live his life as a person who is unable to read and write, the oldest student, a 64-year-old man, described the immense envy he felt when he saw someone writing: “*tinha a maior enveja do mundo* (I had the greatest envy in the world).” A female student in her thirties spoke of how an illiterate person has to depend on others: “I think that study is a good thing because a person without an education goes around having to ask others. When we are educated, we see something and we already know it all, right?”

But the most common association was that literacy will help you get a better job and give you access to financial rewards:

I would like to study because an education is important. It can help you get a better job. As for myself, I don't have a better job because I haven't studied.

I have more motivation to learn mathematics because soon I will retire and then I will be able to take care of a small business and make a little more to help me out in life. That is what I am interested in.

From a different perspective, a 35-year-old husband and father articulated a desire for intellectual growth and a curiosity for the unknown. He muses:

We want to learn what is in the project for us to learn: to write, to do arithmetic, to read a word that we don't know, or maybe something new, that we have never seen before. . . . We want to learn about those modern things—maybe a magazine with a different name, a foreign name that we don't know of and that we want to learn about—so that we can move ahead. We are more-or-less backward. We want to leave here more aware than when we arrived.

This kind of thirst for knowledge is not an isolated incident but reflects a growing trend among illiterate populations also detected in research in other Latin American countries (Torres 1993).

In summary, the students all attached a high value to literacy. Despite the obstacles that the social and material conditions of their lives—past and present—afforded to their learning to read and write, after a long day's work, there they were, two nights a week, attempting to unfold the mysteries of the written language in an effort to understand their world better and to act upon it more effectively.

### **Literacy, Politics, and Social Movements: An Afterthought**

O pedreiro é quem faz a obra e o engenheiro quem fica com a fama.

Tinha a maior enveja do mundo.

We want to leave here more aware than we arrived.

—Comments of members of a MOVA literacy group

The above narrative provides some small detail of the collective effort and complex process of constructing a São Paulo literacy movement of the dimensions of MOVA.<sup>8</sup> Yet, it also serves to give voice to some of the literacy learners involved in the movement and to reveal some of the contradictions between the theory and praxis of an emancipatory literacy training project. The intentions of the literacy monitor, who in his own words and actions expresses an affinity with the PT's political-pedagogic agenda—the collective construction of knowledge and the political formation of the popular classes—are at once complemented and contradicted by the learners' own participation in the literacy sessions and their reflections on the literacy process and its perceived benefits. In short, there is a tension between two purposes. On the one hand, they recognize the social injustices that they live and the need to gain greater awareness and to get organized to ameliorate them. On the other hand, without questioning the condition of labor markets or the structural dynamics of capitalism, they express a desire to learn to read and write for purely instrumental reasons, that is, to get a better job and make more money. While these two purposes are not in themselves wholly contradictory, they are quite different; and yet this tension is not self-reflective in the construction of learners' narratives.

Both the MOVA experience, linking the government and the social movements in Brazil, and the PT's interdisciplinary curriculum reform project in São Paulo were intimately connected to the theoretical premises and historical experience of Freirean education.<sup>9</sup> A basic reminder—at this point in history, a seemingly trivial one—of the Freirean principle of the indissoluble nexus between politics and education becomes a sobering lesson for political activists, teachers, and scholars. It is unavoidable that every educational activity will impact political practice, moreso when the educational praxis is generated by a partnership between the state and social movements. The unity between politics and pedagogy evokes the relationship between conscientization—as a goal and actual practice—and cultural politics—as a dream, an utopia, and a new horizon for practical and purposeful transformation. The epistemological implications are many.

With his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire introduced an epistemological perspective in pedagogy. Knowing, for Freire, like Dewey, starts from lived experience. Problem-posing education, which is at odds with problem-solving education models, starts by discovering the theory hidden in the practice of human agency and social movements. Freire's epistemological perspective seeks, in turn, to produce new knowledge that will guide, inspire, redefine and assist in the comprehension of praxis. However, this new knowledge, this unknown theory, is not yet knowledge. It has to be discovered, invented, con-

structed, or recreated, in an intelligent dialogue between the logic of critical social theory and the demands of tension-ridden, complicated, contradictory practices. Certainly, as the narrative in this article indicates, the nature of the popular sectors' knowledge—a knowledge that is immanently class-, gender-, and race-oriented—makes the pedagogical work richly textured and compelling and challenging beyond and above any measure.

Thus Freire's epistemological stance has at least two major implications. On the one hand, critical pedagogy emerging from Freire's contribution is concerned with how emancipatory education can validate learners' own culture and discourse while at the same time challenging their common sense, to identify the *salutory nucleus*, the "good sense" that Gramsci, in his philosophical imagination, signals as the beginning of counterhegemony (Torres 1992b). On the other hand, Freire's recognition of the tensions between objectivity and subjectivity, between theory and practice—as autonomous and legitimate spheres of human endeavor—lead him (departing from Dewey) to recognize that these dichotomies and tensions cannot be overcome. Nor can they be captured in their entire complexity through mainstream methodologies. Long live the creative imagination!

Both the lived experience of PT's curriculum reform movement in the municipal schools of São Paulo and the large-scale literacy training effort that MÓVA represents serve as an historical reference to these and many other theoretical questions and practical dilemmas of educating for liberation in a postmodern age (see McLaren 1994). Perhaps the best way to capture the essence of this experience is to say that there are no limits to the pedagogical imagination, and yet, no creative pedagogical imagination can operate freely of structural constraints. In the words of Fernando del Paso, "Si pudiéramos hacer de la imaginación la loca de la casa, la loca del castillo, y dejarla que, loca desatada, loca y con alas recorra el mundo y la historia, la verdad y la ternura, la eternidad y el sueño, el odio y la mentira, el amor y la agonía, libre, sí libre y omnipotente aunque al mismo tiempo presa, mariposa aturdida y ciega, condenada, girando siempre alrededor de una realidad inasible que la deslumbra y que la abrasa y se le escapa" (1989:644–645).<sup>10</sup>

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## Notes

1. María del Pilar O'Cadiz, a fourth-year doctoral student, has conducted several months of fieldwork in São Paulo, Brazil, with support from the UCLA Latin American Center (August–September 1991 and August–November 1992). O'Cadiz's dissertation work is on the Freirean curriculum reform in the municipal schools, but at the same time, as a research assistant to Carlos Torres, she conducted research on literacy training in São Paulo under the PT administration, specifically interviewing over a dozen leaders of social movements active in MOVA and visiting several MOVA literacy groups. Also, O'Cadiz conducted preliminary research during June and July 1990. The field site visit to a MOVA literacy group and the interviews with literacy learners and a literacy monitor, cited in the "narrative" section of this article, were carried out during this earlier stage of her research.

2. Schools could elaborate their own independent proposal to improve the quality of their educational program and receive technical and financial support from the secretariat. By January 1992, 326 schools had their own projects, independent from the secretariat's Inter Project, underway (Municipal Secretariat of Education 1992a:10).

3. The secretariat made a "political decision" (after extensive debate among the members of Freire's initial organizing team), based on its principle of democratization, to open up the opportunity for all schools in the municipal system to participate in the project instead of carrying it out more thoroughly under more-controlled circumstances, in a few sites. The same decision was made about MOVA, in that all social movements in the city were invited to enter into the movement's coalition. In the case of the schools, Ana Maria Saúl, defended the secretariat's decision, pointing out that for the first time in the municipal school system's 50-year history an educational reform had had a profound impact on the system as a whole, reaching one-third of the schools (185 out of 691 schools) (from an October 1992 interview).

4. An example of such a top-down literacy-training program in Brazil's recent history is MOBREAL (the Brazilian Movement for Literacy Training). One of the most important experiments in adult education in Latin America during the 1970s, it served as an instrument of political legitimation for the bureaucratic-authoritarian regime that governed Brazil from 1964 to 1985 (see Torres 1990).

5. In October 1992, the PT lost the municipal elections to the Partido Democrático Social (PDS, Democratic Social Party), a conservative party led by São Paulo's current mayor, Paulo Maluf.

6. The fieldwork and interviews for this narrative were conducted by Pilar O'Cadiz in July 1990. This research consisted of two observational visits to this particular literacy nucleus in a São Paulo favela within the same week. Besides interviews with the literacy learners and the monitor of this group, O'Cadiz attended the 1st Congress for Municipal Literacy Workers, São Paulo, July 15, 1990 and visited the Municipal Secretariat of Education, interviewing the then-cabinet chief under Freire, Moacir Gadotti. Gadotti was later replaced by Mário Sérgio Cortella, who then replaced Freire as secretary in May 1991.

7. *Popular sectors* refers to lower-class sectors (peasants, workers, urban marginals and squatters, etc.).

8. The secretariat reports that 15,766 working-class students were attending 868 literacy classes within MOVA (Municipal Secretariat of Education 1992:11).



9. There are a number of works in progress regarding this significant aspect of the PT's educational activity in São Paulo, including Pilar O'Cadiz 1994 and Wong 1994. In addition, several of the educators and university specialists who participated in the formulation and implementation of the PT's educational policies in São Paulo have recently published several works reflecting on this experience (see Gadotti and Torres 1992; also see Pontuschka 1993 and articles therein by A. O. Citelli, B. H. M. Citelli, Delizoicov, Fester, Garcia, Lutti, Marques, Zanetic, Chiappini, Seabra, Mendonça, Forjaz, Pernambuco, and Moraes), including Freire himself (1991).

10. "If only we could make of imagination the crazy one of the household, the mad one of the castle, and set her free in her insane and unbound madness, insane and with wings to journey the world over and through history, truth and tenderness, eternity and dreams, hatred and lies, love and agony, free, yes free and omnipotent, yet at once imprisoned, a blind and bewildered butterfly, condemned, incessantly circling around an unattainable reality that dazzles her, scorches and escapes her" (Fernando del Paso 1989:644–645). We would like to thank Maria Christina Pons for calling our attention to this fantastic statement.

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