

We Are All Paulo Freire

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If he were alive, Paulo Freire would be 100 years in 2021. Also in 2021, I say goodbye to the Managing Editor of TCI, after 10 years. In my research about curriculum policies, I do not support my ideas in the texts of Paulo Freire. However, it doesn't mean that Paulo Freire wasn't part of my life as a professor and Curriculum researcher. Thinking about this coincidence of events, I tried to analyze my relationship with Freire's thought.

In the post-structural and discursive theories with which I work, I question a certain essentialist approach of the subjects and knowledge, typical of critical curricular approaches, among them that of Paulo Freire. I argue that every curriculum is a political dispute for meaning. Binary statements, such as "dominant knowledge and popular knowledge", "dominant subject who defines curriculum and oppressed subject who are submitted to a selection, being able only to resist it", "historically constructed knowledge versus traditional knowledge", presuppose fixed positions in the political dispute. I argue that there were not subjects with fixed identities linked to each of the categories of knowledge. Differently, I argue that political antagonisms constitute subjects and identities (curriculum, knowledge, competences) and these antagonisms and identities change in the course of the disputes for the meaning of culture. In other words, curriculum is a product of a dispute to signify legitimate knowledge, competences, content. Curriculum is the dispute for the production of meaning itself, the political dispute itself for the production of culture.

In this perspective, it is not worth talking about introducing popular knowledge in school, but about disputes in the production of meanings in the school. This dispute does not precede the production of the curriculum: it is the very production of the curriculum. This dispute is not restricted to the school. It is linked to a whole social process that has the school as an important locus of power. In this case, Paulo Freire's thinking can be understood as one of the discourses that enters the dispute for the meaning of the curriculum and education more broadly.

Subjects are decentered, there are not full identities. Groups and projects in dispute are not predefined. Subjects, identities, groups and projects are effects of political articulations, they are constituted and changed in a political dispute. In these articulations, there are traces of histories, traditions and multiple processes of social identification – such as citizens, professors, researchers, teachers, men, women, blacks, whites, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, affiliated or not to social movements. All of them are translated and hybridized to the new processes of representation developed. All these articulations are precarious, unstable, ambiguous, contingent.

Nevertheless, how does an articulation constitute itself? How does the articulation among different demands take place in a given political context, in order to construct a discourse about what comes to be curriculum, education, quality of education? These are some of the questions I have been researching in curriculum policy. Within the limits of this presentation, I mention only Ernesto Laclau's theoretical notion: the closure of a discursive



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articulation is guided by the logic of equivalence (Laclau,1996). Usually the articulations, linked to the formation of political groups, are conceived according to an equality of purposes or conceptions or even identities. Laclau questions this perspective by proposing that equivalence (never equality) depends on antagonism to a difference expelled from the articulatory chain. This difference is an exterior against which all other differences included in discursive totality are antagonized and become equivalent, giving up their particularities.

In this process, a group is built. Some individuals remain together around contextual and contingent demands and drive others away from that same group. Sometimes we call this group as “our group”. In politics (even curriculum policy or any policy), we are always building this “our group” (we) against “the others”, the ones that are against us (them). In this antagonistic relationship “we” against “them”, antagonism is not due to previously constituted identities that are denied. The identifications of “who we are” and “who they are” are constituted by the antagonistic relationship. The identities in an antagonistic relationship are interdependent, they are established as a result of mutual opposition and this opposition is always constitutive: I can only say that something threatens a certain identity if at the same time I affirm the existence of that same identity. Affirming Western and Eastern identities in contemporary political dispute, for example, is not based on a set of characteristics common to different peoples inserted in each of these classifications. The construction of the meaning we confer on the East is a result, not necessary nor obligatory, of a discourse on the East produced in the West, and with its power in geo-political disputes. This discourse on the East makes equivalent multiple differences, often signified as the stranger, the enemy, “the outside ones”. From this perspective, the East is not represented as formed by identities that are not Western. The East is represented as an anti-West.

At this point of investigation on the political disputes of curriculum, marked by antagonism, I return to Paulo Freire and the politics in Brazil today. Some of the central clashes during the 2018 presidential election campaign developed around education. The criticism of gender policies, the proliferation of fake news related to sexuality policies in education and what is privileged in the curriculum were some of the moments of a discursive articulation that led Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency of the Republic. During this process, ultraconservative educational discourses identified these differences as associated with Paulo Freire's thinking. Attacking Paulo Freire has become one of the central movements in the elections and even now. In this interpretation, it is possible to represent politics as instituted by an antagonism between the pro-Bolsonaro and anti-Bolsonaro discursive articulations. As there are many articulations at the same time, it is also possible to identify a discursive chain anti-Paulo Freire and pro-Paulo Freire. In Education, if some (they) become anti-Paulo Freire, others (we) become pro-Paulo Freire, even if we were not working with the Freire’s theory or could be identified with such thinking before this moment.

And it was thus, in the political dispute, that people like me began to value Paulo Freire more, reread Paulo Freire, to cite Paulo Freire.

The force with which the pro-Bolsonaro movement built the representation of its enemy (Paulo Freire and us) in a given way, as well as the very representation of an antagonistic dispute, also constitutes us. I want to reiterate here that such representations of “them against us” are not just an antagonism to be situated on an outside. They are also constitutive. To the extent that we are inserted in this dispute, we are also constituting the other and we are being constituted in a given way. If all processes of signification are relational, such antagonistic discursive chains engender new and precarious meanings of who they are and who we are.

However, Laclau's theory of discourse not only highlights the logic of equivalence, it also theorizes about the logic of difference. Political movements remain in process, marked



by difference. The temporarily constructed equivalence among educational and curricular demands does not erase the differential movements that make impossible any discursive fullness, prevent the end of politics. Some articulations have secured an election, although they are not necessarily the articulations that make it possible to govern. New disputes are in process. At this moment, I argue an investment in a democratic political dispute in Brazil (Lopes, 2020). For this, it is necessary to invest radically in the deconstruction of the chains of antagonistic meaning that constitutes the devaluation of public education, a political dispute in favor of education and social justice. At this political moment, this radical investment is also a defense of Paulo Freire. Today, Paulo Freire no longer just means an educational thought of an internationally known researcher who has built a popular education project and a new way of thinking about literacy and the teacher/student relationship. Paulo Freire is a possible name for the democratic political dispute for the education in Brazil. To agree or disagree with Freire, to perform different readings of Paulo Freire – what he represented and what he represents in Brazil, in the world – to defend Paulo Freire is to insert himself in an articulatory chain that produces an emblematic discourse, the representation of a political dispute. Like the meme "Eu Paulo, tu Freires, ele não" (I Paulo, you Freire, not him)², widely disseminated on Brazilian social networks on Paulo Freire's 100th birthday, we can say that in today's Brazilian Education which is waging a political dispute in defense of democracy: "We are all Paulo Freire".

Notes

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² The expression "not him" appeared at the time of the presidential campaign, when different social movements organized to say that it would be possible to agree with any candidate, but Bolsonaro – not him, ever.

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