

Liberating Communication in the 21st Century

Comunicação Libertadora no Século XXI

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ABSTRACT

Does Paulo Freire have any contribution to the field of communication studies today? We offer an exhaustive reading of Freire's work, from his view of human nature, which includes communication as an existential and ontological reality, to communication in its relational and political dimensions. We also survey Freire's manifestations on communication after the publication of his foundational texts; an analysis of the critical position of communication scholars in Brazil and abroad; and, finally, an evaluation of Freire's contribution from the perspective of his *praxis of freedom* extended to communication research in the 21st century.

Keywords: Paulo Freire, liberating communication, praxis of freedom

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RESUMO

Paulo Freire tem alguma contribuição a oferecer ao campo de estudos da comunicação nos nossos dias? Neste artigo, fazemos uma exaustiva leitura da obra de Freire, desde a sua visão da natureza humana, que inclui a comunicação como realidade existencial e ontológica, passando pela comunicação nas suas dimensões relacional e política. Fazemos também um levantamento das manifestações de Freire sobre comunicação após a publicação dos textos fundadores; da posição crítica de estudiosos da comunicação no Brasil e no exterior e, finalmente, oferecemos uma avaliação da contribuição de Freire na perspectiva de sua *prática da liberdade* alongada para a pesquisa da comunicação no século XXI.

Palavras-chave: Paulo Freire, comunicação libertadora, práxis da liberdade



I dream of a society reinventing itself from the bottom up, in which the popular masses actually have the right to have a voice and not just the duty to listen.

–Paulo Freire, *Essa Escola Chamada Vida (A School Called Life)*.

INTRODUCTION

PAULO FREIRE'S NUCLEUS of thought was formed during his practice as an educator in Brazil in the late 1950s, early 1960s and in Chilean exile, until the end of the decade. During this period, it was believed that the collective process of *conscientization* promoted through *education as a praxis of freedom*, would lead to the political and economic emancipation of populations historically subjected to injustice and inequality in Latin America. This utopia was shared by an important portion of Christians – Catholics and Protestants, including Freire – stimulated by the *aggiornamento* proposed by Pope John XXIII, by the new directives emanating from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and by the nascent Liberation Theology (Löwy, 2016). Even after the 1964 civil-military coup in Brazil, and in the midst of the fierce ideological dispute promoted by the Cold War, many still bet on the viability of a project of democratic socialism for the region. It did not happen.

Twice imprisoned by the dictatorship, Freire was exiled for over 15 years in Bolivia, Chile, the United States and Switzerland. Working in the World Council of Churches, he had, from 1970 onwards, the opportunity to collaborate with African nations that had recently emerged from bloody processes of national liberation, returning to Brazil only after the Amnesty Law, in 1980.

At the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, the historical circumstances are totally different. Freire did not live through the troubled times of post-truth, virtual social networks and the uncontrolled dissemination of fake news (disinformation). When he died in 1997, the leading role of media oligopolies and their ability to define and influence the scenario of political disputes was unquestioned. Many believed, however, that the digital revolution and the internet would be unavoidable factors for popular participation and the strengthening of democracy. It did not happen.

In the new times, those who the Franco-Italian political scientist Giuliano da Empoli (2019) called “chaos engineers” fuel the formation of virtual bubbles that do not communicate with each other. Issues of common interest are evaded from public debate, breaking a basic condition of the democratic process. Among other different causes, one of the results of this whole process is the coming to power of extreme right-wing authoritarian leaders who threaten the

very survival of liberal democracy. Not only in Brazil, but in several countries around the world (Lima, 2021a).

Given the new historical circumstances, is the discussion of the concept of communication, first articulated by Freire more than 50 years ago, justified today? What did his later praxis and reflection add? How has Freire's communicational thought been evaluated by Brazilian researchers? And, after all, does Freire have any contribution to offer to the field of communication today?¹

To try to answer these questions, it will be necessary to go back to his initial formulation of the concept. In Freire, the concepts of *communication*, *education* and *culture* are closely associated. He himself, in a letter addressed to the editor of *Paz e Terra*, Moacyr Felix, in the fall of 1970, stated:

It seems to me interesting to point out . . . that reading *Extensão ou Comunicação?* [Extension or Communication?] implies reading *Educação como Prática da Liberdade* [Education for Critical Consciousness], *Pedagogia do Oprimido* [Pedagogy of the Oppressed], a few articles published by ICIRA with the title *Sobre la Acción Cultural*, as well as essays such as *Cultural Action for Freedom* and *The Cultural Action Process – An Introduction to its Understanding*, which resulted from seminars I coordinated last year in Cambridge, Massachusetts. (Freire, 1969/1971a, pp. 9-10)

The initial formulation of the concept of *communication* in Freire must be understood, therefore, in the perspective of the other texts indicated by him and in the context of the execution of an agrarian reform program in Chile, in the mid-1960s. The isolated analysis of the concept is not only insufficient, as it will always be incomplete and partial. Since then, Freire's liberating communication/education implied overcoming the *culture of silence* in which the oppressed were immersed.

FUNDAMENTALS OF THE FREIREIAN CONCEPT OF COMMUNICATION

The only opportunity in which Freire conceptually discussed communication was in an essay written for the Instituto de Capacitación e Investigación en Reforma Agraria (ICIRA), in Chile, in 1968. The text intended to criticize the extension activities of agronomists and serve as a basis for discussion in an interdisciplinary group composed of experts linked to the agrarian reform program². With the suggestive title of *Extensão ou Comunicação?* (Freire, 1969/1971a), it constitutes a radical criticism of the American *diffusionist* tradition which, at the time, had great penetration in Latin America, submitted to the general rubric of *communication and development*.

¹I have tried to answer these questions in different papers over time. So, repetition of arguments and duplication of texts are unavoidable. Check, among others, Lima (2015b, 2021b).

²The team of experts was made up of officials from the Agrarian Reform Corporation (Cora), the Animal Production Development Institute (Indap), the Agriculture and Livestock Service (SAG) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).



Opposing communication to *transmission*, Freire (1969/1971a) argues that communication is *the co-participation of Subjects in the act of knowing* and that *extension* implies transmission, transfer, invasion and non-communication. Freire therefore distances himself from the false neutrality that is normally attributed to the word transmission in diffusionism and in other models of communication study, originating in the behaviorist tradition. He says:

The term extension is significantly related to transmission, delivery, donation, messianism, mechanism, cultural invasion, manipulation, etc. And all these terms involve actions that, by transforming man³ in almost a “thing”, deny him as a being of transformation of the world. They [also] deny the formation and constitution of authentic knowledge. They deny true action and reflection to those who are the objects of such actions. (p. 22)

The view of human nature

What bases the Freireian concept of communication is his view of the human being as a *Subject in relation to the world*, which implies, in turn, a specific conception of the *relationships between men*.

Freire (1976) emphasizes the fact that “all educational practice implies a theoretical position on the part of the educator. This position, in turn, demands – at times more, at others less explicitly – an interpretation of man and the world” (p. 42). What is valid for educational practice applies equally to communicational practice. For this reason, Freire always reiterates a distinction between *men* and *animals* in their relationship with the world that implies a particular type of relationship between men.

Assuming that men differ from animals because they are able to create and innovate their world, Freire (1970b) says:

The main difference between the animal, whose activity goes no further than mere production, and man, who creates the domain of culture and history through his action on the world, is that the latter only is a being of praxis. He is a being who creates and knows it as changer and creator. That man, in his permanent relationship with reality, produces not only material goods, sensible things, and objects but also social institutions, ideologies, art, religions, science, and technology. (pp. 167-168)

Freire therefore uses the relationship between man and nature – what he calls praxis – to explain the type of creation that is unique to human beings, using the word *contacts* to identify the relationship between animals and the

³ At the time of this text and others cited here, Freire still used the word *man*, later replaced by *human being*. We kept the terminology of the original. In his self-criticism in *Pedagogia da Esperança* (Pedagogy of Hope), he states: “From that date until today (between the late 1970s and early 1971), I always refer to women and men or human beings. . . . Changing the language is part of the process of changing the world. The relationship between language-thought-world is a dialectical, procedural, contradictory relationship. It is clear that the overcoming of the sexist discourse, like the overcoming of any authoritarian discourse, requires or bring us the need, concomitantly with the new, democratic, anti-discriminatory discourse, to engage in practices that are democratic as well” (Freire, 1992, p. 68).

world. Thus, the categories that identify each of these types of links with the world are defined: (1) men-world relations: critical stance, plurality, consequence and transcendence; (2) animal-world contacts: absence of a critical stance, singularity, inconsequence and immanence (Freire, 1970c, p. 1/5).

A beautiful summary of this distinction is presented in the first pages of *Educação como Prática da Liberdade*:

Men relate to their world in a critical way. Their capture of objective data from their reality (such as the ties that bind one piece of data to another, or one fact to another) is naturally critical, and therefore reflexive and non reflexive, as it would be in the sphere of contacts. And in the act of critical perception, men discover their own temporality. . . . Transcending one-dimensionality, they go back to yesterday, recognize today and arrive at tomorrow. . . . Man . . . exists in time. He is inside. He is outside. Inherits. Incorporates Modifies. Because he is not tied to a reduced time, to a permanent today; he crushes it, emerges from it. Bathes in it. He temporalizes himself. However, insofar as he emerges from time, freeing himself from his one-dimensionality, discerning it, his relations with the world are impregnated with a consequent meaning. Man's normal position in the world, since he is not only in it but with it, is not limited to mere passivity. Not being limited to the natural (biological) sphere, as he also participates in the creative dimension, man is able to interfere with reality to change it. Inheriting the acquired experience, creating and recreating, integrating to the conditions of his context, responding to its challenges, aiming at himself, discerning, transcending, man launches himself into a domain that is exclusive to him – that of History and that of Culture. (Freire, 1967/1971b, pp. 39-41)

Thus, in Freire's view, while animals are contact beings that adapt to the world and are *in it*, men are relationship beings that interact with the world in *praxis* and are *with it*. In another text, he completes the previous view, noting:

Men and animals are both unfinished beings, in relation to, or in contact with, an equally 'unfinished' reality. But men are beings conscious of themselves and the world, while animals are beings unconscious of themselves and the world. Consciousness is an exclusively human characteristic, so that men are 'unfinished' in a way fundamentally different than animals. . . . While men, even though conditioned by the categories of time and space, live between determinism and liberty, animals are absolutely determined by their species and their own 'support'. Men are not merely unfinished beings; men recognize themselves as incomplete



beings, while animals are not capable of asking themselves about themselves. (Freire, 1970c, p. 2/1)

The basic consequence of Freire's comparison, and one that he uses most often, is that men are not *objects* but, on the contrary, *Creative Subjects*. They can be treated as objects by oppressive social systems, that is, they can be dehumanized, but this does not change their *ontological vocation*, which is to be a Subject, aware of himself, who interacts with the world and with other men⁴.

⁴The best synthesis of Freire's conception of men and animals in their relationship to nature and the world is in the ten *existential situations*, illustrated by Francisco Brennand, originally discussed in *culture circles*. Check "Apêndice" in Freire (1967/1971b). In Lima (1981/2015b, pp. 114-130), I discuss these existential situations as an anthropological concept of culture.

Communication as an existential and ontological reality

In his view of man and the world, Freire joins the philosophical tradition that, according to Friedman (1975), recognizes "dialogue, communication, and the I-Thou relationship not as a dimension of the self but as the existential and ontological reality in which the self comes into being and through which it fulfills and authenticates itself (p. xxvii).

Freire was strongly influenced by existentialist philosophy, both through the work of the Instituto Superior de Estudos Brasileiros (Iseb)⁵ and for his involvement with progressive Christianity in the 1950s and early 1960s⁶. It is this influence that makes communication a central category in his educational theory⁷, in his epistemology and in the political implications of his thought.

Freire (1969/1971a) argues that "the social and human world would not exist as such if it were not a world capable of communicability" and goes on to state that "the human world is, in this way, a world of communication" (pp. 65-66). He also says that "existing is individual, but it only takes place in relation to other existences. In communication with them" (Freire, 1967/1971b, p. 41). But he goes further by underlining: "Only in communication does human life make sense" (Freire, 1968/1977, p. 73). "Men as beings cannot be out of communication, as they are communication. To obstruct communication is to transform them into almost a 'thing'" (Freire, 1968/1977, p. 149).

More than 25 years later, reflecting on dialogicity, in his *À Sombra desta Mangueira* (Under the Shadow of this Mango-Tree), Freire (1995/2013) reiterates and summarizes:

Dialogicity is a requirement of human nature, on the one hand; on the other, a claim for the democratic option of the educator. Ultimately, there is no communication without dialogicity and communication is at the very center of the vital phenomenon. It is in this sense that communication is, at one time, life, at another, factor of more life. (p. 130)

⁵Iseb (1955-1964), linked to the Ministry of Education and Culture, but with administrative, research and teaching autonomy, had as its main objective the discussion of a public policy for national development. Extinct after the 1964 military coup, it had several of its members exiled from Brazil.

⁶For a detailed discussion of these influences, see Lima (1981/2015b, Chap. 1).

⁷In his early writings, Freire called his method *dialogic* and used the definition of dialogue found in Karl Jaspers (1953).

Considering man as a creative Subject in relation to the world, and being essentially communicative in relation to other men, Freire establishes the immediate philosophical basis of his concept of communication, which necessarily includes two dimensions, the relational and the political one.

Communication as a social and political relationship

In his reflection on *the act of knowing*, Freire (1969/1971a) draws on the work of the Spanish-Mexican philosopher Eduardo Nicol (1907-1990), who builds his argument in the context of the discussion on the nature of scientific knowledge and truth (Nicol, 1965, pp. 42-93). For him, in addition to the three relationships encompassed by knowledge – *gnoseological*, *logical* and *historical* – there is a fourth, also fundamental and indispensable, without which no act of knowledge would be possible: the *dialogic* relationship.

Nicol (1965) interchanges the word *conocimiento* (knowledge) with the word *pensamiento* (thought). In both cases, however, he refers to the fact that knowledge is a dynamic process and the four relationships are dialectically interrelated. It claims, therefore, that, just as there is no isolated human being, there is also no isolated thought.

The relational dimension

Based on Nicol (1965), Freire (1969/1971a) argues about the nature of knowledge (and communication) as follows:

The thinking Subject cannot think alone. He cannot think about objects without the co-participation of another Subject. There is not an “I think”, but a “we think”. It is the “we think” that establishes the “I think” and not the opposite. This co-participation of the Subjects in the act of thinking takes place in communication. . . . Communication implies a reciprocity that cannot be broken. Therefore, it is not possible to understand thought without referring to its dual function: cognitive and communicative. . . . What characterizes communication as this communicating by communicating is that it is dialogue, just as dialogue is communicative. Education is communication, it is dialogue, inasmuch as it is not transference of knowledge, but an encounter of interlocutors who seek the meanings of meanings. (pp. 66-69)

In another passage, he is even more incisive. He excludes the possibility of communication (and knowledge) when the practice is transmissive. He says that “without the communicative relationship between cognoscent Subjects,



around the cognizable object, the cognoscitive act would disappear” (Freire, 1969/1971a, p. 65). So:

The object . . . as content of communication cannot be communicated from one subject to another. If the object of thought were a pure communication, it would not be a significant meaning mediating the subjects. If subject “A” cannot have the term of his thought in the object, since this is the mediation between him and subject “B”, in communication, he cannot transform subject “B” into a depository incidence of the content of the object he thinks about. If this were so – and when it is – there would not be and there is no communication. (Freire, 1969/1971a, pp. 66-67)

By emphasizing that communication means the co-participation of Subjects in the act of thinking, that the object of knowledge cannot be the exclusive term of thought, but, in fact, it is its mediator, and that knowledge is built through the relationships between beings and the world, Freire is defining communication as the social situation in which people create knowledge *together*, transforming and humanizing the world. Communication is an interaction between Subjects, equal and creative. And this interaction must necessarily be founded on *dialogue*.

Although the concepts of communication and dialogue are used interchangeably, for Freire, “only dialogue actually communicates” (Freire, 1967/1971b, p. 107). He insists on this point, stating:

To be dialogic is not to invade, not to manipulate, not to sloganize. To be dialogic is to commit to the constant transformation of reality. This is why, since dialogue is the content of the way of being unique to human existence, it is excluded from any relationship in which some men are transformed into “beings for the other” by men who are false “beings for themselves”. Because a dialogue cannot take place in an antagonistic relationship. Dialogue is the loving encounter of men who, mediated by the world, “pronounce” it, that is, transform it and, by transforming it, humanize it for the humanization of all. (Freire, 1969/1971a, p. 43)

Freire (1970c) considers it crucial, therefore, that the philosophical principle of dialogue, at the level of the act of knowing, is carried out on the social plane. He insists that “The real act of knowing is always an act of engagement” (p. 1/4) and suggests that communication/dialogue not only presupposes co-participation and reciprocity, but above all, it constitutes a significant process that is shared by Subjects, equal to each other, in a relationship of equality as well. Communication must be lived by human beings

as a human vocation. In other words, communication must be experienced in its political dimension.

The political dimension

The political dimension of communication appears in a more articulated way in the *Pedagogia do Oprimido* (Freire, 1968/1977), in the context of the discussion on dialogicity and cultural action. Communication is defined as an *encounter between men, mediated by the word, in order to name the world*. Using the biblical myth of Genesis, Freire explains his religious roots and introduces the idea of *saying the true word* or *giving a name to the world* as a specific political dimension of the dialogue.

When analyzing the dialogue as a human phenomenon, the word emerges as the *essence of the dialogue itself*, however, according to Freire (1968/1977), it is something more than an instrument that makes it possible. Seeking its constitutive elements, he finds two dimensions – reflection and action – “in such a profound interaction that if one is sacrificed, even in part, the other immediately suffers” (p. 91). The consequences are, then, *verbalism* – the sacrifice of action, or *activism* – the sacrifice of reflection. Freire then states that “there is no true word that is not at the same time praxis. Thus, to say the true word is to transform the world” (p. 91).

Freire (1968/1977) also uses the notion of *speaking the true word* in relation to the socio-historical process in which thought and language are generated. For him, *thought and language, insofar as they constitute a totality, always refer to the reality of the thinking subject. Authentic thought-language is generated in the dialectical relationship between the subject and his concrete historical and cultural reality*. Thus, in the case of *culturally dependent* or *alienated* societies, thought-language itself is alienated because it is *dissociated from the action implied by authentic thought*. This only generates false words, not true words. Freire (1970a) goes on to argue that the fundamental theme of the “Third World”⁸ consists exactly in the “the conquest of its right to a voice, of the right to pronounce its word”, adding that the man who “has a voice” is “one who is the subject of his choices, of one who freely projects his own destiny” (pp. 1-4).

Next, Freire (1970a) is even more explicit about the meaning he attributes to the idea of naming the world and, republicanly, speaks of using the word as a “primary human right”:

Speaking the word is not a true act if it is not at the same time associated with the right of self-expression and world-expression, of creating and re-creating,

⁸The expression Third World emerged during the meeting of Asian and African countries emancipated from European colonization, at the Bandung Conference, held in Indonesia in 1955. Throughout the Cold War, it began to identify countries that were neither aligned with the United States nor with the Soviet Union. Later the expression was replaced by *underdeveloped* or *developing* or *emerging countries*. For Freire (1976), however, “the concept of Third World is ideological and political rather than geographical. . . . The Third World is the world of silence, oppression, dependence, exploitation, violence exerted by the ruling classes on the oppressed classes” (p. 127).



of deciding and choosing and ultimately participating in society's historical process. (p. 12)

For Freire (1968/1977), the political dimension of communication/dialogue – the transformation of the world by naming it, pronouncing it – is inherent to human nature itself. In light of this reality, he argues:

Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once *named*, the world in its turn reappears to the *namers* as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*. (p. 92)

In short: by stating that communication means co-participation of the Subjects in the act of thinking; that knowledge is built through the relationships between human beings and the world; that the object of knowledge cannot be the exclusive term of thought, but, in fact, is its mediator; that communication is an interaction between Subjects, equal and creative, necessarily founded on dialogue; that the word constitutes the essence of dialogue and the true word is praxis committed to justice and social transformation; Freire defines communication as the social situation in which people create knowledge *together*, transforming and humanizing the world. That is to say, *true communication will always be liberating communication*.

In the successful synthesis by Ana Maria Araújo Freire (2015):

Starting . . . from the semantic analysis of words, dialoguing with them, [Paulo] understood, contrary to History, that extension implying transmission, transference, invasion and manipulation was not only different, but antagonistic to communication. This is the co-participation of subjects around the object they seek to know, when they seek to humanize themselves. Extension is within the authoritarian standards of the verticality of the command, while communication is characterized by the horizontality of the epistemological loving dialogue. One orders from the top down, nullifying the ability to think and decide who is obligated to simply obey. The other calls for dialogue and understanding of the equity relationship between those involved in the issue, allowing for thinking, deciding and learning. One rips humanity away from the other, thus making it impossible for them to become transforming subjects in the unethically ugly and unjust world. The other gives rise to inventiveness, recreation, humanization. One depoliticizes. The other politicizes. One works for incommunicability,

muteness, oppression and domination. The other reinforces the social relationship of equal opportunities and rights, not forgetting the duties. One oppresses. The other frees. (p. 13)

FREIRE'S OTHER WRITINGS

After *Extensão ou Comunicação?* (1969/1971a), *Pedagogia do Oprimido* (1968/1977) and other texts from the same period, Freire no longer conceptually dealt with the theme of communication. Still in the *Pedagogia do Oprimido*, when discussing “the conquest” as one of the characteristics of the theory of antidialogic action, Freire (1968/1977) says that the “approach” with the people to keep them alienated. “This approximation, however, does not involve being with the people, or require true communication. It is accomplished by the oppressors depositing myths indispensable to the preservation of the status quo”. He considers that the mass “communications” media are the channels of well-organized propaganda that bring to the popular masses the myths necessary for their conquest, “as if such alienation constituted real communication!” (pp. 163-164).

I register three other emblematic occasions in which Freire makes reference to technologically mediated forms of communication, particularly television, two of them answering questions put to him.

The first is in the second volume of the book in dialogue with Sérgio Guimarães, *Sobre a Educação* (About Education) (Freire, & Guimarães, 1984):

SÉRGIO: . . . We see that, in your various books, you haven't properly discussed [media] issues. Why?

FREIRE: Precisely because I have never felt competent, other than from a global appreciation point of view. If you ask me: “Paulo, what do you think about television?”, I answer: for me, television cannot be understood in itself. It is not a purely technical instrument, its use is political. And I am also able to make some proposals regarding the use of television. But even when I have not been dealing with these so-called means of communication in my previous works, even though I do not speak directly about them, *I consider them, for example, within the general horizon of the theory of knowledge that I have been developing in my work on education* [emphasis added]. I do not deal with them directly, in the sense that they are not the subject of a scientifically valid, technical study. . . . I don't feel like an expert on this topic. I approach it in general terms. (p. 40)



The second passage is from a long interview that Freire gives to Sonia Breccia, on the program *Hoy por Hoy*, on Channel 5, the Uruguayan state TV, in June 1989. I made an edited selection of some representative excerpts from her transcription that appears in *Pedagogia do Compromisso* (Pedagogy of Commitment) (Freire, 2008):

INTERVIEWER: How is TV used in your country and how do you think it could be used? Do you like TV? Does TV have a role (in the process) of change or not?

FREIRE: I try to be a man and an educator of my time. I cannot understand how an educator of this time can deny TV, deny video, deny computing, deny radio. . . . I would love to work on TV, I would probably have to learn a lot because I don't know anything about it. . . . I believe this world of illusion is fascinating, but if there is a world of illusion that is profoundly real, this is it. . . . Through the imagination, you touch the real. There is a huge relationship between the imaginary and the real, the concrete. However, for this work on TV, it is necessary to know that there is no such thing as neutral TV. A means of communication like this cannot but be eminently political and ideological. . . . Probably, if I worked in Montevideo permanently, there wouldn't be four programs like this. Not because of you, but because of the political-ideological forces that are behind the TV, behind the camera.

INTERVIEWER: Do you trust that much in the importance of the medium, in people's intelligence and in their ability to transmit to know that . . . , over private interests. . . , there is an interviewee and a popular intelligence that can surpass (these interests)?

FREIRE: I believe there is, I bet on it, as an educator and as a politician. . . . And my dream is that one day TV will treat people with decency. You know that I'm deeply annoyed by the people who do it in a "scientific" neutral way, who work in the organization of the news. Sometimes it seems like they don't know what they're doing. They gather a lot of news from around the world and "pulverize" it. . . . This is the ideological and political wisdom of the ruling class and this happens all over the world, not just in Brazil.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think TV is all-powerful, in such a way that it makes men less free and "sells" us the candidate or formula they want?

FREIRE: No, it's not like that. I believe it is an undeniable power, indisputable, but not as potent as once thought. . . . TV is an extraordinary means of communication, but it is necessary that we teach, that we learn to see it critically. . . . The key is to fight for this environment to be more ethical, to be more at the service of the exploited, the dominated and for that we have to change society itself, and by changing society the ethical and political issue that is proposed is not to perpetuate in this means of communication the taste for preservation, for the status quo. In other words, in a different society, putting this medium at the service of making it different: more alive and more creative. (pp. 127-139)

And the third appears in one of Freire's last writings, *Pedagogia da Autonomia* (Pedagogy of Autonomy) (1997), when he deals with the need to "unhide hidden truths" in the media:

Thinking about television or the media in general poses the problem of [mass] communication, a process impossible to be neutral. In fact, all [mass] communication is communication of something, done in a certain way in favor or in defense, subtle or explicit, of some ideal against something and someone, not always clearly referred to. Hence the keen role played by ideology in [mass] communication, hiding truths, but also the very ideologization of the communicative process. It would be holy naivety to expect that a television station belonging to the ruling power group, in reporting a metalworkers' strike, would say that its comment is based on employer interests. On the contrary, its discourse strives to convince that its analysis of the strike takes into account the interests of the nation. We cannot put ourselves in front of a television set "surrendered" or "available" to whatever may come. . . . A critical and alert posture at the necessary moments cannot be lacking. . . . To face the ideological ruse that involves the message [of the ruling power] in the media . . . our mind or our curiosity would have to function epistemologically all the time. And that's not easy. (pp. 157-158)

In summary: what is observed in the above quotes is that Freire recognizes the immense power of the mass media for the creation of the collective imagination; its power to spread the myths that keep the masses alienated; the impossibility of their being neutral; the immense political and ideological power, particularly of television. On the other hand, he does not lose faith in the capacity of educated women and men to deal critically with the means. Most importantly, Freire refers the reader to his previous reflections on the theory of knowledge and to the need to think *epistemologically*, that is, to consider



the dialogic matrix as a normative reference for the communication process, be it technologically mediated or not.

WHAT DO BRAZILIAN SCHOLARS THINK?

In the essay “Research in Communication in Latin America”, when identifying what she calls “founding fathers”, Christa Berger (2001) mentions a survey carried out among 50 researchers in the region, in 1992. The study identifies Paulo Freire as one of the top five theoretical influences of this field of study. Freire is remembered for his essay *Extensão ou Comunicação?* (1969/1971a), in which “the main criticism of the mass media is contained: of being mere transmission instruments, of treating recipients as passive receivers and of making dialogic relationships impossible” (Berger, 2001, p. 256). Likewise, widely recognized authors with vast production in the field, such as the Belgian Armand Mattelart – with historical experience in Chile in the 1960s and 1970s – and the Spanish/Colombian Jesús Martín-Barbero, recognize Freire’s contribution in the construction of their theoretical perspectives.

Denise Cogo (1999), on the other hand, describes the active presence of Freire’s ideas in three areas: the studies and practice of rural communication; alternative and/or popular communication and cultural studies, in the research aspects on the active receiver and critical reading of the media.

Regarding alternative and/or popular and community communication, it is worth mentioning the recent research by Círculo Peruzzo (2017) who, after following the practice of different community organizations and popular movements in three Brazilian states – Paraíba, Paraná and São Paulo –, states:

Paulo Freire . . . contributed a lot in the formulation of concepts and practices of popular, alternative and community – or horizontal, participatory – communication in Latin America. Many Latin American authors who deal with this communication, as well as communication for development and social change and the relationship between Education and Communication, are based on Paulo Freire’s conceptions or, at least, started from his ideas. Social practices, in turn, echo in different regions and experiences, the principles of dialogue, popular protagonism, horizontal participation, criticality and emancipatory education, especially when it comes to non-formal and informal education. . . . The concepts of popular and community communication and their derived denominations bring at their core some of the principles of Paulo Freire’s liberating education, which can be seen in scholars of this communicational field, such as Mário Kaplún, Luis Ramiro Beltrán, Daniel Prieto Castillo, Juan Diaz Bordenave,

Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, Rosa Maria Alfaro, Regina Festa, the author herself and many others. It is also common for leaders and militants to carry out these propositions, putting these principles into practice. (pp. 8-9)

On the other hand, considering that Freire was the precursor of the more or less explicit critical dialogue with the nascent North American and English traditions of cultural studies, personified at the time in James W. Carey (1934-2006) and Raymond Williams (1921-1988)⁹; Cogo's (1999) considerations about its founding importance for this tradition in Latin America deserve to be noted. She states:

⁹For a discussion of these issues, check Lima (1981/2015b), especially chapter IV.

Paulo Freire's work helps to consolidate the bases for understanding the interrelationships between communication, education and culture, whose consequences are later reflected in the development of a field called cultural studies and communication. Heir of English cultural studies, this trend finds its specificity in the Latin American context from the late 1980s onwards through researchers such as the Colombian Jesús Martín-Barbero and the Mexicans [*sic*] Nestor García Canclini and Guillermo Orozco Gómez, whose reflections point to the construction of a common trajectory: the comprehension of communication within the framework of the process of cultures in which the comprehension of the communicative phenomenon is not limited to concepts and criteria such as channels, means, codes, messages, information. The understanding of communication is reoriented towards a revaluation of the cultural universe and the daily lives of subjects as mediators of the meanings produced in the field of reception of messages disseminated by the mass media. (p. 31)

Another author who highlights the potential of Freire's work for communication studies is Eduardo Meditsch (2008). In a thought-provoking article published in 2008, he draws attention to Freire's commitment to practice:

Paulo Freire's thought was not limited by this or that theoretical school on which he eventually relied: his first commitment was to real life, to the human reality he sought to understand in order to transform or, in a word, to practice. (Meditsch, 2008, p. 3)

Both Cogo (1999) and Meditsch (2008), however, recall not only the reductionist readings and the imprisonment "in the game of concepts practiced in the academic environment", but also "the weak appropriation" of Freire's work in the studies of Communication. Meditsch (2008), in a caustic diagnosis of the



field of study in our country, states that it was exactly the fundamental primacy of *practice* that caused Freire's distancing:

The "practical" ones never realized the potential of Freire's theory to improve their practices, and the vast majority didn't even know about his ideas, except through book flaps. In turn, the "theoretical" ones who read beyond book flaps never felt committed to applying Freire's ideas in media practices, not only because they solemnly ignored these practices, but also because they felt a deep contempt for them. For them, the practice that Marx and Freire spoke about was just another concept to enrich their theoretical baggage, or it was so idealized a practice that it refused to admit as legitimate the reality with which "the practical" ones related. In this way, Freire's ideas, when taken into account in our area, were confined to the "ballet of concepts" of communicology and "domesticated" by the academic logic that their author has always condemned. Its application in the development of communication practices was aborted in our field. (p. 8)

Over and above Meditsch's (2008) observations, there are also authors who consider Freire's thought a disservice to the field of communication studies, especially to the theoretical search for a specific object of study of communication itself¹⁰. One of these authors discards the eventual contribution of the "pedagogue" Freire and criticizes, from an allegedly "scientific" position, his inclusion among the four "founding fathers" of a "Latin American school of communication", whose existence he does not recognize. He states:

Theory was, and to a great extent remains, the great weakness of Latin American production – hence the paradox of classifying it as a school. A proof of this is that authors from other disciplines are often appointed as the founding fathers or as the great theorists in our field. Paulo Freire, for example, widely recognized as a pedagogue, ends up becoming one of the four main Latin American communication theorists, although the real contribution of this author is quite debatable: his humanist and philosophical vision of communication is better expressed in a theology who takes divine love as the foundation and ultimate criterion for communication. Of course, this can only happen with the entry into the scene of a communication concept with a stratospheric scope and hardly conducive to scientific discussion. (Martino, 2007, pp. 107-108).

The aforementioned observations by Berger (2001), Cogo (1999), Peruzzo (2017) and Meditsch (2008), in addition to others by important authors cited by them, answer affirmatively to the question whether Freire, after all, would have any contribution to offer to the field of communication today.

¹⁰Contrary to the defense of an innocent *epistemological purity* for the field of communication studies, Stuart Hall (1989) argued, in his "Ideology and Communication Theory", about the inevitability of the theoretical articulation of communication happening in the regional field "of the social structures and practices" (cf. Lima, 2015a, pp. 103-133).

We have not examined all the authors who refer to Freire here, but those who argue otherwise are rare.

FREIRE'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Complementarily, it is also possible to suggest at least four specific areas of communication studies for which Freire would certainly have something relevant to say.

Communication as dialogue

Freire is the main contemporary representative of the theoretical tradition of *communication as dialogue*. This is what is argued by Clifford Christians (1988, 1991), one of the most important researchers of this tradition in the United States. Freire adds to this tradition the political dimension, absent from the reflections of its main exponents (cf. Lima & Christians, 1979a¹¹).

Back in 2001, I wrote:

if until recently this model seemed inadequate for any type of application in the context of the so-called “mass communication”, unidirectional and centralized, today the new media reopens the possibilities of a dialogic process mediated by technology. . . . The normative model constructed by Freire becomes current and becomes an ideal for the full realization of human communication on all its levels. (Lima, 2001/2012, p. 53)

The tradition of communication as dialogue gains renewed importance given the possibility of permanent and online interaction in the very act of communication. Freire ethically and normatively theorized about interactive communication before the digital revolution, that is, before the internet and its social networks. As Freire himself did, we must refer to his reflections on the theory of knowledge, the basic reference for the concept of communication as dialogue. There we will find a revitalized, creative and challenging ethical and normative reference of immense value for thinking about new communication technologies and the public policies necessary and adequate to their complex democratic regulation.

Communication and freedom (liberation)

The implicit conception of freedom in the dialogic definition of communication developed by Freire is constitutive of an active citizenship that

¹¹Portuguese language version published in Lima and Christians (1979b).



equates self-government with political participation, contrary to the negative freedom of classical liberalism. Freedom does not precede politics but builds on it. Education (communication) must be a practice of freedom. Having a voice and expressing it publicly, on equal terms with any other citizen, is a necessary condition for the democratic process. The subject-citizen constitutes the main axis of democratic public life.

In a seminar on literacy and citizenship, held in Maceió, Sergipe, in November 1990, Freire (2001) stated:

Being a citizen involves popular participation, through the voice. By voice I do not mean opening one's mouth and speaking, reciting. The voice is a right to ask, criticize, suggest. That's what having a voice is. Having a voice is being a critical presence in history. Having a voice is being present, not being a presence. (pp. 130-131)

This *republican* aspect of Freire's thought did not go unnoticed by the renowned press historian, Michael Schudson. In his famous *Descobrimos a Notícia: Uma História Social dos Jornais nos Estados Unidos* (Discovering the News: A Social History of Newspapers in the United States), when discussing current explanations about the *revolution* that took place in American journalism from the 1830s onwards, Schudson (2010) resorts to Freire to contest "the literacy argument" (pp. 48-52)¹².

¹²I thank Professor Murilo C. Ramos (FAC-UnB) for drawing my attention to Schudson's quotation of Freire.

Despite admitting, of course, that without literacy, large-circulation newspapers would be unfeasible, he questions whether increasing literacy would itself be a stimulus for newspaper circulation and says that there are good reasons to doubt this. Schudson (2010) quotes Freire's passage about the "the right of self-expression and world-expression" (Freire, 1970a, p. 12) and continues to argue that

what would explain an increase in literacy in a literate society would be an extension of political and economic rights or, more broadly, an extension, to a greater number of individuals, of the awareness that they are actors in history. (Schudson, 2010, p. 50)

Then, he adds the importance of "the whole range of social changes, many of them political, that enable people to emerge from what Freire calls the 'culture of silence'" (Schudson, 2010, p. 52) and then conclude that "literacy is a necessary but insufficient condition for the growth of newspaper circulation" (Schudson, 2010, p. 52).

Communication and human rights

Freire's ideas constitute the theoretical basis for the affirmation of *communication as a fundamental human right*.

The right to communication permeates the three dimensions of liberal citizenship defined by T. H. Marshall, in his classic *Cidadania, Classe Social e Status* (Citizenship and Social Class) (1949/1967), each one founded on a distinct principle and institutional basis. In fact, contrary to liberal logic, the right to communication is, at the same time, a *civil* right – individual freedom of expression; in *political* law – through the right to information; and in *social* law – through the right to a public policy that guarantees citizen access to different forms of technologically mediated communication.

The need for the development and affirmation of a right to communication was identified more than 50 years ago by the Frenchman Jean D'Arcy, when he was director of audiovisual and radio services at the United Nations Department of Public Information in 1969. At that time, he stated:

The time will come when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights will have to embrace a broader right than the human right to information, first established 21 years ago in Article 19. It is *man's right to communicate* (as cited in Fisher, 1984, p. 26).

Eleven years later, the famous MacBride Report, published by Unesco (1980/1983), pioneered recognition of the right to communication. The Report says:

Communication, nowadays, is a matter of human rights. But it is increasingly interpreted as the *right to communicate*, going beyond the *right to receive communication or to be given information*. Communication is thus seen as a two-way process, in which the partners – individual and collective – carry on a democratic and balanced dialogue. The idea of dialogue, in contrast to monologue, is at the heart of much contemporary thinking, which is leading towards a process of developing a new area of social rights. The right to communicate (45) is an extension of the continuing advance towards liberty and democracy. (pp. 287-291)

Both D'Arcy's proposal and the MacBride Report, in fact, assumed and enshrined the dialogic perspective of communication that had already been developed by Freire, from a conceptual point of view, in *Extensão ou Comunicação?* (1969/1971a). Communication as a characteristic of human nature, the co-participation of equal subjects who interact dialogically around the object they want to know and, at the same time, transform the world in the context of liberating cultural action.



Since the late 1960s, as mentioned above, Freire claimed that speaking the word, having a voice, expressing oneself constituted a “primary human right”. It is worth repeating:

Speaking the word really means: a human act implying reflection and action. As such it is a *primordial human right* [emphasis added] and not the privilege of a few. Speaking the word is not a true act if it is not at the same time associated with the right of self-expression and world-expression, of creating and re-creating, of deciding and choosing and ultimately participating in society’s historical process. (Freire, 1970a, p. 12)

Communication is necessarily dialogic, *two-way*, sheltering, at the same time, the rights to inform and be informed and the right to access the technological means necessary for full freedom of expression¹³.

¹³The Freirean perspective is described and elaborated by Pedrinho Guareschi (2013).

Communication and culture of silence¹⁴

There is an enormous analytical potential in concepts elaborated by Freire that have not yet been fully explored. An eloquent example is the concept of the culture of silence – the culture that hosts those who have no voice – and its corollary, the *policies of silencing*.

The relationship between communication and culture takes place in Freire in a very simple way: there is no possibility of communication in the *culture of silence*. The silence of oppression predominates in it. Cultural action, that is, the conscious process of struggle for human liberation, assumed by women and men who are subjects of their own History, is the space for dialogic communication, generator of new knowledge and social transformation.

¹⁴To any interested parties, I would like to suggest the reading of Lima (2021b).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Starting from the concrete challenge that emerges from his practice with peasants in the process of agrarian reform in Chile, in the 1960s, Freire makes a rigorous critique of rural extension, which was based on the theory of diffusion of innovations. He then develops the theoretical and practical alternative of humanizing and liberating dialogic communication. It is located on the opposite pole of communication as transmission and is based on the belief of the human being as a creative and transforming subject in the world, and on a gnoseological theory in which, without dialogue (communication) between equals, knowledge is not produced. Communication becomes, by definition, necessarily political and liberating.

Although there are occasional criticisms of his thinking, Freire has influenced and continues to influence important communication researchers in Brazil and abroad, including formulators, in multilateral organizations, of the perspective of communication as a fundamental human right.

The proposal of a Freireian liberating communication, extending an entire thought and praxis focused on the practice of freedom, continues to offer a creative and challenging perspective for the field of communication studies, especially as a normative and ethical reference in the historical circumstances of this third decade of the 21st century, dominated by virtual interactivity, made possible by the digital revolution and the internet. ■

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