

## ***A Shared Vision of Radical Education. Going Beyond Specific Differences in the Relation between Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich***

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**Abstract:** This essay explores the specific differences between the philosophies of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich, while nonetheless arguing for their shared vision of radical education. With a focus on Freire's earlier period of work, especially the seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, we point to the differing reception of their respective works in Europe of the 1970s (where Illich is often seen as an incompatible and extreme case). This in retrospect seems somewhat surprising as we argue that the fundamentals of their thinking are a shared critique of banking education and a re-conceptualisation of authority and teaching in renewed education systems. Both thinkers reject the two most obvious positions post-May '68. On the one hand, there is the New Right perspective, represented by the *Philosophes* in France, who view all Leftist thought as Stalinist. On the other side, we have what might be termed the «Deleuzian-Guattarian» alternative, represented most crucially by the 1974 text, *Anti-Oedipus*. Here, the whole conception of a possible «revolution» (the whole '68 dream), is deemed to be an impossibility. Instead, both Freire and Illich share in a renewed sense of the critical educational project of emancipation, albeit with different emphases. Moreover, the current crisis of education under late capitalism (and subject to the conditions of the Covid pandemic) returns the powerful resources of Freire and Illich to centre stage in education and politics.

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### **1. Introduction**

In a recent essay, the Italian philosopher of education Letterio Todaro has contextualised the reception of Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire in Europe in the 1970s as related but distinct. The essay, entitled «The challenging resonance of Freire's pedagogy: the problematic confrontation with Left-Marxist thinking in Italy in the early 1970s» (Todaro, 2021), speaks of the growing attention given to the Brazilian

educator in Italy across the 1970s. Freire's work wasn't alone in its influence on Italian education at this time and Todaro also points to the seminal influence of another thinker who «pointed out the horizon of a revolutionary pathway for education. This paradigmatic radical thinker (and «bridge») was Ivan Illich» (Todaro, 2021).

In this essay, I will explore some of the affinities and disaffinities between Freire and Illich, as their respective thought systems engage with both education and politics. Having described the strong relation between their philosophies, Todaro goes on to clarify that there was an ultimate reluctance amongst the Italian educational culture to embrace the «extreme proposal...of deschooling» made by Illich (Illich, 1971). Instead it was Freire's thought, as delineated famously in his classic text from 1968 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1996), which became the paradigmatic influence on the European Left as its politics sought to influence the educational sphere. Outside the specific historical and national contexts of Italy and Europe, this essay will take a more intra-philosophical look at the rationale for the positing of a crucial difference between Freire and Illich on education. In many respects, one can question this historic judgement as closer inspection of their key works reveals a fundamental sense of shared vision. Let us seek to explore and clarify the nature of this fundamental solidarity while first understanding those specific differences which were to be seen historically as so definitive.

## **2. The Specific Differences of Freire and Illich**

The differing interpretations of Freire and Illich in the context of the 1970s in Italy as outlined by Todaro are significant when we come to explore their respective relations to the approach of Critical Pedagogy (Todaro 2021). As Todaro notes, the Left-wing Catholics in Italy at the time (very much under the influence of Liberation Theology) came to see the need for a critical thinking and a greater emphasis on democracy as a remedy to the endemic inequalities in the society. At the same time, this grouping demonstrated a reluctance to agree with the extreme proposal preached by Illich's teachings about «deschooling society» (Illich, 1971). But concerning the acceptability of Freire's perspectives and the ultimate unacceptability of Illich's ones, one is led to analyse what exactly were the specific differences between the two thinkers.

In Italy, this discussion took off from the provoking challenge coming from Illich's judgement of what he was indicating as the «last chance» given to education, by way of its complete deinstitutionalization (Todaro, 2021). This was effectively his call for a «deschooling society». While on initial inspection this call for a transformative political pedagogy would seem to have great resonance with Freire's thinking, rather on the contrary in the Italian context of the time Illich's call was met with suspicion. Left-wing journals journal asked a decisive question: «cui prodest?» (Lombardo Radice, 1972). In other words: to whom could the solution for «deschooling society» be of use? Could it be taken as a genuinely advantageous path to reach the revolutionary purposes brought about by a socialist civilization? Could it really lead the humble folk, the excluded, the «oppressed» to come to a more equal society? (Todaro, 2021). Today, we can note the powerful contemporary resonance

of this same question as Covid sweeps across the globe and how its attack on the most poor and vulnerable has been enabled by Rightist leaders and ideologues (Trump, Bolsanaro etc.). Moreover, it can be argued that in politics and in education, the increasing technologization of life and of knowledge under neoliberal global economy has intensified significantly the contemporary problems of inequality and authoritarianism which were described as emergent by our relevant theorists from the late 1960s onwards.

In the resulting earlier discussion, the various movements of the Left in Italy ultimately excluded the conception of Illich's deschooling ethos from any genuinely transformative potential in education and politics. Rather than bringing about emancipation, this philosophy would only have the effect of reinforcing the power of the ruling classes whilst destroying the residual possibility of transformation for the oppressed and weak in society. In direct contrast to this negative reception of Illich's philosophy, Freire's proposals found the complete opposite reaction in Italy of the time. Despite arguably maintaining quite «bourgeois» elements in his thought, such as Christianity (the supposed «opium of the people») and existential philosophy (taking up the influence of Sartre and others), the Left focused on Freire's critique of banking education as a force for overturning the authoritarian power bloc of European and wider global society. In this, his work was seen (*contra* Illich) as liberating the oppressed from their condition of slavery and fear.

### 3. Understanding the Affirmation in Illich's Dual Vision

Above, we described the very differing receptions of the work of Freire and Illich respectively in Italy and beyond of the 1970s. This differing interpretation seemed to posit Illich as very much a reactionary thinker whose proposals for a «deschooling» of society would lead to a reinforcement of the power blocs in society. In contrast, Freire's vision of education is seen as empowering the weak and oppressed so as to overturn the very same power blocs and to lead to a genuine emancipation. This latter conception of Freire's work is especially tied to an almost eulogistic reading of Freire's early and seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

While this reading has a certain persuasiveness, and above we looked at some of the specific differences between Freire and Illich's thought, nonetheless it is ultimately unconvincing. An interesting and important reading of Illich's thought is provided by Erich Fromm, in his «Introduction» (Fromm 1971) to Illich's 1971 text *Celebration of Awareness. A Call for Institutional Revolution* (Illich 1971). Fromm highlights the radical and critical aspects of Illich's thinking which, from the beginning of his work in the Church, are set very much against the power bloc of institutions and power. For example, Illich often comments on the discursive work of the *Center for Intercultural Documentation* (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca, Mexico, quoting at the beginning of *Deschooling Society* for example the influence of Valentine Borremans and of Everett Reimer in urging that «the ethos, not just the institutions, of society ought to be "deschooled"» (Illich, 1971a, p. 4).

Fromm, while acknowledging some of the differences in their respective approaches (and the same could be said of the relation between Fromm and Freire) nonetheless points to a fundamental congruence. Seeking a term or concept for

this philosophical agreement, Fromm comes up with the term «humanist radicalism» (Fromm, 1971, p. 8). What does such a «humanist radicalism» actually mean? In grappling with this definition and clarification, Fromm makes some points and develops insights that are important that not simply for a specific reading of this Illichian text but for a more meta-level reading of Illich's conception of a radical education and politics. They also help us to draw Illich's vision (despite the differences) closer to that of Freire. Fromm clarifies first that he is most interested in describing not a specificity of ideas but rather an attitude, a whole «approach» (Fromm, 1971, p. 8) to education and indeed to existence itself (each of these thinkers we can argue are existentialists above all else). According to Fromm, the radicalist humanism that is distinctive of Illich's approach is based on the principle of «omnibus dubitandum» («everything must be doubted»).

Crucially for Fromm, this capacity for radical doubt is not an end in itself but rather points to more positive possibilities of transformation. This leads in Illich to «the readiness and the capacity for critical questioning of all assumptions and institutions which have become idols under the name of common sense, logic and what is supposed to be “natural”» (Fromm, 1971, p. 8). But while such radical questioning may appear to be wholly negative (or as was often the case in the reading of Illich, destructive) for Fromm it is precisely the opposite. It can both negate and affirm in the same approach as a way of deconstructing so as to reopen the possibilities of transformation of humanity in education and in politics. «Humanistic radicalism is radical questioning guided by insight into the dynamics of man's nature and by concern for man's growth and full unfolding» (Fromm, 1971, p. 9).

In «Deschooling Society» and in the many other essays which emerge at this time from Illich, one sees both of these tendencies at work. The radical doubt is certainly present. As well as the aforementioned call to «deschool» the ethos of the whole society, Illich for example in the essay «A Call to Celebration» refers to «the demonic nature of present systems which force man to consent to his own deepening self-destruction» (Illich, 1971b, p. 17). In the very same essay, however, he clearly contextualises this process and need for deconstruction as part of a more dialectical drive towards something more positive and affirmative; «we can escape from these dehumanising systems. The way ahead will be found by those who are unwilling to be constrained by the apparently all-determining forces and structures of the Industrial Age. Our freedom and power are determined by our willingness to accept responsibility for the future» (Illich, 1971b, p. 17).

We see a similar dynamic in the text «Deschooling Society». On the one side, the constant negative interpretation of current institutional pressures on humanity: «Man is trapped in the boxes he makes to contain the ills Pandora allowed to escape. The blackout of reality in the smog produced by our tools has enveloped us» (Illich, 1971a, p. 134). However, once more this negative interpretation has to be contextualised in the way of Fromm's interpretation of Illich as a «radical humanist». Illich is deconstructing so as to reconstruct (oftentimes, the former is stressed in the readings of Illich, and the latter missed). As Illich outlines in the same seminal text from 1971, «On the other hand, the growing awareness on the part of governments, as well as of employers, taxpayers, enlightened pedagogues, and school administrators, that graded curricular teaching for certification has become

harmful could offer large masses of people an extraordinary opportunity: that of pre-serving the right of equal access to the tools both of learning and of sharing with others what they know or believe» (Illich, 1971a, p. 135). The contemporary resonance of this simultaneous radical critique of the existing institutional system, alongside a reconstructive and hopeful future vision, has a strong contemporary significance for us today in 2021. With an eye to some of his critics, Fromm says of Illich's writings that «by the creative shock they communicate – except to those who react only with anger at such nonsense – they help to stimulate energy and hope for a new beginning» (Fromm, 1971, p. 10).

#### 4. Authority Through Freedom – Understanding Freire and Critical Pedagogy in a Postmodern Context

While the stress on the chasm between Freire and Illich in the 1970s seems to overstress the negativity of Illich's vision (which is counterbalanced by an ultimate affirmation for positive change), we can say that there is in the same reading an overemphasis on positivity in Freire's vision of education and politics. Part of the difficulty here is that Freire's work is often interpreted solely in terms of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* period. In this, we might say that the Italian interpreters of the Freire/Illich divide in the 1970s may have been correct enough in their reading of *Pedagogy* but Freire's later work strikes a more discordant note (connecting it to Illich's more deconstructive dimension). We might think about this longer-term vision as «Understanding Freire in a Postmodern Context». This latter category returns us to the open-ended space of Freire's own interpretation of his work, focusing on how his work has been developed by specific aspects of the Critical Pedagogy tradition of thinking. Here, also, as well as Freire's own self-critique and self-reflexivity, we can see the strong connections which Freire maintains to more emancipatory aspects of postmodern thought (often a very neglected connection). In this, Illich's own work (in its relation to succeeding postmodernism) can also be seen as quite prescient.

Key to this understanding is the reinterpretation of Marx and his legacy in philosophy and politics. Freire is not unique in grappling with the complexity of the legacy from Marx. As David Mc Lellan's work has shown paradigmatically, the interpretation of Marx's original work is full of dilemmas insofar as much of Marx's work was left ambiguous at his death. In his Introduction to *Marxism after Marx*, for example (Mc Lellan, 1980), Mc Lellan outlines the myriad examples of this. Referring to these under four category headings of «economics, sociology, politics and philosophy», Mc Lellan outlines the complex reinterpretation or interpretation after the fact required by the Marxist tradition in understanding the «legacy of Marx» (Mc Lellan, 1980, p. 3ff). Developing from the question of a contested legacy of Marxist interpretation, we can explore a more specific question in Freire's work which has an especial bearing on education and indeed on politics. This is the oft-cited question of «authority and freedom». In a similar manner to Illich's dual approach to strong critique and simultaneous affirmation, we can see how Freire also develops an ambiguous interpretation of authority in education and politics. Again, this is an interesting point of convergence which goes against the conventional interpretation that Illich is, for example, simply anti-authority. Key to this more nuanced reading of Illich is Fromm's

understanding that we need to look on a more meta-level interpretation of Illich's «approach» rather than abstracting some essence from more specific comments or radical critiques.

In turn, Freire's approach to the question of 'authority and freedom' in education and teaching (as well as in the political sphere), takes its cue from his early and radical approach to literacy education in Brazil in the 1960s. However, the radical democratic thrust of this educational vision meets very significant political resistance in Brazil and Freire spends 30 years in exile. The Freirean approach needs to be contextualised in the specifically Brazilian context. However, this theme also explores his original contribution to the wider problematic of authority and freedom in the Philosophy of Education. In Freire, there is a simultaneous critique of traditionalism and progressivism (not dissimilar to Dewey's in *Experience and Education* [Dewey 1970]) and this allows Freire to reconceptualise the relation between authority and freedom in education. We can explore how Freire's 1968 text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1996) articulates this understanding very clearly and from a very strong conceptual-philosophical perspective. This question also evolves in Freire's later work, in for example *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1992), which represents a return to a more experiential analysis of the question of authority and freedom in education. Nonetheless, while recognising the need for a philosophy of education to develop «in a manner in keeping with the times», there is also a very strong continuity between the early and later work in this understanding. In brief, in both his earlier and later work, Freire develops an understanding of an «authority through freedom», a co-dependent relationship between these two variables in pedagogy, as also in political life. Again, one can make a similar claim for Illich's work that, somewhat contrary to existing impressions, that his work is seeking to reconstruct possibilities for education, politics and social life beyond the first (more obvious) stage of vehement critique of the status quo of institutional life.

The misuse of authority in education and wider society is described by Freire in *Pedagogy* under the example of what he refers to famously as «banking education». In looking at banking education, Freire pays particular attention to what he calls the «Teacher-Student contradiction» and the «A-J of Banking Education» (Freire, 1996; Irwin, 2012; Cowden and Singh, 2011). Thus, traditional forms of education set up an opposition or «contradiction» between the omnipotent power of the teacher as authority and the passivity and powerlessness of the student. This represents the value of authority as *authoritarian* – authority is only itself when it is one-way; «the teacher presents him or herself to the students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he or she justifies his/her own existence» (Freire, 1996, p. 53).

But there is another dimension to this critique of authority in Freire, alongside the critique of traditional authoritarianism. We already can discern this aspect in Freire's «A-J» of banking education. In the first principles of this conception, we can see the traditional authoritarianism clearly evident:

A) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing

- B) the teacher talks and the students listen – meekly
- C) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined (Freire, 1996).

Here, the authority is all-encompassing and unquestioned, students reduced to powerlessness and meekness, and the suggestion of force or even violence is present in the descriptions of discipline (one thinks of the usage of corporal punishment in traditional education and of the use of violence in colonial society, the latter described vividly by Freire here). But, in the developing principles of banking education, one also sees a different emphasis, on what might be considered a more hidden or ideological form of authoritarianism.

- A) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher
- B) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students (Freire, 1996).

Here, the concept of «illusion» is used for the first time, and we see Freire's foregrounding of a certain kind of deception or «ideology» which can be at work in the use of authority. Freire's own conception of «ideology» owes much to Gramsci's conception of *hegemony* (Eagleton, 1994, p. 197), which allowed for the notion of ideology to become more subtly connected to «lived, habitual social practice» (Eagleton, 1994, p. 197). In this context, the situation itself under capitalist society and education was no longer simply false but *subject to contestation*. It is the latter view which is most influential on Freire, and which leads him to also address some complicities between progressive education and politics and more traditional authority.

In the case of principle (d), Freire is suggesting that nonauthoritarian or progressive forms of teaching, ones where the students are supposedly given freedom to «act», can sometimes mask a more hidden authoritarian aspect; there is just the «illusion» of freedom, of the possibility of action. Here, Freire seems intent on focusing on residual aspects of the banking mindset in education and politics, which can continue to determine even attempts to move beyond and transform traditional approaches. In his later work, for example in *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1992), we will see how this critical analysis of progressivism turns into an unsparing self-critique, but here his critical analysis is more at the conceptual level. Freire makes an important distinction between what he refers to as «sectarianism» on the one side, and «radicalisation» on the other. The «rightist sectarian» attempts to domesticate the present and hopes that the future will simply reproduce this domesticated present. The «leftist sectarian», in contrast, considers the future pre-established. Both are caught within a fatalistic position or a «circle of certainty» and both «negate freedom» (Freire, 1996, p. 19). Thus, such «sectarian» approaches are not sufficient to go beyond traditional forms of education and politics but rather simply reinforce and repeat them.

Certainly, the critique of the more obvious forms of banking education and politics must be made, where a clear binarism exists between teacher authority and student passivity – thus, (a) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing (Freire, 1996). However, such an objectifying and authoritarian mindset and politics can also be present when we seem to have gone beyond such authority completely. The banking mentality and ideology may also be a hidden component of a progressive education and politics. Of course, here in a very different context, we see Freire connecting with Dewey's critique of progressivism in *Experience and Education* (Dewey, 1973). But if we critique the traditional authority of education while simultaneously critiquing the emphasis on a supposed freedom in progressivism, what is our third alternative and what happens to the value of authority per se? Here, the last principle cited above of Freire's analysis of banking education becomes important: (e) «the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students» (Freire, 1996). This statement from Freire is significant because, as with Dewey, Freire is seeking to defend a conception of «authority in education and politics – “the authority of knowledge” – while eschewing the simple identification of this authority with professional authority». It is this latter which must be far more suspiciously critiqued. But the danger of this professionalization of authority («the circle of certainty») applies not simply to traditional forms of banking education but also to forms of supposedly emancipatory education, where its repressiveness may be hidden.

For Freire, as later for a thinker such as Jacques Rancière (1991), this tendency to a hidden authoritarianism can thus be fatal for the progressive educator, or at least the one who wishes to be radical rather than sectarian: «the radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a “circle of certainty”» within which he also imprisons reality. On the contrary, the more radical he is, the more fully he enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he can better transform it. He is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. He is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them (Freire, 1996, p. 21). Freire adds here a reference to Rosa Luxemburg, thus allowing also a more feminist perspective: «as long as theoretic knowledge remains the privilege of a handful of academicians in the party, the latter will face the danger of going astray» (quoted Freire, 1996, p. 21).

Crucial to this notion of radical education, then, is the notion of authentic communication and a critique of the paternalism which destroys all authentic communication. This was a paradigmatic theme of Freire's work even before *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In his early text *Extension or Communication* (Freire, 2005b), he demystifies all aid or helping relationships. He sees an implicit ideology of paternalism, social control and nonreciprocity between experts and «helpees», and refers to the oppressive character of all nonreciprocal relationships (Freire, 2005b). Of course, this sets up a major dilemma for radical education or education and politics which seeks to go beyond banking education and beyond oppression. Too often, the previously oppressed can become the future oppressors, where there is simply a role reversal rather than any authentic transformation of the oppression into real freedom and hope. The question thus becomes: *how can a more authentic practice of authority emerge in radical education which does not simply return us to*



*a newer form of oppression, a more subtle version of authoritarianism and misuse of power?* This is the dilemma which Freire's later work seeks to resolve. As we have suggested above, it is also the complex dilemma which the work of Illich seeks to deconstruct (often leading him to a more throughgoing critique of institutions as such in the effort to avoid residual power formations and «backwash»).

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Freire's progressive work in education and in politics in the early 1960s in Brazil was singled out as socio-politically «dangerous» (threatening a redress of endemic injustice and illiteracy for the poor), and he was to spend nearly thirty years in exile. Perhaps one of the unintended offshoots of his exile was that his work and influence spread to a much wider public internationally, and including Europe. In 1968, when he published his seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in English, a footnote on the very first page notes the seismic revolutionary events of May '68 happening outside his window. These events seem to mirror the very conflicts and dilemmas (social and psychological) which he delineates in the book's very pages. The footnote could be translated as «Look, I told you so!» with a Leninist question «What is to be done?».

But what about now, the contemporary situation? We write this at an extraordinary time in contemporary world history. We are currently in «lockdown» again and the successive waves of the Covid 19 pandemic show no signs of abating, although we are also witnessing the first vaccinations of our country's populations. In Freirean language, we might say there is genuinely *hope* on the horizon. And yet this pandemic has only highlighted more than ever the extreme disparities in power and resources which weaken our societies immeasurably. The shocking impact of the pandemic on our poorest communities has also been accompanied by the rise of political movements and figures who seem intent on widening this divide, while claiming to be «populist».

Despite the specific differences in the work of Illich and Freire respectively, we have argued in this essay that the fundamentals of their thinking are a shared critique of banking education and a re-conceptualisation of authority and teaching in renewed education systems. Both thinkers reject the two most obvious positions post-May '68. On the one hand, there is the New Right perspective, represented by the *Philosophes* in France, who view all Leftist thought as Stalinist. On the other side, we have what might be termed the «Deleuzian-Guattarian» alternative, represented most crucially by the 1974 text, *Anti-Oedipus*. Here, the whole conception of a possible «revolution» (the whole '68 dream), is deemed to be an impossibility. Instead, both Freire and Illich share in a renewed sense of the critical educational project of emancipation, albeit with different emphases. Moreover, the current crisis of education under late capitalism (and subject to the conditions of the Covid pandemic) returns the powerful resources of Freire and Illich to centre stage in education and politics. It can be argued that, in politics and in education, the increasing technologization of life and of knowledge under neoliberal global economy has intensified and deepened significantly the contemporary problems of inequality and authoritarianism, which were described as emergent by our relevant theorists from the late 1960s onwards. But whither the radical and alternative educational-political visions of Freire and of

Illich today? This is a question full of suggestive potential for those of us committed to progressive change within society, but a question which also maintains an open-ended aspect which is fraught with challenge and difficulty.

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