

Tilman Grammes

Paolo Freire and political education

Interview mit Lyu Na, Universität Hamburg, 4-12-2015

Interviewer:

Lyu Na (PhD student by stipendium of CSC/China Student Scholarship, CCNU Central China Normal University, Wuhan, China)

Lyu Na: Good morning/afternoon, Professor Grammes, I am so grateful for your guidance and great help for nearly a year. I'm very happy you can give me this opportunity to ask some questions about the famous Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. This interview will benefit for my research. Thank you very much. When did you begin to read Paulo Freire's writings?

Paolo Freire's books were the heroes in our youth and teacher student years in the 1970ies, the worldwide post 1968 movement period. That time, I had left my hometown, to study at the "Freie Universität Berlin", which meant the island of West-Berlin that time, surrounded by GDR. Together with books by Ivan Illich (Deschooling Society), the anti-paedagogy movement, and the rediscovery of Freudian-Marxist paedagoge Siegfried Bernfeld - Die Schule als Institution erzieht! – the school educates as institution itself!

Posters of Che Guevara and chairman Mao decorated our rooms that time, even from today's view this was more a Pop-culture event than a serious political movement. But that is perhaps, how youth is behaving.

What did not bother us secular socialist students that time was, that Freire called himself not only a Marxist, but a Roman Catholic at the same moment.

Lyu Na: Freire proposed "oppressor" and "the oppressed" in his classic work Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Could you please talk something about your understanding of these two concepts under the background of capitalism?

Freire's pedagogy was developed under circumstances of colonialism in the so called "Third World". Guess, for example, his practical work in the former Portuguese colonies such as Guinea-Bissau. I remember, When being a student in upper secondary school, having donated for the PAIGC, the anti-colonial liberation movement. Perhaps I gave two Deutsche Mark to the leaders of the student council of the school. To me, this meant a lot to be paid from my poor pocket money. The student council's leaflet also showed guns, which the PAIGC used to fight against the Portuguese oppressors. This reflects, that at that time I had no problem to indirectly support an armed movement, which makes me feel ashamed as a peace educator today. The true reason was, I did not know nearly anything about Guinea-Bissau in detail, as we were not be informed about in Geography or History lesson. Guinea-Bissau is thousands of kilometers away from Germany. The main reason was, that I was fascinated by the student council's leaders, which appeared so "cool" and as a role model for the shy young student. Thus, there appears some dialectics in the process: I voluntarily subjected to a practice (of donating), which I did not fully understand. Pedagogy of the oppressed?

Lyu Na: *What is included of "the oppressed" in Capitalist system?*

Is "capitalist system" the appropriate description? Or do we have a social market system? Is it up to the student, to decide about this?

In the so called "First world" states, at least in Germany, as far as I can tell, "the oppressed" were identified with "working class people" and their "hidden" culture by educational science. This discovery led to a critique of textbooks and teaching material content, where this working class culture and there everyday life was not represented at all in favor of a so called higher culture. This led to a switch from deficit to difference theory: the working class culture and language dialect was no longer seen as "deficit", but as an own culture of own rights and value. Education and curriculum should stop to alienate students from their own culture, and make them passive and feeling ashamed by doing so.

An important concept, and perhaps the most popularized concept from Freire's writings, became his critique of the so called "Bankiersmodell" (bankers model) of

knowledge transmission. Store as much of currently non-understandable knowledge in the heads of students for later use in the future. This teaching concept goes along with memorization. It is relevant in days of a global testing industry, which came to us after "PISA".

Lyu Na: *Paulo Freire hopes that arouse awareness of the oppressed through education, he proposed "conscientização". What is the meaning of this word in Germany? How do you understand this concept?*

"Conscientização" means "Bewußtsein" (*consciousness, awareness*) in German language, a concept put into the center of philosophy mainly by philosophers like Hegel or Marx. The Marxist paedagogy, influential in Germany in the post-1968ies, was the so called "Critical Theory" of the Frankfurt school: Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, Herbert Marcuse. They put the concept of "Entfremdung" (*alienation*) and of alienated consciousness, in the center of their critique of contemporary capitalist culture, which they saw inescapable determined by the "affluent society" and the alluring aesthetics of consumer goods. Department stores, advertising, mass media – all a kind of an-anesthetizing. This should cause a false consciousness, which is very difficult to contradict and to break up in order to initiate a process of emancipation.

Remember, we are speaking of West-Germany (FRG) here, only! In the socialist-democratic East Germany (GDR) Paulo Freire played no role. He did not visit, probably was not allowed to visit (?!) The reason might have been, that in socialism by definition oppression has disappeared. The GDR had a few migrant student population, from countries like Mozambique or Vietnam, but their schooling was not a success story and remained "hidden" until the wall came down in 1989/1990.

Lyu Na: *Paulo Freire believed that "education is politics". What do you think about this opinion from the view of citizenship education?*

From today's point of view, I disagree with Freire here. Education should be education, and politics should be politics. Do not mix up the spheres of society, but let them each follow their own logic. Dietrich Benner says: "The politician should not act

as educator in a society.”

The confusion results from a difficulty in translation here, probably. The English term “education” appears in German language and tradition in two words: “Erziehung” and “Bildung”. Erziehung is more reserved to kids and youth, who are for example not of age to vote (“Mündigkeit”). Adults need no education any more, as they should be able to speak for themselves and do no longer need a representative. Educating adults in this sense means to act in a paternalistic way. Now, the practical work of Freire as well as his theoretical reflections are mostly concerned with adults’ alphabetization.

Thus, in German language and tradition of educational philosophy, “education” in politics is strongly associated with indoctrination, propaganda and manipulation. This contradicts educational aims such as “Mündigkeit”, meaning to be able to speak with your own voice. So we prefer to speak about politische Bildung, which stresses the reflective moment in transmission of knowledge.

Lyu Na: *In your opinion, how should we use Freire’s education thoughts inspire the oppressed to take political action?*

Who is the “we” here? Today, we tend to speak about “empowerment”, a concept that mainly stems from vocational education and trade union educational concepts. This might represent, what Freire meant by “paedagogy of the oppressed”. Empowerment is a core aim of politische Bildung (political education) in Germany. As I always do (and you know), I cite the famous Beutelsbach consensus here, which celebrates his 40th anniversary in 2016. It gives three principles and criteria of good “Politische Bildung”:

For English version of Beutelsbach consensus see here, and it could be inserted here. We even should have a Chinese translation, done by whom?

www.lpb-bw.de/beutelsbacher-konsens.html:

Lyu Na: *Paulo Freire insisted people learn the word and the world through dialogue education in “cultural circles”. As far as I know, you worked in the high school as a*

political teacher in your early years. Did you use Freire's methods in your classroom?

Yes. But, it was not a regular classroom. It was a class for school drop outs which had left school without any examination at early age. So our first consideration was, we could not go into a regular school building with them, as not to cause aversion into these young adults. So we choose a Jugendfreizeitheim (*youth club*), where they used to spent their leisure time hours. We did team-teaching in the courses. I remember the dispute with my colleague (we were both still students), when conceptualizing the first lessons in politics. I proposed to introduce some core definitions of what politics is, firstly – the deductive way of teaching; my colleague insisted to ask the students by themselves, as we did later – the inductive way of learning. So, this was in some kind a Freirean approach, to work with, to value and to develop the concepts, the students bring to classroom from their everyday experience.

Lyu Na: Freire has been to Germany at 1970s and his classic book "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" was published in this period. According to your understanding, could you please tell something about the influence in Germany even Europe at that time?

Astonishing enough, the German translation "Pädagogik der Unterdrückten" (*pedagogy of the oppressed*) appeared in a Roman-catholic publishing house, the Kreuz-Verlag (Christian cross) in 1971.

As I stated before, the practical work and concept of Freire was developed in and provided for adult education. But in Germany, it became relevant for child and youth education at school as well. The relevance might be best described by two famous terms by the British curriculum theorist, Michael Apple: "the politics of official knowledge" and the "ideology in curriculum". In Germany, the liberation of the oppressed proceeded as a mostly state driven curriculum reform movement, replacing official knowledge by a more pluralistic and "open" knowledge culture, including working class people everyday knowledge and alternative forms of knowledge.

On the other hand, it was reform of "pädagogischer Bezug" (paedagogical relation):

the relationship between the petty bourgeois teacher and learner from lower social class changed, or even turned around/inverted: the teacher could learn from the student and the “alien” culture he or she brought to the more and more multicultural and multi-lingual classroom in the 1970ies and 1980ies. The mono-lingual approach of German school was broken, slowly.

The relation between teacher and student became more and more informal. Teacher authority was lessened intentionally. The teacher can learn from his student.

Lyu Na: Some scholars believe that Freire's educational thought developed in the last century, but, with times past, his methods have not be applied to today's society. Has Freire been forgotten in the 21st century?

Yes, in a way it is true to say so. But, there might be a renaissance of Freires' critiques. A core educational topic in Germany today is “inclusion”. This means far more than providing equal access to handicapped students. It means social inclusion, as living in poverty causes lower success at school. Other groups have to be “included” in education. There is the GLBT-student movement, the Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual-Transgender movement, making these groups visible in educational settings and taking them their own voice. This means, rewriting curriculum materials.

There are a lot of refugees** coming not only to Germany, but migration is the core topic of 21st century, caused by climate change and wars on water.

** In Hamburg classrooms, the percentage of students with migrational background is more than 50%. I found out, that in China a migrant student can mean a student from West China moving to Shanghai. In Germany, this would not count as migrant, because it is within the same nation an mostly same language. In Europe, a migrant is a person from a foreign country, only.

Lyu Na: As a citizenship education researcher, how do you evaluate the Citizenship Education thought of Paulo Freire? According your understanding, how the oppressed strive to their citizenship right?

Impulses from Freirean pedagogy, as well as from Illich, Bernfeld and others, encouraged a civil society movement. We did not know the later articles of Freire in the early 1970ies. They appeared in German translation under the title “der Lehrer ist politiker und künstler. Neue texte zur befreienden bildungsarbeit”* (The teacher as politician and artist. New essays on emancipatory educational work) not before 1981.

* All nouns in lower case letters is a critical and reform orientated spelling of that period: the abandonment of the differentiation between capital letters and lower case letters should make German language writing more easy for they disadvantaged students. Unfortunately, it did not facilitate the reading. So, as other reforms, this was left out after a few years. ☺

Lyu Na: *According to your opinion, what is the enlightenment of Paulo Freire's thought for nowadays?*

21st century might become dominated by conflicts between religion and states. Such global conflicts won't become more transparent in the digital age. Within the perceived complexity of the world, people tend to stick more and more to easy solutions and ideologies. The best remedy against fundamentalism of any kind is pluralism. And this implies let the students develop and reflect their own environment and culture instead of making them feel ashamed and humiliated. This kind of empowerment was the main concern of Paolo Freire, and it is even more relevant today in context of anti-rascist and post-colonial paedagogy, and in time of rising populist movement like PEGIDA – the Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes (*patriotic Europeans against islamization of the occident*), not only in the federal state of Saxonia.

Dear Na Lyu (I prefer the German sequence of given name first and family name second), thanks a lot for confronting me with my educational biography, and tracing me back into my early years. This dialogue, initiated by you in a true Freirean sense, intensifies my understanding of myself and my own biography. This is a kind of empowerment. It has been a pleasure to me. Thank you for this challenge.