

Paulo Freire: Comprehensive Citizenship

Paulo Freire: A Cidadania Compreensiva

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ABSTRACT

This text presents the proposal of comprehensive epistemology as a legacy of the teachings of the educator Paulo Freire, whose centenary is celebrated in 2021. The proposal is centered on citizenship as a possibility to be achieved and exercised in daily life, starting not only with awareness, but sensibilization. The sensitive as a driving force capable of producing the definitive link between diversities and the harmonious coexistence between differences, with a view to building the Freirean utopian horizon. Considering the failure of the framework of rational orders and paradigms, the sensorium is elected as an instance capable of producing new forms of citizenship and the sensitive as a generating force.

Keywords: Citizenship, epistemology, comprehensive

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RESUMO

O texto apresenta o conceito de epistemologia compreensiva como um legado dos ensinamentos do educador Paulo Freire, cujo centenário se comemora em 2021. A proposta está centrada na cidadania como possibilidade a ser alcançada e exercida no cotidiano, a partir não apenas da ideia de conscientização, mas principalmente de sensibilização. O sensível como força motriz capaz de produzir a definitiva vinculação entre as diversidades e a convivialidade harmônica entre as diferenças, vislumbrando-se a construção do horizonte utópico freiriano. Diante da constatação de falência do arcabouço das ordens e paradigmas racionais, elege-se o *sensorium* como instância capaz de produzir novas formas de cidadania e do sensível como força geradora.

Palavras-chave: Cidadania, epistemologia, compreensão



TEACHERS AS CULTURAL WORKERS

PUBLISHED TWO YEARS after working as the Municipal Secretariat of Education for mayor Luiza Erundina, during which he helped to implement fundamental changes in the city of Sao Paulo's educational system, Paulo Freire, 72 years old at the time, published *Teachers as Cultural Workers* (1997). It serves as a basis for considering themes such as the effort and engagement inherent to the bonding and communal proposals for fully exercising citizenship. Beginning with the introduction, Freire (1997) looks to establish the important distinction between teacher and coddling parent, not in order to oppose one to the other, as he himself clarifies, but to avoid conceptually binding the two, which would thereby reduce the professor to the role of an aunt (p. 9). This perspective pinpoints the tendency to flee from the recognition of the real and, in an act of apparently affective juvenile escapism, to demean, deface, and disrespect one of the most important and most necessary enterprises in underdeveloped countries such as Brazil: education and those who dedicate themselves to it.

As Freire (1997) argues, "seeing a teacher as a coddling aunt marks just another chapter in the fight against diminishing the value of the profession, evidenced by the three-decades-old habit of transforming the teacher into a substitute for a relative" (p. 10). In trying to deconstruct the apparently affective construction which is epitomized in the act of identifying the teacher as an aunt, Freire emphasizes the fact that there are no children who choose not to go to schools. In fact, they "are prohibited by the system to either enter school, or to remain in school" (p. 10). It is the fulfillment of an ideology, a deliberate policy of social exclusion.

This book is already an important reference, in that it addresses the idea of *critical citizenship*, and given it uses the sensible as a strategy for overcoming, it must be included when considering the pressing issue of consciousness. Sensible awareness and consciousness are steps toward constructing citizenship.

This article will trace the path towards constructing a perspective of citizenship which is committed to the ideas of territory, or community-based citizenship, in that it is connected to common responsibilities and a common ideal. Education, school, and political literacy are fundamental, as opposed to the pure citizenship of rights, which is ever more concerned with the individual – and ever less concerned with the collective. Liberal citizenship centered on the individual, marked by the exclusive preoccupation with rights, is a fragile concept.

Another of his texts from the 1970s is also relevant to this discussion. *Extension or Communication* (Freire, 1997) was written after the author's experience as an adviser to Chile's do Instituto de Desarrollo Agropecuario (Institute of

Agricultural Development), part of the Ministry of Education, during his exile from 1964 to 1969. As the title implies, the text criticizes the concept of extension by comparing it to communication. However, the fundamental fact is that Paulo Freire explores his unique conception of the nature of knowledge in this book.

The text is a reference and is the only place in which he systematically defines his thinking on the act of knowing, thereby formulating his epistemological basis. He begins with the understanding that, for better or worse, words create a reality. He therefore vigorously defends communication for its dialogical character, while refusing the idea of extension, which is marked by directed practice without considering the historical context of communities, especially in rural areas. With this distinction, he implies that *communication* is a foundational, inescapable, anthropological experience of the human condition. Communication therefore implies the acts of sharing or *mediating*, indispensable to the common, the approximate resolution of pertinent differences in symbolic forms.

This focus on two specific moments of Paulo Freire's thought recovers and emphasizes the markedly sensible aspect of his theory of knowledge. He definitively and consciously considers the sensible in his educational methodology, with his method of teaching literacy by using generative words, defending and valuing the teacher-student relationship in their dialogical epistemology.

He affirms that knowledge "requires a curious presence of the subject before the world" (Freire, 1977, p. 27). This vision, this respect for knowledge is fundamental for research and investigation, in that it transforms the subject into an actor. As Freire himself stated, "knowing is not an act through which a subject transformed into an object, docile and passive, receives the content. Knowing is a task for subjects, not objects" (Freire, 1977, p. 27). In establishing the intrinsic connection between knowledge and feeling, emotion, as he emphasizes in other works – even referencing French theoretician Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (2020) –, Freire confers an affective spectrum to knowledge, which consequently ties into our proposal for a comprehensive epistemology.

COMPREHENSIVE EPISTEMOLOGY: BETWEEN CONSCIOUSNESS AND SENSIBLE AWARENESS

On the one hand, Freire's proposal can be synthesized without resorting to reductionism, using his own words, as "trying to overcome preeminently sensible knowledge by a knowledge which, beginning with the sensible, achieves the reason of reality" (Freire, 1977, p. 33). Freire believes that consciousness can lead to breaking the chains of domination, in that this consciousness allows for a critical reading of the world and reality in which we live.



On the other hand, his initial question is essential: to whom is this knowledge destined? Who is served by scientific progress? This is a fundamental point, in that it regards the production of knowledge and stimulates further investigation. The reduction of the myriad forms of reflection related to scientism, and especially to positivism, have shown no capacity to take account of the historical reality of societies. Recently, the discussion has been aimed toward questioning the collective, egalitarian existence of all individuals, or rather, of a knowledge which accepts, comprehends, and investigates global reality as quotidian reality.

The proposal goes beyond mere rationalism, in that it contemplates the fullness and radical nature of sharing, or rather, the construction of a comprehensive epistemology. The comprehensive approach allows for circumventing that which Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007a) calls the “monoculture of knowledge and rigor”, or rather, “the idea that the only rigorous knowledge is that of scientific knowledge, therefore, that other forms of knowledge are neither as valid nor as rigorous as scientific knowledge” (p. 29).

Sousa Santos (2007b) strove to revitalize critical theory, warning of the incontestable fact that the great social science theories were all produced in three or four countries from the Northern Hemisphere. He therefore argues that, for those who live in the South, “the theories are out of place and cannot be adjusted to these realities” (p. 19).

Octavio Ianni (1988) notes that the analysis of social problems which arose and developed in modernity is originally European, but that Latin America, Africa and Asia continue to reproduce the ideas and theories of European and American sociologists, focusing their work around the same themes and explanations. He admits, however, that among contributions which appear anachronic, exotic, or eclectic, “there are original creations, innovations, new themes and different explanations: they surprise and challenge through their originality, strength, and inventiveness” (p. 16).

Ianni (1988) believes that Latin America is, in a certain sense, a creation of the Modern World, and just like parts of Asia and Africa, represents the unfolding of social forces which drive modern society. They developed *pari passu* with ongoing transformations in Europe and the United States, which is why they often align unequally with that which appears to be the civilizing force of capital, navigating diverse phenomena such as “colonialism, imperialism, nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and internationalism, which can be seen as the products and conditions of the broader Europeanization of the world” (p. 16).

It has already been calmly assumed that there is no one universal logic for all time and every place – although this is the assumption of the legacy of Western modernity: Cartesian thought. Descartes based his reasoning on a

form of rationality which, given its Eurocentric origin, excludes knowledge of other cultures and places from *science*, banishing them to marginality or even denying their existence. The European colonialism of the *Great Discoveries* continued as the colonialism of knowledge. The knowledge of Latin America's indigenous peoples and of the *uncultured masses* in general is still considered *popular wisdom*, lacking in scientific basis.

However, given the failure of the great models and the incapacity of scientific models to respond ubiquitously to all questions, this traditional and popular knowledge is ever more present and increasingly studied by the authorized sciences. In many cases, it ends up being reincorporated in global society as *true* knowledge.

One can even state that, in recent years, this kind of *alternative* knowledge has turned into a lucrative business through regulations on international proprietary rights. The private appropriation of ancient communal or local knowledge, transformed into massively commercialized, global products with exorbitant price labels, especially regarding seeds and medication, is just one example. Businesses expropriate collective knowledge through patents, privatizing traditional knowledge which is produced and consumed communally.

The relationship and the dispute between this kind of science and its applications has become increasingly decisive, normally revolving around technology, where there is a separation between the authorship or propriety of knowledge and the consumer, who only has to receive and use it.

Moreover, there has been a tendency to repeat themes and methodologies from a Eurocentric perspective. The issue becomes even more complicated when questions arise regarding the fragility of these countries' democracies, such as those about the enormous social inequality, largely responsible for the exclusion of indigenous knowledge – permanently shunned from the authorized *loci* of speech. The supposition of a *unitary knowledge* represses an important part of reality, in that it excludes or disqualifies all thought produced through traditional social practices and popular knowledge. Its effects on education are damaging, because monoculturalism, which privileges a hegemonic language, impedes the pluralism of languages which come from different social strata and other, emigratory regions of the globe.

The distance of the “monoculture of knowledge and rigor”, as understood by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007a), aims toward a comprehensive epistemology of the human sciences, focusing on the *social act* – rather than society as collective category, as preferred by sociological epistemology –, not an exclusively individual act, but a *communal act*, filled with affective characteristics. It is the *communal act* that makes the practical knowledge of the institution



transindividual, and can define this knowledge as a way of thinking and doing which is independent from the individual. It is an act which strongly invokes the *emotional* or the *sensible*, or what was still called the *world of spirit* in the 19th century, decisive for comprehending intersubjective relationships.

It is the constitutive acts of the *commons*, or even of the *com*, the with, of coexistence, of living together, and of bonding. The acts of perceiving, feeling, thinking, knowing, engaging, and doing imply bringing oneself to the meeting with the *common*, which is the unifying center of an institution or a social group. Acting *with* also implies an obligation to another, as inscribed in the *munus* (origin of the word, *communitas*).

It is a propitious moment for evoking this proposal as a driving force towards the definitive reversion of excessive individualism as well as the social inequalities and the disparity between intellectual production in the Global North and South. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007b) said, “these days, it is not so much about surviving as it is about knowing to live. This requires another form of knowledge, a comprehensive, intimate knowledge that does not separate us, but rather personally unites us with that which we study” (p. 54).

The bases for a comprehensive epistemology come from a perspective which recognizes the historical and territorial reality, and which is capable of making an analysis devoid of pre-judgments and pre-concepts, in which acceptance is the trick to uniting different forms of knowledge and thus conferring academic legitimacy. The researcher must begin to investigate, in order to avoid repeating the history of Paulo Freire’s (1977) *Extension or Communication?*, which narrated the countless clashes between farmers, *cultured culture*, and the peasants, the *uncultured culture*, witnessed during his exile in Chile.

As Freire himself argued, no one authentically reads or studies without assuming the critical form of being or of being the subject of curiosity, the subject of literature, of the process of knowing in that which is found. To read is to attempt to comprehend that which is read; this, among other fundamental points, marks the importance of correctly teaching reading and writing. Teaching to read is engaging in a creative experience bound in *comprehension* and communication. And the experience of comprehension will be much deeper when we are capable of associating, never dichotomizing, the emerging concepts of the school experience with those which result from day-to-day life.

Reading words, just as in the search for comprehending the text and, therefore, the objects referred to therein, now reminds us of the earlier reading of the world. It is fundamental to clarify that a reading of the world through sensorial experience is not sufficient. On the other hand, it cannot be written off as *inferior* to a reading

made from the perspective of the abstract world of conflicts which range from the generalized to the tangible. (Freire, 1997, pp. 20-21)

The main idea is that, theoretically, one can construct objects which can behold the territory that holds them, whose construction must be made dialogically. One must *comprehend*, not merely hold information or understand, but comprehend the reality of the other and intervene, fully carrying out the proposition that overcoming can only be constructed together. Freire gives value to the *emotional field* – or what 19th century German socio-philosophy termed *Weltgeist* –, considering it decisive for comprehending intersubjective relationships. It therefore reaches the set of requirements which phenomenology instituted as conditions of *comprehensibility*. It has become increasingly evident that the collective construction of science is necessary for acting in a generative manner over the territory – a way in which every action potentially stimulates others – with dignity and mutual respect.

REVISITING CITIZENSHIP AS STRENGTH

Constructing minimal parameters for exercising citizenship requires an education committed to the territory, including a critical reading of reality, historical knowledge, and incentives for creativity and inventiveness. Citizenship is focused on the basic notion of rights, whether civil, political, or social, understood civil rights as the individual freedoms of expression, faith, and property. Political rights are related to the people's participation in political power or elections, and social rights include the basic rights to economic well-being and security, as well as social inheritance.

Commitment to a territory, its people and its culture, must be included when constructing a quotidian concern with the collective. The relationship between rights and duties is symbiotic to the point that the individual perceives themselves as a fundamental part of the group to which they belong. Now that individualistic acts, restricted to ever more confined spaces, are increasingly emphasized, what kind of teaching could demonstrate the urgency of overcoming mere connectivity and achieving sensible, dialogical connections? The intrinsic relationship between rights and duties, which we call citizenship and which is a fundamental piece of living in groups, should be taught and, therefore, learned. A species of Freire's pedagogy for citizenship which can achieve the desired level of consciousness will certainly be founded in sensible awareness.

T. H. Marshall's (1967) classic study used England's historical and cultural trajectory to suggest that different rights arose in different periods: civil rights



in the 18th century, political rights in the 19th century, and social rights in the 20th. The modern idea of citizenship arose in a historical context marked by transformations in traditional power, and in the change from medieval society to the modern era, with the gradual substitution of servile labor by free labor.

Habermas (1998) argues that the urban bourgeoisie was responsible for transforming subjects into citizens. That was when citizenship began to be understood as a social statute, enriched by rights and under the aegis of social contracts. The idea of the social contract itself is fundamental to the implementation of modern citizenship, given that the rights of man were an invention stemming from social and political relationships. The rights of man and citizens are a historical creation, a social and political construction, which came about through structural changes and almost always resulted in social conflict.

The concept of citizenship naturally gives rise to the interaction and interdependence between civil, political, and social rights. However, creating rights allows for a partial vision of the social structure, and does not guarantee the effective presence of citizens. Given that the idea of citizenship is basically the bundling of rights, when we consider societies like Brazil's, with an excessive concentration of wealth and enormous social inequalities, social inclusion becomes urgent, if not fundamental. Citizenship in Brazil demonstrates the urgency of State action, with its *duty* to guarantee a dignified existence to all individuals.

This urgency for survival, for guaranteeing minimal levels of existence, implies a specific understanding of citizenship, one that differs from the structure of social contracts and legal precepts regarding collective rights.

José Murilo de Carvalho (2004) argues that, in analyzing the construction of citizenship in Brazil, the functional separation of rights led to difficulties in exercising and experiencing citizenship in the country. José Murilo believes that our citizenship was founded on a parochial culture with medieval tendencies; that political rights in Brazil came first and were gradually separated from civil and social rights.

He even coined the term “negative citizenship”, referring to actions and movements which historically included attempts to refuse the State's presence, including the movement against civil registries such as marriage registries, in 1874, the movement against the military draft, one against the system of weights and balances in 1871, and various others. He believes that, on the one hand, these were attempts to refute dictatorial actions by the State, especially regarding civil citizenship. On the other, however, that same State was always sought out and utilized in the name of private interests.

Paulo Freire (1970), however, teaches through his work, and particularly through a piece he published in a German magazine while working with the

World Council of Churches in its Department of Education in Geneva, that it is indeed possible to teach citizenship. He teaches about a sense of political literacy: “Consciousness is not based *here* and a world is not based *there*. Consciousness makes this distinction impossible, as it is based on a correlation between the conscious and the world” (p. 59). He argues that consciousness implies critical reflection of the world, and this intimate, profound reflection was the target of his method. It would come about through the pedagogical process.

Even though we ideally adhere to the Greek notion of citizenship and mimic the citizenship we witness every day, it is important to note that, beyond the mere fulfillment of duties, citizenship can provide access to the *good life*, that in which all are capable of deliberating the merits of moral excellence, of participating politically, and of sharing common goods and deciding how they ought to be used. This perspective of the *good life* gives rise to categories that are frequently more highly valued than the common life by certain ethical conceptions: theoretical contemplation and participation by citizens in the political sphere. This stage is considered to proceed the satisfaction of minimal survival needs. This structure was proposed by the communitarians, Michael Walzer (1998) and Charles Taylor (1993). After researching the rule of law’s place and role in societies, they consider that it ought also to be responsible for promoting the *good life*.

The Greek *Polis*, from which the original conception of citizenship arose, no longer exists. Some authors suppose the current existence of a *polis* using a media-based model, so that we could be thought of as citizens of a *mediapolis*, as suggested by Roger Silverstone (2007). Our perspective is that exercising citizenship is of interest to a city’s residents in that it regulates the harmonic possibility of living together.

In this new age marked by the order of the present absentee, devoid of the physical body yet with digitalized contracts and contact – in which we are urban no matter where we are, thanks to the ubiquity of the virtual – new forms of citizenship are being managed. These new formats can become the preparation for exercising a kind of commonality capable of bringing us together as subjects, in which the common is valued and cared for more so than the individual. Subjects can also be connected through a basic set of civil duties necessary for a dialogical connection. Freire’s work illuminates the path, the ever-riskier challenge of further distancing ourselves from the barbarity of these last few years, especially in regards to the normalization of immense inequality gaps.


This article seeks to emphasize the need to construct a perspective of citizenship which values collective, communal duties, in which respect for a territory, its history and cultural diversity is valued through an appreciation for the sensible in the name of comprehension and critical



consciousness. Strategies for creating sensible awareness are necessary for a radical, communal belonging in national society.

This polis, which is no longer structured through walls and rules as was the Greek model, should gain new definitions and possess codes which structure it with a new kind of urbanism. Mobilizations and new forms of social being increasingly evoke citizen participation. These new forms of social action and being began to arise in the beginning of the new millennium, as evidenced by global demonstrations in the middle of the first decade. They have led to political systems which are taking significant steps backwards, especially in regard to human rights.

However, beginning in the second decade of the new millennium and founded on technological advancements, ideas began to form regarding the consciousness of collective life and the necessity for organic, integrative solutions, in which dignity and respect are inscribed on communal education and geared towards overcoming. Once more, we turn to Paulo Freire (1997) for the final argument:

Democracy is not received as a present. Democracy is fought for. You don't break the bonds which prohibit us with good behavior and patience, but rather with the People mobilizing, organizing, consciously critical. With the popular majority not only feeling that they have been exploited since Brazil was invented, but also uniting in feeling the knowledge that they are being exploited, the knowledge that gives them the "raison d'être" of the phenomenon which reaches the level of the sensible in them. In speaking of the sensibility of the phenomenon and of critically apprehending the phenomenon, I am in no way suggesting a rupture between sensibility, emotion, and cognitive activity. I have already said that I know with my whole body: feelings, emotions, critical mind. We make it clear that a people mobilizing, a people organizing, a people knowing in critical terms, a people deepening and solidifying democracy against any authoritarian streak is a people forging the discipline which democracy requires to work. In Brazil, nearly always, we oscillate between the absence of discipline for denying freedom and the absence of the discipline for denying authority. (p. 78) 

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