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Special issue: The legacy of Paulo Freire. Contemporary reflections on participatory communication and civil society development in Brazil and beyond

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Abstract

This text works as an introduction for the special issue “The legacy of Paulo Freire. Contemporary reflections on participatory communication and civil society development in Brazil and beyond”. The text outlines the contribution that each of the six articles constituting this issue makes, examining how they state the relevance of Paulo Freire’s ideas for the development and understanding of a notion of participatory communication and the articulation of bottom-up development processes. In addition, each contribution looks at the significance that the legacy of Paulo Freire has for contemporary debates about politics not only in Brazil, but also in other settings.

Keywords

Paulo Freire, Brazil, participatory communication, civil society, development

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Brazil has a strong legacy in the field of participatory communication and articulation of bottom-up development processes. Many innovative experiences and key conceptual foundations that have enriched and informed this field in Latin America and beyond have strong Brazilian roots. A reference of seminal importance to the field has been Paulo Freire, whose liberating pedagogy and principles of dialogic communication have influenced generations of educators, activists, movements and governments across the world. In a controversial move, the current government in Brazil has explicitly declared its intention to erase any trace of Freire's pedagogy from any policy and practice in the country. It sparks the question: what is so dangerous about Freire's ideas?

This special issue explores this question in articulation with another one that seeks to examine how relevant –beyond the borders of pedagogical fields– are his ideas for Brazil as well as other settings where social and political perspectives clash. This issue is an outcome of a seminar held at Loughborough University London, in June 2019, where around 30 participants concluded that the ideas of Paulo Freire are still alive and kicking but confronted with new and transformed challenges. The collection of articles here suggests that the danger of Freire's ideas emerge from their perspective upon society, their inherent vision of change, and, in particular, from the methods Freire developed in order to build a just society of emancipated and equal members.

The special issue consists of six articles. They place the debate about Freire's ideas in the context of development and social change, populism, polarization, but also of resistance. In this sense, the debate around the Brazilian case is illustrative of a larger historical framework. How Freire's ideas can be expanded, re-written –as he might have proposed– under the experience of current times of such asymmetrical power?

In the first article, Suzina and Tufte discuss Freire's vision of development and how his ontological call along with his proposed methodology of liberating pedagogy has had seminal influence upon agents of change as well as on a broader array of humanities and social sciences. This article outlines how the remaining pieces engage with Freire's aspirations of change. It is followed by Cicilia Peruzzo's contribution, which presents and discusses Freire's concepts. Drawing on her large experience in the field, Peruzzo organizes them around five principles of participatory communication –Communication as dialogue, The human being as the subject, Communication as a practice for freedom, Connection to context, and Social transformation– based on the pillars of non-formal education and the idea of change as a historical and relational process.

The Brazilian history in the last century has seen important developments in civil society organization, which combined cycles of latency with strong picks of contestation, such as the fight against the military dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s as well as the mass mobilizations and multiple social movements for democracy, popular education, land reform and human rights in the 1980s. Many other movements mobilized against the corrupt President Collor in the early 1990s. In the past decade, we have seen diverse civil society driven initiatives, from

both left and right, fighting corruption and lack of accountability, critiquing deficiencies in public services and government's lack of social responsibility.

Today, however, the space for civil society to speak and act is rapidly shrinking. Not only nostalgic discourses of law and order, but political nominations, national policies and many behaviours are reconnecting with the times of Brazil's military dictatorship. Silvio Waisbord explores the significance of Freire's arguments as well as the limitations of purely dialogic strategies within broader discussions about how to confront authoritarianism. He looks at Freire's communicative politics in the context of populism, to propose then some lessons for communication scholarship and practice.

Understanding the current situation requires nonetheless a comprehensive analysis of participatory processes expressing right-wing perspectives. Examining the viewpoints of Brazilian right-wing activists, Fanny Vrydagh and César Jiménez-Martínez discuss limits and developments of Freire's theory considering class constraints, media and technological evolutions, as well as the emergent polarization in the form of barriers to dialogue. Relatedly, Helton Levy asks if participatory practices can lead to conservative or even authoritarian ideologies. He explores the emergence of politicized "grammars of contestation" in digital media in relation to community development and peripheral pluralism.

Finally, Raquel Paiva also draws on a large experience in the field of community communication to explore the roots of Freire's thinking in the development of her concept of "communities of affects". She highlights the place of the sensible and the collective in his perspective of social change.

In a way, this special issue revisits some of the foundational principles of participatory communication that has informed communication for social change as a field of theory and practice. Based on Freirean principles, the field of communication for social change pursues community development, common ground and linking groups together in pursuit of social justice, economic inclusion and political participation for all. How do you do that when the common ground is pushed to the fringes as is the case when erasing Freire from policy and practice in Brazil?

Whilst the articles forming this special issue focus on contemporary debates about Brazil, we are convinced that they contribute to broader discussions about communication and social change. Paulo Freire is one of the most well-known Brazilian intellectuals around the world, and his ideas have been highly influential in broad sectors of the humanities and social sciences. A critical engagement with Freire's thought in the current context allows us not only to understand why the current Brazilian authorities are so fearful of his philosophy, but also contributes to update and advance discussions in other settings, where increasing polarization, populist and nationalist tendencies, as well as mistrust towards the political class and the established media are becoming prevalent. As this collection of articles demonstrates, Paulo Freire's ideas continue to be relevant, perhaps even more than ever before.

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For two days, around 30 scholars from 10 countries discussed different aspects of Freire's works. The depth of the debates is partially registered in this issue, and also in the article 'Qual a mensagem de Paulo Freire para os dias atuais? Diálogos sobre a relevância do pensamento de Freire para entender o Brasil hoje' published in n.11 of *Revista Internacional de Comunicación y Desarrollo*. Another special issue is in preparation to be published in December 2020 by Commons, *Revista de Comunicación y Ciudadanía Digital*. We thank the publishers for providing a platform for these reflections.

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