

**Book Review Symposium: Walter Omar Kohan (2021) *Paulo Freire: A Philosophical Biography* [Translated by Jason Wozniak and Samuel D. Rocha]. Bloomsbury Academic Publishing. ISBN 978-1-3501-9598-1**

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### **Introductory remarks**

In appreciation of Paulo Freire's work, reference to Walter Omar Kohan is *de rigueur*. Kohan is an established scholar in the area of Critical Pedagogy. This latest addition to his oeuvre was published in Portuguese in 2019 and entitled in English as *Paulo Freire more than ever: A philosophical biography*. This 2021 edition is an English translation. It features much additional material, including a powerful *Foreword* by the internationally recognised and distinguished scholar, artist, poet, activist, and public intellectual - Antonia Darder. Following this, an exciting prologue is *A Note on the English Translation*, written by the author and the translators (Jason Wozniak and Sam Rocha), which is also extended as a dialogue in an appendix. This is unique because it captures the deep and intensive process that was a labour of love in producing a translated book specifically for an anglophone readership. All the more interesting as the

English version was not a direct translation from the Portuguese edition. While this prologue is designed to segue to the book's main contents, it has value in and of itself because it provides a glimpse as to how a book of this nature comes into being and the craft that is needed.

Most of the additional material in this version of the book is contained in the appendix, which is lengthy at 106 pages (the main sections total 150 pages). It includes an insightful interview with the son of Paulo Freire, Lutgardes Costa Freire, and another interview (conducted via WhatsApp) with Esther Pillar Grossi about misreading Freire. This part of the book also includes an *Epilogue*. It's not clear whether the *Epilogue* was included in the previous Portuguese edition of the book. However, it is well worth a read because it seamlessly continues the discussion from the prologue. The two could be read in sequence to get to know the book if one only had limited time. But the danger of taking this shortcut is that the reader misses out on the beautiful, deep, and passionate elaboration of the five principles that the book explicates to characterise Freirean Philosophy. In short, Freirean philosophy “does not pretend to be a guide on how one should teach, and even less so does it offer readymade recipes. ... the principle meaning of this book ... [is] to disturb and provoke a questioning of what it means to educate” (p.157). This Freirean philosophy is more commonly known as critical pedagogy. Critical Pedagogy is closely attuned to Gramsci's notion of *hegemony*, in the sense that education is about leadership and leading. To transgress the dominant ideas of the Right who lead us, alternatives must be attuned to reality. Therefore, cast-iron blueprints that pre-plan the future are of little use in the struggle against capitalism (see Maisuria, 2021; and also Mayo, 2022).

A component of Kohan's book that many readers of JCEPS will appreciate is the (re)claiming of Freire as Marxist and revolutionary. So often, critical

pedagogy is reduced to a fashionable statement for some educators who do not name or challenge capitalism directly and the ills it spews (Suoranta, 2022).

Freire clearly had multiple and expansive influences, *including* Marx and Engels, as well as Christianity. The following description of Freire's character by Kohan is crucially important in this regard:

Freire the pastor trusts a Marxist conception of class struggle and dialectical history in order to infuse Christian values and the class consciousness of the oppressed within the capitalist system through a practice of revolutionary education (p.38).

These are some of the best lines that I have read in books about Freire.

To pivot the argument deeper, Kohan goes on to quote Freire: "The more I read Marx, the more I found a certain objective foundation to continue as a comrade of Christ" (p.38).

While these are points that Marxists and many others will find vitalising and agreeable for rescuing Freire and his Critical Pedagogy from being a tame fashionable statement, Kohan also includes some interesting provoking statements that are potentially chewable. For example, on page 7, Kohan comments about holding back from *partisanship* that some Marxists may find unpalatable. Take the following sentence: "Education is political not because it is partisan," this may well be bewildering to some *strident* Leftists. But Kohan seems to be making the nuanced point that education will always be educational and to think otherwise is "partisan blindness," which in turn closes horizons of possibilities. These pages (6-8) are a potentially valuable source for reflection and discussion about education, learning, training, and skills.

This book review symposium brings together leading Critical Pedagogues globally well-known for using and developing Paulo Freire's work. They

skilfully capture the zeitgeist of the book. The first review is by Inny Accioly. Accioly appropriately places the book's contribution to comprehending the historical and political context of this present conjuncture, especially in Brazil where the so-called leadership is purging Freire of *The Trump of the Tropics* - Bolsonaro. Accioly posits essential discussion of how capitalists are using the global coronavirus pandemic and the climate catastrophe to leverage "maximizing the exploitation of workers, usurping the remnants of free time for rest, leisure, social interactions, and philosophical activity."

Drawing from Kohan's book and also invoking Gramsci and others, Accioly extrapolates critical issues of equality, childhood, and the necessity of change. About equality, there is a much-needed discussion about racism being cultivated by the "dictatorship of the homogeneous thinking creating common enemies." Accioly situates Kohan's book in this context of the necessity of reclaiming reality by saying the book "is an invitation for the reader to claim, take back, the time usurped for critical reflection, which is vital for transforming the living conditions." An essential thread to this wide-ranging review is that of consciousness and agency – summoned from Marx - and beautifully stated as follows: "Unlike animals, humans can be aware of their activity in the world. Our presence in the world is historical because we construct history and, for this reason, we can reconstruct it." Her review is effervescent – fizzing with anger and passion, partly because there is a visceral hatred of the effects of capitalism (alienation is specified) and the plight of peoples in Brazil. Channeling Kohan's provocations in the book, Accioly rhetorically and directly directs the reader to reflect upon: "What does it mean to be alive? Does it mean waking up, working – an estranged and mortifying activity – and being thankful for having a job, for example, in a country like Brazil where around 19 million people are going hungry, and half of the population faces food insecurity?" Much of the review talks to the situation Brazil, where the reviewer is based and sees the continued

importance of Freire's ideas to continue the struggle for "curiosity, joy, vitality, sensibility, inquietude."

The second review comes from James D. Kirylo. Kirylo discusses how his reading of the book was primed by listening to various podcasts that launched the book, which gave crucial contextual knowledge about the production of the book and Kohan himself. Kirylo recommends this approach to appreciate the book's complex nature and essence more fully. Like Darder's *Foreword*, Kirylo picks up on the difficulty, even impossibility, of translating Freire's writing that is *distinctly* Brazilian. Unfolding the work from Portuguese into English is a challenging task. Thus, he asserts, "thought, intent, and even passion can get lost in translation if not conducted carefully," but the author and translator have sidestepped these dangers. Kirylo explicates the main arguments in the book are conveyed in, and center around, five principles: *life, equality, love, errantry, and childhood*. The book is not a conventional philosophy book but emerges from "conversations with more than twenty books, interviews, and lectures by Freire made at different times in his life." In this vein, Kirylo highlights that "[t]hese principles are not fixed or methodological"; instead, they are provocations for thinking with Freire about the world, its past, and possible future. Therefore, the principles are framing devices for reinventing Freire, which was, as Kirylo points out, Freire's intention. Like Inny Accioly's review, Kirylo puts a spotlight on the principle of *childhood*. Childhood is not often associated as a primary concern of Freire's. Still, Kirylo suggests this interpretation is a mistake and applauds Kohan for extrapolating Freire's interest in childhood being a "pedagogical act, a political moment, not only having implications for those conducting popular education work, but also for those who teach young children." Kirylo elaborates by crucially stating that "extreme positivistic thinking and neoliberal advances in which students are summarily objectified, and where curiosity is often swiftly dismissed, sucking

the life out of childhood—Kohan’s principle of childhood is a critical point, particularly in this moment of history.”

The penultimate review comes from Peter Mayo. A well-known and distinguished scholar in Freire’s field, especially Gramsci. At various points of his study, Mayo usefully synthesizes his Gramscian expertise with the book’s focus on Freire. Mayo points out two themes of the book that struck a chord. The first is that of temporality. This focus on time and evolution, Mayo suggests, is reflected in the title change in this edition of the book for the English-speaking reading.

Furthermore, Mayo states: “Quite remarkable are also the different forms of time outlined in this book, *chronos*, the chronological sense of time with watersheds, dates, past, and future, *kairos*, seizing the moment, which is the right one that might not return, with its implication for revolutionary activity (when the conditions are ripe)<sup>1</sup> and finally *aion* which, as used by Freire and others, transcends *chronos*.” The second theme that emerges with Mayo’s review is the role of childhood (like Accioly and Kirylo) in Freire’s work and scholarship. Kohan suggests that the theme of childhood has been, to use Mayo’s words, given “short shrift” by Freire and contemporary Freirean, perhaps because they Freire’s seeming focus on andragogy. Mayo doesn’t follow this argument and points to numerous places where the theme of childhood is prominent with Freire and Freirean scholarship and practice. Despite this slight divergence, Mayo welcomes Kohan’s book precisely because it has rigor and importantly provides new “takes on Freire as a subject to think with.

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<sup>1</sup> Marx’s caveat, in the 18<sup>th</sup> *Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, that we bring about change but under conditions not of our own choice.

The final review comes from Peter McLaren. McLaren places the book's intellectual inspiration and affinity, drawing on more comprehensive sources, among other things, Socrates, Foucault, Rancière, Machado, and the Zapatistas. Like the other reviewers, McLaren discusses the five principles: *life, equality, love, errantry, and childhood*. With characteristic flair, McLaren states that “when yoked together, these themes are more than the sum of their parts. What makes these themes unique is how the author discusses them as internally related”. Continuing with this Marxist vein, McLaren states: “The author treats the various themes not as properties but relations, recognizing that they could not remain as they are without being related to each other in the common function of Freire’s revolutionary praxis.” At one point in the review McLaren recounts a beautiful quote about Freire describing himself as a “vagabond of the obvious [education is not neutral].” While Kirylo used the analogy of a door to push through to define the value of Freire’s work for broader and deeper thinking for struggle and transformation today, McLaren suggests that “Wandering into hinterlands unexplored not only provides opportunities to err but locates making mistakes in a realm of the pedagogical encounter that provides for the possibility of growth, transcendence and emancipation.”

Invoking his indispensable development of Freire’s work, McLaren raises the temperature by labeling the work of Freire and Kohan’s account of Freire as *revolutionary*. Resembling Inny Accioly’s review, McLaren places Kohan’s depiction of Freire in the context of present-day Brazil. McLaren compares developments in the USA in terms of the fascistic-style repression of the Left. Still, interestingly he points out, concerning Kohan, that “it becomes much more of a challenge for Right-wing critics to attack Marxism in the way that it has informed Freire’s work, especially his contributions to liberation theology since, the labels: “Christian Socratic Marxist, a Marxist Christian Socratic, a Socratic Christian Marxist” (Kohan, p. 79) fit the life and thought of Freire in every

combination and emphasis” (Kohan, p. 79).” Significantly, and again with a nod to his development of Critical Pedagogy into *Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy*, McLaren characterises Kohan’s description of Freire as clearly Marxist, in that revolutionary fervor was always the nature and essence of and in his writing.

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The current historical time reveals the irredeemably destructive character of capitalism. As the coronavirus pandemic unveils social and environmental collapse, the bourgeoisie reinvents ways to save the system by maximizing the exploitation of workers, usurping the remnants of free time for rest, leisure, social interactions, and philosophical activity.

Meanwhile, the elites forge articulated strategies to construct the dictatorship of the homogeneous thinking creating common enemies by spreading, for example, the idea that refugees and asylum seekers represent threats to the United States and the European Union’s citizens – while these people seek asylum precisely because their lives are threatened by the US and the European Union policies that finance wars, coups d'état, and leave in misery entire



populations in Africa, Latin America, and the peripheries of the global south (Accioly and Macedo, 2021).

In this scenario, Kohan's work (Kohan, 2021) invites the reader to claim, take back the time usurped for critical reflection, which is vital for transforming the living conditions. In a contradictory way, the dictatorship of homogeneous thinking is forged in the era of social media, which, while connecting people, hinders dialogue. As Freire accurately highlights, dialogue is inherent to the way of existence proper to human beings (Freire, 2005). The capitalist mode of existence is inherently dehumanizing as it produces alienated relationships. Under capitalism, men/women are alienated from their/our fundamental characteristic as humans – which differentiates us from animals – that is, being creative subjects that interact with the environment, transform the environment and transform themselves in this process. Unlike animals, humans can be aware of their activity in the world. Our presence in the world is historical because we construct history and, for this reason, we can reconstruct it.

However, capitalism produces estranged labor and, therefore, subjects who are alienated from 1) the object produced by their labor; 2) the set of knowledge comprehended by the different steps of the work process; 3) their most basic characteristic as human beings, that is, creativity in the transformation of nature; 4) other human beings and nature (Marx, 1844/2008).

Thus, the capitalist mode of production takes the workers' time, the ability, and the openness needed to engage in authentic dialogue, which is transformative by definition (Freire, 2005).

As a historical subject living in the catastrophic context of the 21st century, Kohan urges the reader to exercise the ability to listen, see, touch, and be

touched by Freire's work and life. He suggests five "beginnings" of a life path followed by those educators committed to transforming society, as Freire was: Life, Equality, Love, Errantry, and Childhood.

By presenting Freire's life as part of a coherent unity with his writings, Kohan (2021) leads to the troubling question: What does it mean to be alive? Does it mean waking up, working – an estranged and mortifying activity – and being thankful for having a job, for example, in a country like Brazil where around 19 million people are going hungry, and half of the population faces food insecurity?<sup>2</sup>

There is something crucial implicit in Freire's work and the life: the dignity of life. The attack on that dignity anywhere is an attack on life everywhere. There is an ethical duty that needs to be assumed by critical educators who enjoy privileged conditions, the duty of actively taking sides since it is not possible to exist without taking a political position. According to Gramsci (1917/2020):

I hate the indifferent. I believe that life means taking sides. One who is alive can be nothing if not a citizen and partisan. Indifference is lethargy; it is parasitism; it is cowardice; it is not life. Therefore, I hate the indifferent. Indifference is the dead weight of history. Indifference plays an important role in history. It plays a passive role, but it does play a role. It is fatality; it is something that cannot be counted on (Gramsci, 1917/2020, p.33).

Here, "I hate the indifferent" has the radical meaning of Freire's "appropriate anger." According to Freire, "the kind of education that does not recognize the right to express appropriate anger against injustice, against disloyalty, against

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<sup>2</sup> UOL Noticias, May 25, 2021. Available at <https://economia.uol.com.br/noticias/redacao/2021/05/22/fome-provocada-pela-pandemia-atinge-19-mi-de-brasileiros-diz-levantamento.htm>

the negation of love, against exploitation, and violence fails to see the educational role implicit in the expression of these feelings” (Freire, 1998, p.18).

The right to express “appropriate anger” is an affirmation of life against the elite’s necrophilic greed. Therefore, this is related to the radical sense of love. Without question, Freire would agree that it is with love that the people, committed with the dignity of life, go to the streets in Brazil to march, for example, for vaccines against Covid-19.<sup>3</sup> It is with love that one dares to stand against the deniers who deny life and the will to live. This way, love is rebellion against death since it is courage and commitment to the fight against oppression. Likewise, love requires “appropriate anger” against the dehumanization provoked by capitalism that makes inequality seem natural, normal.

As Kohan (2021) affirms, love is a lifeforce, and political love is to live life to expand it and never limit it. For this reason, it is impossible to love under capitalism truly. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire declares: “I hope at least the following will endure: my trust in the people, and my faith in men and women, and in the creation of a world in which it will be easier to love” (2005, p.40).

The coronavirus pandemic established, locally and globally, the “new normality” that separates, on one side, those who have access to vaccines and health care, and on the other side, those who are left to die without the prospect of being vaccinated and without places in hospitals for receiving medical

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<sup>3</sup> Reuters, July 4, 2021. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/brazilians-demonstrate-against-bolsonaro-slow-vaccine-rollout-2021-07-03/>

treatment. Among educators, the new normality put on one side those who teach their online courses with no significant adversity. On the other side, those educators from the global peripheries, where the internet and computers are privileges for the few. The pandemic unveiled that inequality and intrinsic dehumanization are capitalist normality (Accioly and Macedo, 2021).

One of the fundamental postulates of education for Freire is the ontological equality of all humans (Kohan, 2021). According to Kohan, in his travels and wanderings around the world, Freire was able to observe that “the world is too excessively unequal to not do anything.”

Inspired by Freire, Kohan affirms that:

The educator wanders the world to show it that it can always be different than it is. The teacher walks the world wandering on the path of a political education that is inspired by the belief that the world can be otherwise, and so that the world becomes so (Kohan, 2021, p.154).

Transforming the world requires a permanent tension between denunciation and announcement to construct the untested feasibility that points to a future open to possibilities not yet experimented with.

There is no authentic utopia apart from the tension between the denunciation of a present becoming more and more intolerable and the “annunciation,” announcement of a future to be created, built – politically, esthetically, and ethically – by us women and men (Freire, 1994, p.114).

At this point, Kohan’s work presents childhood from a fascinating perspective. Since “childhood is not something to be educated; rather it is something that educates (Kohan, 2021, p.182)”, one can learn that

Childhood is a way of looking to the future with eyes wide open [...]. Childhood is a way of inhabiting the present, of being entirely present in the present, as if time were just time, embodying the now, as if we were only children, as if the future was just one other form of the present. In childhood, there is not much past and there is a wide-open future, undefined (Kohan, 2021, p.230).

The fight to reconstruct the future – our authentic utopia – requires men and women that are also permanently open to reconstructing themselves. Likewise, this fight must be full of curiosity, joy, vitality, sensibility, inquietude. This way, Kohan reaffirms that fighting to transform society is the duty of every educator. That being so, educators should dare to radically love, having the audacity to wander, march, and protest. Above all, it is necessary to dare to live a life committed to the dignity of life and therefore committed to equality.

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Before reading this beautiful book, *Paulo Freire: A Philosophical Biography* (Bloomsbury, 2021), by Professor Walter Omar Kohan, I took the time to listen to a few book launching podcasts that discussed the work. See [here](#), [here](#), [here](#),

and [here](#)<sup>4</sup>, with the latter ending with a delightful, upbeat Brazilian song dedicated to the life and work of Paulo Freire, which alternatively can be heard [here](#). I am glad that I engaged in this collective listening exercise, providing me an even richer context of the text and Kohan himself. I would encourage readers to do the same.

Kohan's book was first published in Portuguese in 2019, titled *Paulo Freire mais do que nunca: Uma biografia filosófica* (Paulo Freire more than ever: A philosophical biography). This is important because, as Kohan discusses on the podcasts and in the book—with Jason Wozniak and Samuel D. Rocha, who translated the text to the Bloomsbury English edition—thought, intent, and even passion can get lost in translation if not conducted carefully.

Paulo Freire was a gifted human being on multiple fronts, including his ability to write in Brazilian Portuguese in such a way that uniquely created and recreated words, providing new meanings in a poetic writing style that was radically graced with richness precision, strength, and beauty. Thus, the effort necessary to translate Freire's writing was not an easy task and sometimes impossible with respect to capturing the exact spirit of his thought. Indeed, Freire's writing is distinctively Brazilian, as he would characterize it (A. Freire, 2000).

Similarly, Kohan meticulously worked with his translators to best capture the authentic essence of his book in English as it “had to be translated lovingly, taking stock and care of every word, savoring new inspirations, enjoying the opportunity to be writing and rewriting Paulo Freire in a new language, in the

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<sup>4</sup> These podcasts are available on Youtube: The Bloomsbury Academic Podcast - Episode 22 | Paulo Freire with Walter Omar Kohan Pt. 1 - YouTube; Launching of Walter Omar Kohan, and also, "Paulo Freire, a philosophical biography" by NEFI - UERJ

one that is most read in the world, rather than his native Portuguese” (p. xv). This is no small point—in this case—for the English reading audience, as underscored in Antonia Darder’s insightful Foreword for the book.

Translation work for this particular work was a labor-intensive process that not only demanded a fundamental understanding of Paulo Freire, but also a rich appreciation of what Kohan desired to convey about Freire, linked to an acute awareness of the political, social, pedagogical, and economic milieu that situated the text. This, indeed, as Kohan indicates, requires a loving framework in which to imbue the process. If these elements are not there, fine work, important work, can easily get lost in translation. I, therefore, commend Kohn to underscore this critical point. Otherwise, we risk taking for granted an essential aspect to the unfolding of this publication in English.

The heart of Kohan’s text focuses on what he describes as five principles in which Freire’s life, thought, and work is highlighted: *life, equality, love, errantry, and childhood*. These principles are not fixed or methodological; rather, they are “beginnings, ways of being born in the world, of beginning to think and to live philosophically, a life attentive to what a policy of educating means. They are forms from which a political path can be born to walk in a philosophically educating life” (p. 12).

In other words, as I reviewed this book and pondered these principles, it is clear Kohan emphasizes that Freire is not a method; rather, Freire provides for us a door to enter, one in which we can frame our thought and work, indeed our lives, in the context of our individual spaces and time, realized within historical, political, cultural and economic realities (Freire, 1997). Entering this door, however, must always pave a path toward a more just, loving, and right world,

mindful of the common good. In short, the task of the Freirean “follower” is not to follow but rather to reinvent him (Freire, 1997).

While each principle—*life* (“life and philosophy, education, school, and thinking are all intertwined” (Ch. 1, p. 17); *equality* (“all lives are equal, all live have the life potential, not a single life is superior to another life” (Ch. 2, p.43); *love* (“to educate is an act of love” (Ch. 3, p. 67); *errantry* (“an educator is someone who walks, wanders, displaces themselves” (Ch. 4, p. 93)—is worthy of its own distinct review, for the purposes here, however, I would like to simply share a few reflections on the principle of *childhood* (“childhood is not something to be educated; it is something that educates” (Ch. 5, p. 113).

Kohan makes the point that the things of childhood were not the central focus of Freire’s work, as it was in the case of his focus on popular and cultural education. Yet, this does not suggest that Freire had no interest in childhood in general, and more specially childhood education. On the contrary, Freire possessed a significant interest in childhood, as Kohan argues, markedly adding to the bigger picture of the corpus of his work.

For example, Kohan points to Freire’s autobiographic account in his *Letters to Christina: Reflections on My Life and Work* (1996). In this text, among other themes, Freire reflects on his childhood, his relationships, his varied experiences, and their influence on the shaping of his philosophical, social, and political thought, all of which were linked to the bigger picture of education. And part of that critical link was that his childhood was a pedagogical act, a political moment, having implications for those conducting popular education work and those who teach young children.



With the assumption that children are naturally curious, who unpretentiously ask the “why” questions, looking to do, seek, explore, and even inclined to experiment and take risks, Kohan underscores that Freire possessed and maintained a dispositional childlike way of being. This way of being is strength, for in that place, as was in the case of Freire—curiosity, and attentiveness to life, to people, to the everydayness moments—continuously stayed in motion. Kohan puts it this way,

Even in the last of his public interventions—interviews, encounters, and ceremonies—we can see his childlike way of being. Until the very end of his life he walks through the world questioning himself and others in a childlike way. To sing these childlike notes in his words: the perennial childhood of Freire expresses itself in his curiosity, his unquietness, his taste for asking questions, for not fearing to dream, for wanting to grow, create, and transform, in his childlike speech, in the originating use of words that first formed his world during his own childhood (p. 144).

For critical pedagogues, whether working with adult learners or young children, a childlike disposition stance recognizes that education is ultimately about relationships and to be “entirely present in the present” (p. 147), engaged in the sights, smells, and sounds of our surroundings as connections are made with those we encounter.

In an age of extreme positivistic thinking and neoliberal advances in which students are summarily objectified and where curiosity is often swiftly dismissed, sucking the life out of childhood—Kohan’s principle of childhood is a critical point, particularly in this moment of history. In the final analysis, it is for this and other reasons that *Paulo Freire: A Philosophical Biography* is a necessary read. The writing approach is accessible, graced with passion, conviction, wisdom, and a humble intellect.

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Another book on Paulo Freire, whose centenary birth is being celebrated this year, has seen the light. I keep saying that, as long as there is rigour and new ‘takes’ on Freire as a subject to think with, then such books are welcome. I personally think that these qualities are contained in Walter Kohan’s offering which, as Carlos Alberto Torres, prominent Freirean scholar, writes in his endorsement on the back cover of the paperback version in hand, is a *tour de force*.

This book was previously published in Spanish and Portuguese, the Spanish version bearing the title *Paulo Freire. Mas que Nunca?* (Paulo Freire. More than never/ever?). The subtitle replaces the main title in this book because of a theme taken up in its main contents, the question of time. This book is original and imaginative in the way the discussion around Freire’s own ideas are organised thematically around the following: Life, Equality, Love, Errantry and Childhood. Some of the themes are familiar to those steeped in the Freirean corpus, although Kohan, who is very erudite and well versed in philosophy, especially classical philosophy and, as an Argentinian ensconced in a Brazilian

university, Latin American social thought, provides innovative nuanced approaches to them. Equality is often preferred to equity in the discussions on social justice. Scholars such as Kathleen Lynch have argued for a greatly qualified notion of *equality* that considers the conditions that need to be in place to render the term more meaningful than as understood in its formal sense. I have often been told that the use of this term, in a nuanced and qualified manner, has legal implications and significance, hence the preference of many for this term over that more prevalent, especially in the Anglophone world, namely equity.

Quite remarkable are also the different forms of time outlined in this book, *chronos*, the chronological sense of time with watersheds, dates, past and future, *kairos*, seizing the moment which is the right one that might not return, with its implication for revolutionary activity (when the conditions are ripe)<sup>5</sup> and finally *aion* which, as used by Freire and others, transcends *chronos*. For educators, it can involve working towards establishing the conditions to insert oneself in the *now*, that is, “inhabiting the present” (p. 178). It serves to problematise attempts to vocationalise it for a future that might not even come to fruition, what Gramsci, in his denunciation of the Giovanni Gentile reforms, called ‘mortgaging the child’s future’ (*ipotecare il futuro del fanciullo*, in the Italian original). Kohan highlights the relation of Freire’s writings to these categories. *Kairos*, for instance, is reflected in Freire’s frustration, writing in exile in Chile, at the CIA and multinationals-backed military coup in 1964. This brought about a rupture of a democratisation process in a country roused for social transformation. The discussion on time runs throughout the book, in the main thematic section and also in the added interviews, notably the one with Jason Wozniak.

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<sup>5</sup> Marx’s caveat, in the *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, is that we bring about change but under conditions, not of our own choice.

The other theme which struck me in this book is that of *childhood* in Freire, which, according to Kohan, is given short shrift in the thinking around his ideas. Yes, those who confine themselves to his early works, born out of adult literacy experiences in Angicos, Guinea Bissau and elsewhere, may fall into that trap – equating Freire solely with adulthood. I would submit, however, that many have seen the value of Freire’s approach and denunciation and annunciation (Anuncio, denuncia) of different pedagogical approaches, always political pedagogical approaches, to engage in education within the ‘limit situations’ of formal schooling. There is ample evidence of this in the literature around Freire, and explicit ones at that. As for Freire’s own writings, I would argue that it is not even a case of leaving it to others to reconfigure his approach for schooling and other formal engagements. Freire’s oeuvre extends to published work, even in English translation, connected with Higher Education (his dialogue with scholars at UNAM Mexico, published as *Paulo Freire on Higher Education*, SUNY Press, 1994) and certainly with his role in reforming public education as Education Secretary in the Mayor Erundina-led Municipal Government in São Paulo.

*Pedagogy of the City* would be the key work in English translation in this case, backed by the ethnographic work by Maria del Pilar O’Cadiz, Pia Wong and Carlos Torres, admittedly on social movements but more widely on the larger municipal context: *Education and Democracy: Paulo Freire, Social Movements, and Educational Reform in São Paulo* (Westview Press, 1998). We learn of his attempts at providing the conditions for children, the popular children (*meninos / meninas* popular), to learn, with cooks being engaged to ensure they are not famished. Together with other employees (janitors, administrators, teachers, etc.) in this community schools project (those who democratically elect to join the project of the ‘popular public schools’), these cooks are formed as educators. This was presented by Freire and others in a symposium on his work

as SP Education Secretary, held at the 1991 AERA meeting. They have as much a say and vote on the schools' running as parents and the professional teachers. All are brought to bear on the educational experience of the child and all school employees are therefore immersed in a holistic education culture.

Kohan however highlights Freire's insistence throughout to not kill the child in us, to prevent what William Wordsworth, referring to the Platonic theory of Anemnesis (The Immortality Ode), described as shades of the prison house descending upon the child. In this case, not necessarily the romantic English bard's, it would be the child in us. The point is captured by Freire in the sense of social justice and critical consciousness being allied to dreaming - dreaming of a world *menos feio, menos malvado, menos desumano*. This dream is ideologically represented as being 'impossible' but Freire did cling to the hope that it can be possible. Rooted in our existential situation, it is that dream which helps us imagine a world not as it is but as it can be. This is a call to rescue utopia or heterotopia from the stranglehold of 'Capitalist realism',<sup>6</sup> the kind of post-war dystopian reality which Samuel Beckett tackles in *Waiting for Godot*. Apparently 'dream the impossible dream' was the song Paulo Freire use to hum when he visited Danilo Dolci at his centre in Partinico near Palermo in Sicily.<sup>7</sup> The child in us smacks of being inquisitive and of asking questions, hence Freire's 'pedagogy of the question' which Kohan rightly highlights with regard to the book, *Learning to Question*, involving Paulo's exchange with Antonio Faundez. This is one of Freire's few 'talking books', translated to English, which provide some tension and contested positions.

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<sup>6</sup> I adopt the late Mark Fisher's phrase.

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to former Maltese Education Minister, Evarist Bartolo, for this point. In his youth, he had a stint working at Dolci's centre and Freire's visit coincided with his time there.

It also brings to mind a conversation between Freire and Neil Bruss and Donaldo Macedo, originally published in the *Boston Journal of Education*. Questioning lies at the heart of problem posing. One of the standard criticisms of conventional schooling and parenthood is that they kill the inquisitive dimension of our upbringing through pressure for conformity and to embrace the ‘given’, specific social constructions of reality, normalising discourses if you will. Figures such as Jean Piaget and Ada Gobetti underline this. Questions beget further questions and induce skepticism towards ‘certainties.’ This approach is politically dangerous from the vantage point of those within the system world seeking to safeguard the status quo. In short, the child is not to be dismissed as a fount of naïveté but is feared by those who want to smother change initiatives. The child in us will be tagged with the warning, echoing Mr Murdstone regarding David Copperfield, ‘Take care of ...[ *the child*]. [*The child*] bites’ – more metaphorical, in our case, than literal (in Dickens’ case).

Another aspect of this book, which struck me, is the notion of the errant Freire or the errant intellectual. It is the image of the itinerant intellectual who wanders in exile. This image connects with Paulo Freire’s well known exile post-1964 which took him to Bolivia, Chile, the USA, Switzerland, including sorties to parts of Europe, the Caribbean and Africa, and then back to Brazil. Like James Joyce, on self-imposed ‘exile’ from Dublin, Freire’s thoughts never wavered from his home context as manifest throughout his works. Freire immersed himself in the present exposing himself to a variety of struggles and issues, worldwide, about which he wrote but Brazil was firmly on his mind. As I argued in several books, talks and papers, exile served as a means of praxis for Freire, as it must have done to Joyce, enabling one to obtain critical distance from an everyday reality one thought one once knew to see it in a more critical, semi-detached manner – critical distancing. Freire and Faundez discuss this in

their specific ‘talking book’ originally produced by the World Council of Churches in Geneva – *Learning to Question* (1989).

After being convinced of the ‘non fragility’ of the new democracy in his home country (by the Rev. Paulo Evaristo Arns, among others), Freire and most of his family travelled back for him to relearn his homeland before intervening in public policy in one of its largest cities. Kohan, for his part, presents these episodes as Freire’s ‘third exile’, the first being the exile from his mother’s womb, which applies to all of us, the second being his dislocation from Recife and its playful present of innocence and vitality to the experience of Jabotão when the Great Depression left its mark on many livelihoods, including that of the Freire family. There, he had to confront new harsh realities, having to enter the accelerated adulthood world of work and deprived schooling (just like Gramsci following his father’s arrest), to contribute to his family’s ability to put food on the table. Freire however broadens his repertoire as an intellectual and pedagogue, being alive to these new learning experiences, experiences that included reading and learning from books, newspapers and other documentation.

As Wordsworth himself insisted, in ‘The Tables Turned’, however, this also entailed learning from mutable life lived to the full, from the rest of nature in which we are all immersed (“One impulse of the vernal wood would teach you more of man [*sic.*], of moral evil and of good than all the sages can.”). Freire learnt from different sources, from his interpersonal communication with peasants in different countries and continents, other intellectuals such as Amílcar Cabral whose spirit he encountered in former Portuguese colonies in Africa, years after Cabral was assassinated, and different revolutionary and post-independence contexts and social movements from all corners of the world, including his homeland Brazil.

Like the errant knight of medieval chivalry, he is depicted, in the chapter on Errantry<sup>8</sup>, as having moved from site to site with love. This was not love proclaimed in a *Chanson Courtois* for a fictitious damsel. We do have chronicles of love put together by his second wife Nita, and interviews. There are interviews in this book, one with his son Lutgardes that affirms how important was his much-loved first wife, Elza (she died in 1986) in Paulo's evolution as an engaged intellectual and pedagogue – confirming the same point stressed to Antonia Darder and me, at a meeting in Paris (2019), by Freire's Geneva-based daughter Cristina (not the Cristina of the *Letters to Cristina*).

The recurring notion of love attributed to Paulo Freire's thinking is love for anything one engages in throughout life. This includes what Antonia Darder, author of this book's Foreword and *Paulo Freire. A Pedagogy of Love* (Westview Press, 2002), refers to as a love for humanity and the rest of nature manifest in his striving for a better and more social-justice oriented and ecologically more sensitive world. It is reflected in his view of education as an act of love and, more generally, in revolution as a similar act, the latter as described by Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. One fights for a better and more socially just world because of one's love for humanity and the rest of nature. All these sentiments are captured in this compelling and lucid book, a fitting monument to Freire on his birth centenary year.

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<sup>8</sup> There is a double meaning in the word err here. It also means revising errors of judgement and views. Freire revised earlier misconceptions and writings, especially regarding gender ... .. and masculinity, ultimately providing a multifaceted view of the subjects of history. There was a greater emphasis, in his later writings and interviews, on ecological concerns.



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This is an important new contribution to the many books available on the development of Paulo Freire's work. Included in his book is a valuable explanatory Preface by Antonia Darder. In his analysis of Freire's life and intellectual development, including Freire's autodepiction of his life, Kohan lucidly compares Freire to the Athenians and the Cynics, "especially in the sense of one's life being a sacred mission" (p. 73). In this regard Kohan is able to discuss similarities between Socrates and Freire. Kohan also uses a Foucauldian lens to tease out important aspects of Freire's mission, as well as the "non-methodical method" of the French pedagogue Jacotot (1770–1840), creator of universal teaching or panecastic philosophy, made famous by Rancière. This is no mere ahistorical analogizing, but a prescient means of drawing out emergent themes that on the surface might escape the attention of students of Freire.

Kohan is especially adept at traversing the expansive and diverse epistemological terrain of Freire's intellectual biography. He does so with verve and iconoclastic insights, currycombing through Freire's oeuvre with a deft criticality. He begins by addressing Freire's concern with language translation and charts out new and robustly creative ways of thinking about Freire, focusing on five philosophical principles—life, equality, love, errantry, and childhood. These five principles provide a Freirean window into how life is to be affirmed, questioned, examined as the self becomes simultaneously an aperture and an end-point of study, a dialectical dance whereby meaning is forged in a crucible of exploration of both the world as it appears and the world as it could be, and its relationship to the word. This living life in the subjunctive mode—the "as if" of the liminal state—opens up pathways to new worlds that Freire was unafraid to enter. Entering thresholds that enable him to transition across

borders—linguistic, cultural, historical, semiotic—all of which are freighted with a vitality of ways of engaging Freire’s oeuvre, the author enjoins the reader to explore these five themes in a spirit of life-affirming solidarity with Freire, while underscoring the political purpose of the dialogical encounter. These five themes are more than instrumental in transcending the unresisted encroachments of capitalism’s most barbarous aspects—namely, the exploitation of human labor. For instance, they function more than, say, items in a flight manifest or cargo document which itemize the major content of Freire’s brainpan. The author chose them because, when yoked together, these themes are more than the sum of their parts. What makes these themes unique is how the author discusses them as internally related to an understanding of Freire’s work, how they work together as a necessary desideratum of Freirean praxis. Despite the different contents of Freire’s life which they encode, they form a self-maintaining whole. The author treats the various themes not as properties but relations, recognizing that they could not remain as they are without being related to each other in the common function of Freire’s revolutionary praxis. While the themes of life, love, equality and childhood are explored in ways that open up innovative portals of inquiry not addressed in the mainstream studies of Freire, it is the theme of errantry that is the most innovative, and which repays the most attention. For Kohan, Freire can be described as one of those rare educators:

who walks, wanders, displaces themselves. Without a final destination, they create the conditions to encounter those who are outside—in the present, with presence. The educator wanders the world to show it that it can always be different than it is. The teacher walks the world wandering on the path of a political education that is inspired by the belief that the world can be otherwise, and so that the world becomes so. The world is open, and the wandering educator creates a place for a world that we cannot anticipate. (p. 154)

Freire the vagabond, the wanderer, brings to mind the famous poem by Antonio Machado from his collection known as *Proverbios y Cantares*, or *Proverbs and Songs*: Caminante, no hay camino, se hace el camino al andar (wayfarer, there is no path. The path is made by walking). It also reminds me of the Zapatista saying, *andar preguntandos* (walking we ask questions) as opposed to “andar predicando”, (walking we go preaching). In other words, Freirean praxis is closer to resembling a *self-transformation of the masses approach* than a vanguard party approach to revolutionary change. A journalist once asked Freire how he defined himself. The answer was "I am a vagabond of the obvious, because I walk around the world saying obvious things, such as that education is not neutral" (1976, p. 12).

Wandering into hinterlands unexplored not only provides opportunities to err but locates making mistakes in a realm of the pedagogical encounter that provides for the possibility of growth, transcendence and emancipation. After all, the object of critical pedagogy is always in perpetual motion, and so are we human beings. Consciousness is never static, it offers us the conditions to become both the subject of consciousness and the object of consciousness simultaneously. And critical consciousness enables us to reflect on this co-constitutiveness. Freire describes all human beings as “unfinished” and this enables human beings to reinvent themselves in ways that enable them to overcome the obstacles that are systemically embedded in capitalist social relations. We do this through participating in revolutionary praxis, which is essentially a praxis of utopia, a dialectical means of “denouncing how we are living and announcing how we could live” (Freire, 2004, p. 105). Kohan writes:

Freire inscribes himself within .... traditions which consider philosophy to be explicitly committed to the transformation of the status quo. For example, in a 1973 interview with the Institute of Cultural Action in Geneva, Freire (1976a) critiques the

diverse forms of dualist visions of subjectivism and objectivism and proposes instead that we understand philosophy as praxis: action and reflection, dialectical unity of subject-object, theory and practice. (p. 55)

Freire's work has careened into the stratosphere of influential works, as it is now the third most cited work in the world in the field of social sciences and the first in the world in education (Kohan, p. 27). This has made him both a target and a prophet in his own country. Presently, he is being singled out by fascist groups (*Movimento Brasil Livre and Revoltados Online*) and Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro as responsible for a Marxist indoctrination of students throughout Brazil's school system, bringing Bolsonaro the sobriquet of "The Trump of the Tropics." Bolsonaro's attacks bear a resemblance to the Republican attacks on critical race theorists and Marxist teachers in the United States.

Yet it becomes much more of a challenge for rightwing critics to attack Marxism in the way that it has informed Freire's work, especially his contributions to liberation theology since, the terms "Christian Socratic Marxist, a Marxist Christian Socratic, a Socratic Christian Marxist" (p. 79) fit the life and thought of Freire" in every combination and emphasis" (p. 79) especially in Freire's avoidance of transcendental dogmatic absolutes in his interfaces between theology, education, and politics.

Kohan correctly asserts: "In any case, Freire is clearly a Marxist in the sense that he affirms a philosophy that not only contemplates or understands the problems of education but also seeks to transform educational practices" (p. 57). And, correctly, according to Kohan, Freire is also a metaphysician of the soul "and sought the transformation of this world into another through education which would be born from the existing, immanent world" (p. 72). As Freire's

impact on liberation theology would surely attest, Kohan's remarks are clearly apposite. Kohan's book will be widely read and appreciated. There is no evidence of manufactured sincerity that sometimes accompanies books about great historical figures. It is a sincere work, filled with love and admiration for the greatest educator of our time.

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