

PAULO FREIRE IN GENEVA – A STORY

INTRODUCTION / POSITIONNING

Since we began to develop collaborative pedagogical art projects as the collective *microsillons* in 2006, the work of Paulo Freire has been a key reference for us. It's only years after reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*¹ for the first time that we found out that Freire spent ten years of his life in Geneva, the city where we developed most of our projects.

The many studies presenting Geneva as a capital of pedagogy seem to completely ignore this episode and are not acknowledging to work the Brazilian refugee did in this city between 1970 and 1980.

As artists, we began to investigate this *story*, with the idea that there is a form of urgency in reengaging the work of Freire today, with educators and art educators, and that getting a better understanding of the articulation between his work and Geneva (or Switzerland) could help us to invent ways to do so.

This document leans on our first investigations to present a summary of Freire's life in Geneva, illustrated with specific facts that we selected for their diversity and singularity more than for them being representative of the whole *story*.

We will also describe here the different sources that we identified to develop our *story*.

SOURCES AND APPROACH

We are approaching the sources with our position as artist-researchers willing to reengage Freire today, specifically in the Geneva context. We are willing, through our work, to find significant ideas for this reengagement and specific angles of reading rather than writing a state of the art history of the life of Freire between 1970 and 1980. To do so, we identified three main sources so far (we will soon continue our investigation for more documents, in getting in touch with former IDAC members, in visiting the Geneva University archives and in getting in touch with different foundations around Freire):

1 Freire, Paulo (2005) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated from the Portuguese by Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group. (Original work 1974).

- Freire's writings, in particular *Pedagogy of Hope : Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*² (in which he talks about his life and work in Geneva), *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau*³ (where he discusses his exchange with a country that he visited many times when living in Geneva), and a series of articles published between 1970 and 1980.
- Testimonies of people who met him in Geneva. In particular : Rosiska Darcy de Oliveira (writer, former president of the Brazilian Council for Women's rights), Miguel Darcy De Oliveira (author of *Citizens – Strengthening Global Civil Society*), Claudius Ceccon (cartoonist, coordinator of the CECIP – Centro de Criação de Imagem Popular in Rio), Marcos Arruda (economist), Jean Ziegler, Cristina Freire (Paulo Freire's daughter, who is still living in Geneva), Pierre Dominice (editor of *Freire-Illich, Pédagogie des opprimés, oppression de la pédagogie* for the IDAC and Honorary Professor of the Geneva University), Jimmie Durham (artist who was Freire's neighbor in Geneva and we founded an art school in Mexico based on his ideas and Illich's ones).
- The archives of the World Council of Churches, an international organization based in Geneva where Freire was working as a special consultant for its education office.

Those archives are the primary source we investigated the most so far⁴. We are still trying to imagine specific angles to tackle the many documents that are presented. We imagined a series of possible unchronological readings of the corpus, which could be based on different kind of documents:

- *Letters of friends and admirers*. Those documents are most of the time simply wishing Freire all the best in his life and work and show sympathy. There are sometimes written by very young people. The friendship dimension in those exchanges seems to play a very important role, sometimes visually translated in the object 'letter' itself.
- *Nostalgia and fetishism*. Through our research we are not trying to write an apologetic history but to critically tackle Freire's work

2 Freire, Paulo (1994), *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum.

3 Freire, Paulo (1978), *Pedagogy in process: the letters to Guinea-Bissau* (transl. by Carman St. John Hunter), New York: The Seabury Press.

4 Andrew J. Kirkendall, author of *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy* (2010), did a first investigation in those archives a few years ago and claims to be "the first scholar to have consulted it" (p. 4).

and to imagine contemporary reinterpretations of his work. Nevertheless, we cannot stand from being moved when finding hand written documents, telegraphs and very personal testimonies or when visiting the places linked to that history. From an artistic stand point, this nostalgia and this kind of fetishism could be something interesting to work with and to deconstruct.

- *Presence/Absence*. As we will discuss it later in this document, Freire spent a lot of his time, during those years, outside of Geneva. This is resulting to a lot of documents planning his trips or excusing him from being away and not being able to answer personally. Many letters are signed “Paulo Freire’s secretary”. This fact could be used as a metaphor in different ways (working locally/thinking globally, living in exile...).
- A last angle that could be a special interest regarding the *Intertwining HiStories* cluster in the UNESCO hits. Many documents are mentioning this organization, for which Freire was working in Chile and who was very involved in the worldwide discussion around education during the 1970’s.

Concerning the sources, we must finally note that, according to Paulo Freire (Pedagogy of Hope): “Few things from the Geneva files have survive”.

CHRONOLOGY

After developing for years methods to overcome illiteracy in Brazil – since 1947 in the Nord-East and on a larger scale under the patronage of the federal government since 1962 – Freire is imprisoned following the 1964 coup. He flees to Bolivia and then Chile (where he will write *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, work as a professor and be a consultant for the UNESCO), is a visiting professor at Harvard (1969-1970) and lands in Geneva, where he accept a position as special consultant in the newly founded Office of Education at the World Council of Churches (WCC). He sees this position as an opportunity to take part to the decolonizing process in several countries, considering an international organization Geneva to be an ideal place from which to work with Africa (Botswana, Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Mozambique, Tanzania, Cape Verde) or central and Latin America (Costa Rica, Argentina, Ecuador) in particular, but with other countries (India, Australia, New Zealand, USA...).

He imagines to play a real political role through his actions and write, in his World Council of Churches acceptance letter, quoting Fanon: “You must know

that I made a decision. My cause is the one of *The Wretched of the Earth*. You must know that I chose revolution.⁵

He will live in Geneva with his family until 1980, when he will go back to Brazil.

ELEMENTS OF PARTICULAR INTEREST

Rather than writing a complete and linear history of the life of Freire in Geneva, we are trying to identify elements of particular interest regarding our own artistic practice, regarding our will to address interconnected questions of social issues, gender, migration or (post)colonialism and, moreover, regarding the possible reengagement of his *praxis* today. We are presenting here five elements of particular interest that we are willing to investigate further.

1. FREIRE – ILLICH SEMINAR On 6 September 1974, the WCC organizes a seminar called “An invitation to conscientization and deschooling : a continuing conversation”. Paulo Freire is joined by Ivan Illich – who is visiting Geneva for the 50th anniversary of the Geneva International School – and Swiss professors (Michael Huberman and Heinrich Dauber).

Freire and Illich summarize their positions and a debate is taking place amongst the participants, in different languages. Freire disagrees with Illich on several points :

- For Freire, school is a subsystem of larger structures which must be transformed, as Illich is seeing school as a more autonomous system.
- Freire feels that Illich is mythologizing education when he extends his critic of school to all forms of education.
- Freire shows a faith in people as change agents that Illich doesn't share.

Illich says that he learned on that day, listening to Freire, that “If education transforms, it is granted the power to transform only because it maintains that which it transforms”.

They both agree on the idea that some stumbling blocks are necessary for education and that those blocks are so obvious that they are often forgotten. Therefore, Illich and Freire present themselves as “pilgrims of the obvious”, as a way to *demythologize conscientization* (see the *Risk* issue (vol. 11,

5 Translated from French.

n°1, 1975) around the seminar). A recording of the seminar was found and digitalized.

2. INTERNATIONAL ACTION & IDAC Freire travelled in more than 40 countries (see map) as consultant of the WCC Office of Education, for seminars, for workshops, for helping to set up education programs, for discussing with authorities. He would both with partners of projects sponsored by the WCC and with other partners. He developed an especially long collaboration with the Ministry of Education of Guinea-Bissau to fight against Portuguese colonialism. He would also sometimes work as an intermediary between governments or publish pedagogical documents to support alphabetization in different countries through popular education (see document: Adult Basic Education).

The degree of information available about those different projects is unequal and more investigation is needed to get a better sense of what the results of those different trips were. A key element must be added in the reflection here: the creation, in 1973, of the IDAC (Institut d'action culturelle) – a non-profit work collective – by Marcos Arruda, Claudius Ceccon, Miguel Darcy De Oliveira, Oliveira, Rosiska Darcy de Oliveria, Elza Freire and Paulo Freire (all Brazilian exiles in Geneva). The goals of the IDAC is:

- to research and engage in projects using conscientization as a tool for social change (with focus on helping the “Third-World”, developing a political pedagogy, working toward to liberation of women and developing new forms of political action in the highly industrialized countries)
- to organize seminars and working groups,
- to publish documents.

Paulo Freire is the first director of the Institute. The links between the actions officially run by the WCC and the self-organized IDAC work is yet to be studied. A key element in the IDAC publication is the cartoon production of Claudius Ceccon, which operates as an illustration of Freire's writing.

3. LOOKING AT SWITZERLAND On several instances, Freire is commenting the Swiss context and dialoging with local players. Some letters in the WCC archives contain information completing what Freire writes in *Pedagogy of autonomy*.

- He talks about the social situation and the struggle of workers, in particular migrant ones. In the early 1970's, he meets, in Switzerland and Italy,

representative of the Italian worker fighting for a “50 hours” working week. He also mentions the construction strikes taking place in Geneva in 1974. Around that time, he meets Spanish workers developing in Geneva an alternative school for their children (which they attended in addition to the official Swiss school), because they felt the Swiss school was not offering them a correct political education.

- He is commenting the Swiss school system through an anecdote about the son of his friend Claudius Ceccon. One day, the young Flávio comes back from school sad and discouraged. His teacher had torn apart one of his drawings. His father meets her to discuss the case. She praises Flávio, his talent and autonomy. Then, she proudly shows him a series of almost identical cats realized by the pupils from the observation of a statuette. She explains, that copy is a way to avoid “terrifying situations for the children” where they must choose and create. Therefore, she couldn’t accept Flávio’s cat, which had “impossible colors”. Freire presents this anecdote as a metaphor of school system as a whole, a system fearing liberty, creation, adventure, risk and leaving no space for transformation.
- In *Pedagogy of Hope*, he talks about the Swiss bus timetable, bringing a performative element in the comparison between cultures ; “*We have a different way to ‘dance’ in our structure of thinking*” he says.

4. PERSONAL EXCHANGES Aside from the official projects organized by the WCC, personal exchanges seemed to have played a key role in the spreading of his work to specific relays. In the WCC archives, many letters can be found of people all around the world presenting him specific problems, asking him for advice or simply showing their admiration for his work. Most of the time, those letters were answered either personally or by a secretary and often, copies of articles and books were sent in return. Among that correspondence, he received letters from American feminists women criticizing the lack of specific address to gender issues in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire explains how those letters changed the way he would formulate his writing from that moment.

Some in-person meetings – of very different kind – also occurred in Geneva, among which:

- Regular meetings with South-African people, of black or white skin. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is forbidden in South Africa and Freire would read its content to his

guest before they are flying back to their country. He explains how deeply he is touched by the Apartheid and is referring to Fannon and Memmi as resources for the struggle against this regime.

- An encounter with Jean Ziegler, teacher at the Geneva University, of whom work he is showing admiration. Ziegler will use his diplomatic suitcase to bring the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* manuscript to Freire's editor in Brazil.
- A culinary meeting with le Chef of Le Portugais restaurant. We are still looking for traces of Freire in Geneva – both in discourses and action and in the everyday. In *Le Portugais*, one can still read today in the menu, next to "Feijoada Brasileira": "dish prepared as a tribute to our friend Paulo Freire, famous Brazilian pedagogue, who personally cooked it for the first time in our restaurant in 1974".