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Analyses in Language and Literacy

Edited by Sandro R. Barros and Luciana C. de Oliveira



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"The People" Lost in Translation

Samuel D. Rocha

Eu sou na minha fé [I am in my faith].

Paulo Freire

In his preface dated Autumn 1968, written from Santiago, Chile, Paulo Freire remarks that his book for radicals, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, may only be read to the end by Marxists and Christians. Sadly, for the monolingual English-speaking world, and all those whose translations were based on the English translation, no one has ever read the book to its original end. Not even Marxists and Christians.

I am a Christian, not a Marxist. In this prefatory note, I will explain why those who have only read Freire in English, including Marxists and Christians, have, in fact, never read his book to the end. I will also introduce the English-speaking world to a part of the lost ending of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* through its main article of faith: the people.

"Amar" means "to love" in Portuguese and Spanish. It is the final word Freire wrote by hand in blue ink in *Pedagogia do Oprimido*. "Menos difícil amar" means "less difficult to love" in Brazilian Portuguese. They are the final three words that Freire's hand wrote in his famous book. The final eight words are "um mundo em que seja menos difícil amar" that means "a world where it is less difficult to love."

These words have all been lost to the Anglophone world because of a translation that omitted the final five full paragraphs. To this day, there is great resistance to correcting this simple but profound literary mistake. The final sentence reads as follows in its entirety: "Nossa fé nos homens e na criação de um mundo em que seja menos difícil amar." This translates to mean: "Our faith in people and in the creation of a world where it is less difficult to love."

The lost final paragraph of Freire's *Pedagogia do Oprimido* reads as follows in full: "Se nada ficar destas paginas, algo, pelo menos, esperamos que permaneça: nossa confiança no povo. Nossa fé nos homens e na criação de um mundo em que seja menos difícil amar." In English, this says: "If nothing remains of these pages, we hope something, albeit small, remains: Our confidence in the people.

Our faith in people and in the creation of a world where it is less difficult to love."

Listen to it again, in English. Imagine Freire speaking these words in his Brazilian accent to you, by name, after reading every page of his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to you in a fictional complete translation, like a bedtime storybook: "If nothing remains of these pages, we hope something, albeit small, remains: Our confidence in the people. Our faith in people and in the creation of a world where it is less difficult to love."

Freire here reduces his book down to a single element: the people. He is willing to let the rest go, to empty himself, to separate the chaff from the wheat. He is willing to purify his book in fire, like gold, trusting that "something, albeit small" will remain and endure. Freire ends his most famous book with a wish, a prayer, a hope, a longing for "something, albeit small," a tiny remnant. "If nothing remains of these pages ..." It is especially poignant to think of this in light of the reality that these very words themselves did not survive translation into English which popularized and globalized the book from its distinctly South American context.

What is this "something, albeit small" that Freire hopes will survive the death of his own ideas and authorship? "Our confidence in the people. Our faith in people and in the creation of a world where it is less difficult to love." Freire places his confidence and faith in "the people"—*el pueblo*, in Spanish—a theological and spiritual expression that is commonly used in the Liberation Theology of Latin America which Freire prefigured and took part in. Theologically, the expression is short for "the people of God"—*el pueblo de Dios*, in Spanish. This is not a purely sociological expression for a social plurality or group. It conceals an even deeper meaning of "the people of God": *vox populi, vox Dei*, in Latin—the voice of the people is the voice of God. We, the people, are Christ's hands and feet, the body of Christ is the universal Church, the communion of saints. Where two or more are gathered...

Freire puts his confidence and faith in "the people" because there, in the voice of the people, he finds the voice of God, just as in the face of the person he sees the face of Christ, his friend and comrade. His work with the Brazilian people was precisely dedicated to the ontological problem of their voicelessness, an illiteracy that is not alphabetic but, more deeply, spiritual poverty. Material poverty acquires its moral harm and violence by its spiritual effects, robbing people of their voice and vocation and even their very personhood, inverting their being as active subjects with predicates into passive and dead objects, archiving them in a perverse banking concept of education, one of many instruments that threaten the people, that make them be less rather than their true vocation to "ser mais," to be more.

It is too easy to forget that the colonial enslavement of African people was practiced in Brazil at a higher rate than any other place in the Iberian Union

and the abolition of slavery in Brazil was the latest date in all of the Americas. Without this context of distinctly Brazilian anti-Blackness, it is difficult to appreciate the full sum of Freire's efforts. Freire does not teach the people to read the word and the world from the outside; he first and foremost sends them to find their inner teacher, their conscience, their judgment, their freedom. Conversely, the people teach Freire to have faith in their voice as the voice of the Divine word, the *logos*, which creates and renews the face of the earth. While the work begins in his native Brazil, he visits Africa, the USA, and Europe and always finds its North Star in the people.

"If nothing remains of these pages," Freire repeats, "we hope something, albeit small, remains: Our confidence in the people. Our faith in people..." Confidence and faith are forms of trust and belief; they are bonds born of love. To trust in something is to believe what you may not yet know, to seek and yearn for "something, albeit small." It is to say that even if everything else fails and goes wrong and does not work out, even if the mountains fall and the hills turn to dust, "we hope something, albeit small remains." To have faith despite it all, to belief in the face of trial, to listen for the voice of God in the people, even when they are denied their true voice, to find the beloved here and now, today—not out there, somewhere else, tomorrow, or long ago. The kingdom of God is always already at hand in the love offered through communion with and of the people.

The kingdom of heaven, the people of God, the body of Christ: These are expressions of an article of faith for Freire embedded in the pages of his book that he hopes will survive the apocalypse of history. My own faith has been tested since, too, as we have seen. Freire's own original expression of hope did not survive, but that means that I must share the good news of this Freirean hope and trust, as he did. I must repent of my disbelief and belief that it will endure and live forever and ever, unto the ages of ages, amen. Though the mountains may fall and the hills turn to dust, the love of the Lord will stand. Where do we find Divine love, a love supreme? In the people, always with *el pueblo*.

But this is not where Freire's prayer ends. He goes on to add to his "something, albeit small" hope: "Our faith ... in the creation of a world where it is less difficult to love." Here the people of God, the voice of God, and above all those who are robbed of the *logos* of their word, do not speak into nothingness or a vacuum. The people are never wordless or worldless. There is a world for Freire where the Divine word dwells and abides and delights: *Sic Deus dilexit mundum*, in Latin—For God so loved (or delighted in) the world. This world is not only the natural or physical nor the planetary or cosmic world, but, more radically, it is a fragile world that must be continually created and recreated by the people whose word and voice names and creates it anew. The world is always new and in need of renewal.

Just as the people are the people of God, the world this word and voice creates is a better world because it is a world where "it is less difficult to love." One of

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the words Freire uses in Portuguese to describe the people who are oppressed and robbed of their word is "desamados" which means "the unloved ones." For Freire, oppression is about power, yes, but his sense of power is ultimately a matter of love-power. Those who are robbed of their voice by oppressive force are not merely coerced by abstract political power: they are denied love, they are unloved. A better world for Freire is a world where loving is less difficult, where the unloved are fewer, where it is harder to suffer the ultimate harm of being unloved.

Freire's world is fragile and in that sense in need of creative love, which creates and recreates it, but this world's fragility is also to be found in its capacity to be made in ways that are better or worse. Again: The kingdom of God and the voice of the people of God are not abstract and distant for Freire. In the same way, the creation of "a world where it is less difficult to love" is more than descriptive. It is ethical; it is amorous; it is political; it is theological.

There is a part of chapter three, on the banking concept of education, where Freire shares the insight of a Chilean member of one of his "círculos de cultura"—"cultural circles," a pedagogical approach we read more about in *Educação Como Prática de la Liberdade, Education as the Practice of Freedom*. This Chilean rural person, uneducated by the standards of the banking concept, notes the anthropological and cultural relationship between the people and the world. Lacking this anthropology, he notes, we may still have a natural world of trees, animals, rivers, and stars, but "faltaria quem dissesse isto é mundo"—"someone who would say 'this is the world' would be missing." And without this word and voice of the people "faltaria a consciência do mundo que, necessariamente, implica o mundo da consciência"—"the conscience of the world would be missing which, necessarily implies the world of conscience." For Freire, the world is not a Romantic primal and natural object, animated by an abstract Divine force. Freire's sense of world is a folk world, a world with a conscience and the world of the conscience, the ethical place where the people create and recreate—or destroy—the world.

What does it mean for something to be "less difficult"? Something less difficult remains difficult, but only becomes less so. In this world that Freire hopes for the people to create, it is still difficult to love but it is only less difficult than it is now. Freire does not seek a utopia in the sense of a pure revolutionary place that cannot exist but, instead, he humbly puts his faith in a more realistic and immanent "world where it is less difficult to love." Freire's revolution is a gradual conversion; like the heart, it falls in love by degrees and in stages. The faith placed in "the creation of a world where it is less difficult to love" is not passive worship to a deified or pantheistic nature. On the contrary, it is a repetition of trust in the people to create this world through their voice, their word, their Divine *logos*. Why did Freire single out Marxists and Christians as the ones who would read his book to the end? Clearly, it is because, despite their many differences,

these two schools of thought share a common faith in the people. There are surely many others just as there are Marxists and Christians who have abandoned this article of faith in favor of more exclusive or sublime options.

Many today in educational research—who have yet to read Freire's own words in full—seem to prefer a less anthropological Romantic idea of the world as a natural object because of the failure of the people to create a world where it is less difficult to love. This is unfortunate. The fallibility of the people is not a good reason to abandon hope in them. Freire does not promise us this world just as he does not give the people their own word from without, from the outside. No. Freire's project is not a guaranteed outcome or a best practice. It is a dream, a wish, a prayer, a desire, a longing, a deep and everlasting faith in the people and their capacity to create a world where loving is still difficult but is only less difficult: "Menos difícil amar." "Less difficult to love."