

Separated by a Common Heterodoxy. Illich, Freire and the Perilous Spell of Radical Canonicity

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Abstract: Many scholars, students and teachers who admire and continue to find inspiration in Paulo Freire's and Ivan Illich's work often insist on a shared common ground. This is done for good reason: Illich and Freire sought a sense of hope and liberation beyond the limitations by which large sections of humanity remain oppressed. It is therefore too easy to argue that texts like *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Deschooling Society* can be aligned in sustaining a liberating and emancipatory approach, just as Illich's case for the disestablishment of education would make a lot of sense if it were aligned with Freire's critical pedagogical narrative. However, as this paper begins to show, though noble, such an approach would be detrimental to the one foundational aspect which both works happen to share: the claim to heterodoxy by which both Freire and Illich have endeared to make their case. More than a standard academic paper, this is a reflection on decades of being engaged with these two books. In a mix of personal and academic thoughts, and mostly taken from an Illichian perspective, the author argues that one must clearly separate these books by further submitting them to a reading that would immediately dispense with the gloss by which they remain canonized though often confused. While not exhaustive, this paper is meant to provoke more questions than give any specific answers.

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1. Introduction

When, as a student-teacher, just under forty years ago, I then read (and assumed to have understood) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2005) and *Deschooling Society* (Illich, 2012), I needed a form of reassurance that would be radical enough to throw in my lot with «the struggle», which then meant – rather simplistically – striving for social justice through education. These texts provided such a reassurance, but to do so more forcefully they were made to share the same point of departure, with

the naïve aim of reaching (at least in spirit) a common goal through teaching and learning.

While they were evidently different (and their individual approach made them even more valuable in their originality) in my imaginary, Freire and Illich were on the same team, and fighting for the same cause. After all, they were contesting liberals and conservatives in a relay race which «we» couldn't afford to lose. So, to my mind, for these objectives to be reached, Illich and Freire had to complement each other in maintaining the same cause – that is, *our* cause, the cause of which we, as students of a radical canonicity, remained needy, especially when we were sent «out there» to face a world of schooling and education that remained cruel to those who were weak, invisible, and oppressed. From the very start, in my approach to education there was a missionary zeal which Illich (1970, pp. 23ff) would have repudiated, or at the very best dissuaded us from doing; just as Freire (2005, p. 140) would have found laudable though problematic in terms of how, ultimately, the claims we made remained trapped in a bourgeois sense of *buonismo* of which most of us were at best innocent and at worst oblivious.

2. Necessary confusion

Even when with time one realizes the essentialist errors of this approach, one can see how such confusion was inevitable, if not *necessary*, particularly when considering where we were coming from – which though not exactly characterized as a middle class environment (most of us were, in effect first generation graduates from humble backgrounds), the way Illich and Freire's work was conveyed to us retained that distinct detachment by which, not without paradox, a university education is bound to claim its autonomy.

Be that as it may, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Deschooling Society* had an immense formative role on generations of teachers and exerted a strong impression on our passion for an emancipatory route through education. These texts continue to have a huge influence, not only on students but also on scholars, educators, social workers, and anyone who cares to look closely at schools and education. Thrown at the deep end of a schooling system that remains challenging even in the leafy climes of suburbia, one cannot avoid reaching out to one's copies of Freire and Illich, if only to frequently check one's own sanity, particularly when educational policies remain so volatile. Even so, this situation seems to retain a degree of distance, especially at a time where politics as a form of action is being transformed by forms of representation whose aim is to give a semblance of immediacy when in effect, the very opposite is what occurs. Given the turn of anti-politics in large democracies such as the United States, not to mention Freire's own Brazil, there is no guarantee that matters will get any better, even with new administrations taking over. Yet one cannot ignore how education will always form an integral part of a horizon of complex disparity, inequity, invisibility, and sheer waste.

Pope Francis's frequent reference to a culture of waste (*cultura del desperdicio*) (Francis, 2015) cannot but recall the lineage through which Illich's take on scarcity and Freire's narrative of liberation come from a formative ground of research and method that is identifiably Catholic, although it is also because of this catholicity that

they remain heterodox in their approach. Indeed, as I will argue below, it is because of the heterodoxy that they hold in common, that they part directions, even when, with equal force and determination, they both contest a polity that continues to fail those it leaves behind.

Whether a school looks like an old army barracks or a tenement, or whether it happens to have a new shiny build which comes kitted with all resources imaginable, a closer look at schooling quickly confirms how the spectrum of education, though complex and diverse, is bookended by what still bears a close resemblance to what Antonio Gramsci (1975, pp. 126ff) once identified with a scenario where (a) one form of schooling provides an array of disinterested opportunities that afford the delights of a universal horizon of knowledge; while, in contrast (b) another form of schooling is shaped by a legion of institutions, new and old, shiny and miserable, by which generations are mortgaged into an economy in whose trust of efficiency, creativity, promise and sustainability, education is duly invested. (See also Baldacchino, 2002)

3. A Sisyphean condition

What is found outside the space stretched between these two ends is everyone's guess: though this is not to be ignored by the fact that if scarcity and waste still sustain the free market, it could be argued that consumption defines education as a field which, far from being ever disestablished and far from providing a path to conscientization, it remains at the core of what progressives, liberals and conservatives – in their opposing views – still lay claim upon: an epistemological currency that is securely banked and abundantly promised, even when it speaks the language of emancipation, freedom, and stability respectively.

While I would place no original claim on characterizing this as a Sisyphean condition, this normalized helplessness, which Maxine Greene (1988, p. 15) once likened to «the gas chambers of life», is enough for one to seek solace in the powerful narratives of *Deschooling Society* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Even as a middle-aged academic laden with my obligatory sense of cynicism, I cannot help being moved whenever I re-read these books. Going through each word, sentence, paragraph, and chapter I remain captivated by the beauty of argument and the cogency of thought. Re-reading these texts one remains a neophyte, shouting out one's full approval, and even feeling disturbed by a sense of excitement at how Freire and Illich got it so right and how, against all odds and accusations of being utopian or otherwise idealist, they remain powerfully relevant after so many years.

At the risk of sounding grotesquely nostalgic, I often liken these texts to a favourite symphony or an old album of songs of resistance courtesy of Inti Illimani, Victor Jara or Mercedes Sosa, where one theme leads to another and one case for humanity is sustained by even more arousing lyrics and sounds. If it is not Sosa being thankful for life, it's Jara's moving ballad for Camillo Torres. If it is not Quilapayún's *Venceremos*, it must be Inti Illimani's *El Pueblo Unido*. And here I am purposely aging myself and contextualizing my own imaginary of «the struggle» by which and in whose backdrop, Freire and Illich are held as pin ups alongside Comandante Che Guevara and Padre Ernesto Cardenal.

This goes to show how it is easy (if not desirable) to put Freire and Illich on one relay race team. Normally, the line of thinking is something like this: if schooling is a curse and, as Illich rightly argues, society remains to be deschooled, it is conceivable to intervene critically in the same way Freire encourages us to do so by eliminating those elements which in effect make of education a schooled affair. Admittedly, the claim often feels grossly circular, but as a tautology it makes perfect sense, in the same way Marx meant what he said (twice) in his famous tautology in the *German Ideology*: «The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas» (Marx & Engels, 2004, p. 64).

In rhetoric, tautologies have been known to reinforce a sense of truth, by which speakers seek to instil a sense of reassurance in their audience. And here, the argument seems to have been reinforced in one way or another, as there appears to be no choice. Given that Freire appears more directly engaged with schooled notions (broadly understood), then Illich's argument might as well serve as an overarching context by which we are warned to keep an eye on what frames education per se. It feels rational to say that we would then be right to assume that deschooling has nothing to do with «closing down schools» (of which Illich is crassly accused, and on which he pushes back in *After Deschooling. What?* [Illich, 1974]), just as it sounds justified to cover all eventualities to reach that optimum moment of lasting and desirable change.

Deschooling will be only a displacement of responsibility to other kinds of administration so long as teaching and learning remain sacred activities separate and estranged from fulfilling life. «If schools were disestablished for the purpose of more efficient delivery of “knowledge” to more people, the alienation of men through client relationships with the new knowledge industry would just become global» (Illich 1974, p. 48, emphasis added).

This is where we must suspend – indeed *dispense with* – our claim to certainty, which is another way of saying that even when the radical sound and rhythm in both books continue to rouse our emotions and desires for a just and better society, we need to seek beyond that immediate satisfaction – because frankly, we are not even close! Here we must retrace our steps. Freire and Illich must part ways. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Deschooling Society* need their own space, and they must be read as different – indeed contrasting – texts. Had they joined their friends, comrades, colleagues, and followers in celebrating the anniversary of their publication, this is what Freire and Illich would insist upon.

4. Pendular detraction

In this rather romanticized opening, I am being somewhat simplistic for a good reason. The equation that has always nagged me is invariably drawn by a valid explanation for conflating texts of this genre. This conflation also provides a good excuse for absolutism in the confessional of history. Our desideratum for a fair and just society must count for something. This is why we had to join up powerful theorists like Freire and Illich, Maxine Greene (1988) and much more recently Jacques Rancière

(1991), whose *Dialectic of Freedom and Ignorant Schoolmaster*, one often presents in addition to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Deschooling Society*.

However, such an assemblage always comes with a risk. All four texts – to which one could add one's own extended repertoire – stand for specific *termini* for education and beyond. Illich, Freire, Greene and Rancière's philosophies of education are extremely different, and many have warned against the confusion, while encouraging readers to appreciate this in bringing together so many avenues of understanding and pedagogical practice¹.

Deschooling Society and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* did not gain their canonicity by accident. The ease by which both books are often unquestioned by adulators, while rejected as being idealistic, Marxist, or utopian by their detractors, verges on the notorious. This warrants a disciplined and dispassionate reading of these books. This may well result in a sense of doubt in one's own original conviction. There may well be a wavering, and even a move closer to opposed views which one would have vouched to never entertain. In fact, as one begins to read Illich, it is now all too easy to argue the totally opposite of what his right-wing detractors often accused him of. Far from being some sort of a Marxist, Illich is sometimes regarded as a conservative, a man whose ideas veer to the right. This was never new to him. Illich found himself accused of being worse when he dared write and publish his book *Gender* (Illich, 1983) – a tome which Illich's left-wing adulators would rather keep hidden under their bed.

When, a few years ago, I dared mention that I was writing a book on Illich (Baldacchino, 2020), a colleague who is pretty much on the progressive side of things, told me that in retrospect he realized how Illich may well be saying things which today (and this was a few years ago at the height of the Trump Presidency) some conservatives are saying about education. Taking a deep breath, I realized that there was something to this (even though I disagreed with my colleague's premise). One possible reason for this objection is found in how many on the left regarded Illich as a wilful ally of predisposed camps, including liberation theology and critical pedagogy. While never against, Illich was never a joiner (Hartch 2015, p. 12), and he said so openly, while in his deeds and thoughts, he found himself marginalized by both the left and the right. (see Du Plessix Gray, 1970, Cayley & Illich, 1992).

One begins to better understand how Illich worked in parallel with Freire when one attends to their necessary difference, if not glaring contrast. Regarding him with the highest esteem and as a great friend, Illich tells Cayley that his approach to education was quite different from Freire's.

I remember Paulo with immense affection, but also as somebody who more and more wanted to save the credibility of educational activities at a time when

¹ A good example is Charles Bingham's and Gert Biesta's (2010) *Jacques Rancière: Education Truth Emancipation*, where they clearly distinguish and warn against confusing Rancière's with Freire's pedagogical methods, a mistake which often results from a reading of Rancière's with «Freirean» eyes. The same problematic approach is often found in those who assume that Illich and even Greene somehow become linked to critical pedagogy, on the premise that their work does not appear to be inimical. For my discussion of this with regards to Greene and Illich see Baldacchino, 2009 and 2020 respectively.

my main concern had become a questioning of the conditions which shape education in *any* form, including *conscientização* or psychoanalysis or whatever it might be (Illich & Cayley, 1992, p. 207).

Illich's position vis-à-vis Freire's never had anything to do with a position taken to the left or the right. That would not only be crass but would have no value to any serious study of their different roles in the critique of education. The reaction by which one moves to an «opposite» side when reading Illich is only understandable if one holds onto a left-right axis. In *Shadow Work* (1981), Illich likens the left-right axis to a graph that has only an x-y axis but misses a z axis. A left-right axis is not unlike a flat earth, where the lack of three dimensionality leaves one in what, in his speech to an audience of educators at Teachers College, Illich likens to the celestial «spheres of educational research» (1992, pp. 111ff). What he meant is that just like those pre-moderns who explained the Universe through the Scholastic image of the Celestial Spheres, modern educational research remains stuck in a space that is still explained away by similar pre-Galilean notions – and this, even when the spheres themselves might be considered as liberal, progressive, and emancipatory. What one takes from this is that reading Illich and Freire would need one not only to take the z axis into consideration, but warrants an approach where the dialectic is neither flattened nor «domesticated». As Freire reminds his readers:

For his or her part, the sectarian of whatever persuasion, blinded by irrationality, does not (or cannot) perceive the dynamic of reality—or else misinterprets it. Should this person think dialectically, it is with a «domesticated dialectic». The rightist sectarian (whom I have previously termed a *born sectarian*) wants to slow down the historical process, to «domesticate» time and thus to domesticate men and women. The leftist-turned-sectarian goes totally astray when he or she attempts to interpret reality and history dialectically, and falls into essentially fatalistic positions (Freire 2005, p. 38).

Illich (1992) reminds his audience of educators, that they risk remaining in the celestial spheres even when their approach to education may well be moved by a sense of liberation and emancipation. Within such spheres, the dialectic is flattened, rendered formulaic, and simply taken for what it appears to be: a binary conflict. Freire elaborates on this predicament, though taking a different approach:

In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform. This perception is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action. Nor does the discovery by the oppressed that they exist in dialectical relationship to the oppressor, as his antithesis – that without them the oppressor could not exist – in itself constitute liberation. The oppressed can overcome the contradiction in which they are caught only when this perception enlists them in the struggle to free themselves (Freire 2005, p. 49).

What both Illich and Freire are saying is that a pendular approach remains problematic. This would also apply to our own reading of their work, particularly *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Deschooling Society*. In what we could here liken to a process of pendular detraction, where the only scope of argument remains trapped between the ends on the left and right, and beyond which the pendulum cannot move, Illich often lamented on how frequently his critics were caught in such a predicament. (Hartch 2015: 64ff) Conservatives in the Catholic Church regarded Illich as a renegade lefty who could not even keep his high position in the Vatican Council II's proceedings. Ultimately it was inevitable for the Vatican's *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* – today's equivalent of the Inquisition – to summon him for a discussion (Hartch 2015, p. 84ff), especially when in his restlessness with officialdom, Illich found himself at odds with the established contexts by which the Church was bound to sustain itself over history. Illich knew this and he acknowledged the tradition, in which, though he found a source of radical thinking, counterintuitive as this might sound, he pushed the boundaries only because tradition allowed him to think and say the unthinkable and the unsayable (See Baldacchino 2020, pp. 53-80).

5. A claim to heterodoxy

These were signs which one could read in *Deschooling Society*, just as the same signs of heterodoxy are found in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. As those who have read both books closely will confirm, many flaws come not from the books themselves but from how we have been taught (and schooled) to read them. More so, their work is often lost in translation. More hermeneutic than simply a matter of language, this loss reveals several ideological expectations by which many would approach such texts. Sandro Barros (2020) recently discussed this at some length with regards to Freire's work and how often it is read from outside Brazilian contexts:

The process of reading Freire's texts in English discloses transcultural and multilingual constructions of his work in international contexts. In many respects, this phenomenon is both puzzling and somewhat expected, given the syncretic quality of Freire's writings traversing known genres (for example, the confessional and the sociological, the philosophical and the empirical, the epistolary and the essay). Indeed, those who venture into the study of Freire's scholarship in translation will find a trail of highly varied appraisals that orient his poetics in sometimes contradictory directions. Though much can be «blamed» on the vapor produced by the act of translation, Freire's message possesses distinctive connotations amid various educational agendas characterizing his uptake as a «critical pedagogue» (Barros 2020, p. 152).

Illich makes similar observations on his own work, though in his case the weight falls on the hermeneutic expectations by which, often, many fail to understand where he is actually coming from. *Deschooling Society* is a very good example. Not many of his readers would have had the time or opportunity to revisit areas of inquiry such as the sociology of religion which, Illich claims to have been a major source

of influence on him. Nor do we witness students of *Deschooling Society* flocking to understand the concept of reform from the approach taken by the Church's Fathers – thereby consulting the patristics – from where Illich also understood the foundational meaning of disestablishment.

Those who took heed to Illich's approach and followed it, will quickly find that as he speaks of reform and disestablishment, the concept of change will be untenable if the dynamic of oppression is reduced to simplistic binaries upheld in some «dialectical» symmetry. Reading Illich through what influenced him brings one to conclude that any claim to symmetry confirms a mistake in how we read the dialectic itself. People who read *Deschooling Society*, Illich says, should «look for Thomas Luckmann's book *The Invisible Religion*, and they'll see where it all began. When he speaks about “church” and “faith”, I simply put in “school” and “education”. At that time, I still identified education with the faith. I wouldn't at this moment» (Illich & Cayley, 1992, p. 242).

Following Illich's trail of argument, one begins to get a comprehensive sense of what shaped his thinking, which, in addition to Luckmann (1967), is heavily indebted to Gerhart B. Ladner's *The Idea of Reform* (1959). While Illich sees himself as Ladner's «grateful pupil» (Illich, 1993, p. 31), he also recognizes the huge impact that Hans Blumenberg (2010) made on his understanding of history, myth and metaphorology. While intellectual genealogies might appear tedious and pedantic, both the necessary rigor in scholarship and the simple fact of doing justice to theorists we highly esteem, require us to be more responsible in how we understand and discern their work.

Likewise, just as the influence by figures like Hegel, Marx, Luxemburg, Gramsci, Fanon and Fromm remains clearly established in Freireian studies, many seem to ignore other, far closer, influences which shaped his work and approach. For example, to better understand Freire's approach to existentialism, in addition to Sartre, one must also pay special notice to his indebtedness to Alvaro Vieira Pinto's work on identity, critical philosophy, and demography, and his work on education (see Pinto, 1961; 1973; 1983) – not to mention how, via Pinto's work, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire's profound reference to Karl Jaspers and the concept of the limit gains extreme originality, even though this is often ignored or misunderstood. (see Freire, 2005, p. 99, n.15). The same goes with Reinhold Niebuhr's work on morality and the moral person (1932), which Freire might appear to be citing *en passant* (Freire 2005, pp. 78 and 118), but which signifies more than just a passing interest in Niebuhr's socialistic theology, as it emerged from a protestant tradition of radical thought that cannot be seen as simply marginal to Freire's Catholic formation. Given Freire's Catholic background, one cannot ignore the significance of his attention to Niebuhr, Tillich, Bonhoeffer and others. Yet Pinto and Niebuhr are just two examples which need to be read in far more depth to begin to discern how Freire's work evolved and gained its profound originality.

From such genealogical accounts, Illich and Freire could not be more distinct. Any dialectic found in their respective methods takes the privilege of diversification and heterodoxy. Far from just Hegelian or Marxist, the dialectic extends its roots to sources of influence that go back to the scholastics and earlier thought. Illich speaks of this in clear terms when he refers to the Augustinian influence which he

inherits from Ladner, especially on the sense of reparation and reform, and when, later in his life he begins to move from the notion of tools as the Aristotelian *organon*, to that of systems, which he navigates through a Franciscan approach (via Duns Scotus and Bonaventure) in his need to synchronize contingency with universality (see: Baldacchino, 2020, pp. 128-142). In contrast, Freire does not seem as directly interested in the Scholastic tradition, especially where his approaches to notions of reform, liberation and emancipation bear the sharp hallmarks of *modernity* – a term with which Illich had a very different rapport.

It is in this sense that I would emphasize how the appeal of heterodoxy in Illich and Freire allow us to navigate a world that is always historically conditioned by what it does not know, but where one's hope is found in an approach to a universe that is boundless in its Spinozian inherence of *Deus sive Natura*, of *God or Nature*. This is a sense which, not surprisingly, is found in like-minded theorists and theologians based in Central and Latin America like Leonardo Boff (1988; 1995) who found themselves clashing with organised religion and were silenced by the Vatican.

Entering *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Deschooling Society* we are bound to find ourselves questioning our own desired orthodoxies, our own sense of certainty by which we seem to have imbued Freire and Illich in one way or another. And yet we know (if we are to be honest to ourselves) that this cannot work, when at random you find yourself reading with Freire how ...

Many political and educational plans have failed because their authors designed them according to their own personal views of reality, never once taking into account (except as mere objects of their actions) the men-in-a-situation to whom their program was ostensibly directed (Freire, 2005, p. 94).

While some would say, «yes indeed that's why we are Freireians and/or Illichians», one is tempted to rebut the argument by saying, «that's why in claiming to be Freireians or Illichians you should realize that this comes with the responsibility to understand how these two major figures of human thought urge us to approach the world in other ways». If we are to take Freire and Illich to their letter, then we must in effect seek to claim the contingent dynamic by which heterodoxy is a perpetual necessary risk, just as theorists like Arendt and Greene were always reluctant to regard those who admired their work as followers of sorts given that their work was prompted by objecting to blind following.

But here we are not simply taking umbrage to enthusiastic followers. After all, these reflections started with a self-declared sense of following which goes back decades. What one needs to grasp in reading Illich and Freire together, or in parallel, with, or even against each other, is the powerful claim for heterodoxy that both of them sustained and which they admired in each other's work.

To me, the only way of grasping this was to write and see the works *with* – that is *alongside* – theorists like Illich, Greene and others, where I tried to understand where they came from by tracing the unlikely sources that are often obscured when their work is relayed to us. (See Baldacchino 2009 and 2020) This also follows a method found in their own work, and especially in Illich where he explains his own approach extensively by which he suspends that which is known (thereby adopting

the phenomenological method of *epoché*), and where, as in negative theology, he reads the world apophatically – that is, by way of negating, indeed unlearning and undoing that by which we are supposed to assert the truth (see: Illich, 1993).

It is also here that one finds how works like *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Deschooling Society* gained their beautiful influence not because they simply defied the conventions of their day (as some have wrongly argued) but because they sought to dislodge the certainties by which even those who were their likely allies, found themselves out of kilter with the claims made and suggested in these texts. For Illich to crown his *Deschooling* with hope through of the rebirth of the Epimethean person, and for Freire to attest to the power of love as he tags along the dreams of characters like Mao and Che, is risky enough to warrant censure in their time, let alone in the anti-political era that we live in. It was also a risk that they took in projecting forms of governance and political practices that defied the customary notions of liberal democracy – risks that even Dewey, in the heights of his experimentation, never dared.

For this to be explained I would resort to Hans Blumenberg (2010) who in his book *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* argues that «the feeling or intimation that the most important landmasses of truth have yet to be discovered, or have only been dimly perceived in their outlines, gives rise to an *attentio animi* [attentiveness of the soul], conditioning the mind to see, in each new finding, only the headlands and outlying islands of unexplored continents» (Blumenberg, 2010, p. 53).

If anything, in my take on *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Deschooling Society* I am even more convinced than ever that these texts represent those outlying islands of unexplored continents that we are yet to «discover», and where what seems familiar and obvious remains deliciously strange and thereby appealing by what it refuses to confirm. Thus, the more I read and write about Freire and Illich, the more I want to find a way of getting my *attentio animi* to a state where I could begin to understand and appreciate Freire's and Illich's heterodox claims on a world which remains largely unknown and broadly undiscovered. Any other way would simply ossify and make a mockery of them.

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