**Paulo Freire, Critical Theory and Ireland[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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From the first paragraph of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* two things are clear.

This is going to be a difficult read;

There is a deeply expressed conviction that the aim of living is to be more human, Freire calls it humanization.

I first came across Paulo Freire in 1973 when I was reading Gustavo Gutierrez (1973) *A Theology of Liberation*. And this presentation of Freire’s work in a theology text is a key insight into how Freire was perceived in Ireland. Five years later I was reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and trying to convince Jack Mezirow (unsuccessfully) that theology was one large access route into Freire’s thinking. Freire’s emphasis on the importance of faith, hope, love; the resonance that the word and speaking the word had from the bible and so on should have made Freire’s work an easily adopted philosophy for adult education in Ireland – where the Church made a long fought attempt to control education and adult education and higher education. But other events prevented that access route. Irish religion was more interested in an amalgam of older pre-christian practices to do with holy wells, banished serpents, and imported practices concerning processions, devotions and authoritarian bishops. Irish thinking was never a Bible based one and so the prophets, those radical Hebrew critics speaking truth to power, their voices fell on deaf ears too. Access could only be made to Freire’s work through multiple routes.

Five years later I went to study with Freire for a semester course in Boston.

The main access routes into Freire’s work (here Mezirow was right) were the writings of Hegel, Marx and other critical social theorists such as Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Lukács and Rosa Luxemburg, Simone de Beauvoir and Franz Fanon all formed a set of allies on whom Freire relied for important ideas. It is this that makes Freire difficult to apply because these are complicated ideas that he applies to South America.

And again a third lens, because parts of *pedagogy* are more like poetry than critical theory it has a tendency to confuse while at another level demanding that the reader engage with these revolutionary ideas from multiple perspectives.

We are fortunate to practice in this field of adult education and research while these ideas were being thought through in the following decades 1970 to his death in 1997. I think it is fair to say that this is the most significant theory of adult education. It offers the possibility of revolutionary change through education from a society that is unfair and unequal to a more human way of living together – as Dewey called it ‘democracy is a name for a way of life of free and enriching communication’ (Dewey, 1954, p. 148).

While Freire’s work got some traction in Ireland while it was adapted and adopted and explored another story was unfolding. The first OECD report on Ireland was published in 1965 *Investment in Education* that began the consistent push to make Irish education more responsive to the needs of the economy. Thought many important innovations followed immediately (Regional Technical Colleges, and free secondary education) there has been a relentless push to reduce education and learning to skills, and align the education system with the market. Today this continues relentlessly. Neoliberal economics and its allies austerity and managerialism rule. Universities are in danger of becoming more responsive to market forces and league tables than in forging a democracy of critical and engaged citizens.

And now along with a number of other countries and I refer to Greece in particular we are dire circumstances and what we need more than ever is an analysis of where we are now and an ability to teach people so see clearly how society really is and how it operates in the interests of the few and keeps lower social groups paying for the folly and corruption of the multinational institutions whether it is the banking system, land developers or multinational tax evaders. In *Daring to Dream* Ana Maria Freire says that the neoliberal economy

Speaks about the need for unemployment, for poverty, for inequality. I feel it is our duty to fight against such fatalistic mechanical forms of comprehending history…if we allow ourselves to fall for the trickery of neoliberal economic discourses, which affirm realities of homelessness and poverty as inevitable, then opposition for change becomes invisible, and our role in fostering change becomes absent.

(Freire, 2007, p. 4)

The neoliberal culture and economics wants to define education by reducing it to teaching the kind of learning and researching the kind of knowledge that is useful not just for work skills but that affirms and supports the status quo. The study of austerity is rejected as too many busy themselves with the race for work and the ways in which public good is underfunded and privatised. The market will provide. One outcome of the recent collapse of the famous Celtic Tiger is that the markets are feral, they demands that the state withdraw from making markets subject to democratic accountability except when the market crashes. Austerity is a relentless transfer of money from one social class to another higher up the social class scale. Travellers, community development and the disability sector were all demolished like no other. And all the while ‘our’ multi-nationals received tax-breaks and sweet heart deals from a succession of right wing governments. I remember well the Department of Education took me aside and told me in no uncertain terms these were dangerous ideas and were unacceptable.

Paulo Freire, if he were here, would not comment on any of this because he would claim not to know enough of our situation. But he would set about teaching people how to understand and change their world and see society the way it actually is. Whether it is the economy or race (as Antonia) or gender (as Brid does) or the environment the task remains to be completed (it is always, like history, in process). The task continues to be to move peoples’ awareness from submerged and uncritical frames of reference to take critical actions that will make the world more fair and caring.

In this very short moment two things are incomplete in our work of critical consciousness. Again and again we need to do what Freire did so well: latch on the best thinking that is available now….Pikitty, Giroux, Chomsky, Habermas, Nussbaum, Nancy Fraser, Stiglitz as we borrow heavily from other disciplines, like Freire and make these current analyses serve our present understanding.

The second and final challenge concerning Freire is to resist and challenge the constant dumbing down of his analysis and his pedagogy. I do not believe Freire wanted to be a facilitator as long as it hinted in any way at a neutral position. He situated the teacher on the side of critical pedagogy. There is so much yet to do.

Praxis is the most dummed down concept and emerges certainly here in Ireland too as a kind of watered down fudging fo the boundaries between teacher and student. Praxis is a most radical deconstruction and re-thinking of one of the great treasures of Western philosophy: The dualisms:

of mind and body,

of nature and nurture,

of natural v man made global warning;

of teacher student;

of subject and object.

In his reconfiguring of these dualisms he reminds me of Seamus Heaney our Nobel Prize winner who inhabited an in-between space. He filled it with possibilities. He occupied the space in-between North and South in Ireland; between Protestant and Catholic; between Irish and British (and indeed a broader global world) – he would have loved to be today in-between American and European Adult Education. He found a space between the chants and rhetoric of each polarity and saw the possibilities of the view from in-between.

For example, in *Terminus* he describes life in his childhood home;

Two buckets were easier carried than one.

I grew up in between.

(Heaney, 1998, p. 295)

And again in *Mossbawn 1 Sunlight* referring to baking scones in the kitchen as a child;

Here is a space

Again, the scone rising

To the tick of two clocks.

(Heaney, 1998, p. 94)

My own hope is that we will not continue to borrow from Freire and not deliver the radical potential of his work. That educators may see themselves as in-between workers between students and the potential they dream about realizing. That education would not be implicated in the reproduction of inequality and divisions of wealth and that education would make it easier to be radical in this neo-liberal world.

As regards Ireland and the project of adult education there is unfinished business, more learning and as great a need for adult education as ever. These may for a reasonable agenda of topics to be addressed and about which there is need for learning. We do need to learn our way out of violence in all its forms and in all its locations from family to society. Child abuse, misogony are unsolved social problems as are emigration, unemployment, ethics in economic life, environmental disasters now looking possible, a neoliberal state defining education and learning in purely utilitarian and functional terms, the threats to higher education from the state and from managerialism within. Only a right to learn and to education that is lifelong will suffice.

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1. Paper delivered in response to Antonia Darder, Paulo Freire and the Politics of Literacy: The struggle for a revolutionary praxis of adult education. Keynote at the 8th triennial European Research Conference (ESREA) at Maynooth University (September 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)