

## Paulo Freire: a thinker of social phenomena

### ARTICLE

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#### Abstract

The present article aimed to identify in three of Paulo Freire's main works the statements present in his discourse that denounce thinking about society and its social phenomena beyond education. A bibliographical study was conducted based on the analysis of "The Archaeology of Knowledge". The results revealed that the aforementioned author did not think about education away from the reality of individuals and social injustices. The conclusion obtained, among others, is that, in this author's discourse, the statements reveal his concern with social phenomena that victimize and exclude individuals, referred to as "the wretched of the world", "the condemned of the Earth" and "the excluded".

**Keywords:** Paulo Freire. Thinker. Society. Social phenomena.

#### Paulo Freire: um pensador dos fenômenos sociais

#### Resumo

O presente artigo objetivou identificar em três das principais obras de Paulo Freire os enunciados presentes em seu discurso que denunciam o pensar a sociedade e seus fenômenos sociais para além da educação. Realizou-se um estudo bibliográfico, a partir da análise de "Arqueologia do Saber". Os resultados constataram que o sobreditos autor não pensava a educação afastada da realidade dos sujeitos e das injustiças sociais. A conclusão obtida, entre outras, é que, no discurso desse autor, os enunciados revelam sua preocupação com fenômenos sociais que vitimizam e excluem os sujeitos, denominados "esfarrapados do mundo", "condenados da Terra" e "excluídos".

**Palavras-chave:** Paulo Freire. Pensador. Sociedade. Fenômenos sociais.

### 1 Introduction

The challenge of this article is to present the arguments that highlight, in certain works by Paulo Freire, the Patron of Brazilian Education<sup>1</sup>, analyses of Brazil's social reality in light of education, across different historical contexts. Paulo Freire, when

<sup>1</sup> [Law No. 12,612](#) of April 13, 2012.

reflecting on the issue of the educational phenomenon within the context of learners' lived realities, develops a discourse that constitutes a particular discursive formation within the field of the Sociology of Education.

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Were he alive today, Paulo Freire would have turned 103 in May 2024. Born in Recife, in the state of Pernambuco, in 1921, with a degree in Law, he received more than 30 honorary doctorates (*Doctor Honoris Causa*) from both Brazilian and international universities. Paulo Freire is also globally renowned in the field of the human and social sciences for his ideas and reflections on education. During his childhood, Freire and his family went through economic hardships that deprived them of adequate nutrition, which hindered his studies (Freire, 2010).

Beyond his experience with economic struggles in childhood, Professor Paulo Freire lived among marginalized populations in Recife while working in the Education and Culture Division of the *Serviço Social da Indústria* (SESI) (Freire, 2011)<sup>2</sup>. His experience at SESI was crucial for him to reflect on the phenomenon of education, grounded in the social realities and contexts of individuals. Such realities and contexts involve economic and cultural issues that affect the survival of millions of Brazilians who face difficulties in securing food, housing, education for their children, employment, and income, as well as studying or remaining in school. Hence, in his works, one can observe a certain social analysis that directly influences the educational phenomenon.

The eminent Patron of Brazilian Education, in his reflections on the educational phenomenon, always analyzed it in connection with learners' social realities. His thought is also grounded in historical-dialectical materialism, one of the major currents of classical sociological thought developed by Karl Marx (1818 to 1893). Paulo Freire emerged on the national scene in 1958, when he and his team took part in the Second National Congress on Adult Education, held from July 9 to 16, in the state of Rio de Janeiro. On that occasion, they presented a document titled *Educação de adultos e as populações marginais*:

<sup>2</sup> For a deeper understanding of Paulo Freire's biography, we suggest consulting, among others, *Paulo Freire: vida e obra*, organized by Ana Inês Souza and published by Expressão Popular in 2010.

*mocambos*. It marked the emergence of new pedagogical ideas, as educators from across the country were engaged in developing new methods for adult literacy (Paiva, 2003). According to Silva (2018), it is in this document that the early foundations of the author's social thought on education become evident.

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In the *Mocambos* document, Paulo Freire and his team presented the concept of education as a process that contributes to forming human beings for life in society, in connection with their historical and social realities, and that goes far beyond the mere act of transmitting knowledge or schooling. The author states: "The educational process should not be a total 'stranger' to the reality to which it is applied. Even when transplanted, it must adjust to the new reality, take on its colors, its tones, in order to be authentic" (Freire, 1958, p. 1).

Throughout his career as a thinker of education, Paulo Freire wrote more than 30 books and delivered countless lectures and interviews, always recognized as a thinker whose reflections centered on the educational phenomenon. Therefore, if his reflections bring forth a strong social and anthropological discussion, why not regard him as a sociologist of education, since his ideas are rooted in class struggle? That is, a sociology inspired by the thought of Karl Marx (1818 to 1883)<sup>3</sup>, in which the elite and the working class vie for power. Within the relations of production in a capitalist society, the former, owners of the means of production, maintain their privileges by purchasing the labor power of the working class, in a context of injustice and inequality. Influenced by Marxian thought, Paulo Freire's thesis was constructed with reference to the real living conditions of working-class individuals, the unemployed, in sum, those who make up the oppressed layers of our society.

Given this evidence, the present article aims to identify, within Paulo Freire's discourse, the statements that reveal his reflections on society and its social phenomena beyond education itself. Statements are the basic units of discourse, as Foucault (2000)

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that education is not a dominant subject in the work of Karl Marx. Among the classics of Sociology (Marx, Durkheim, and Weber), only Durkheim produced significant works in which education is central to his analyses (Lopes, 2012).

asserts in his work *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Every discourse, in one way or another, inevitably contains statements within it. For this purpose, we draw on *Archaeological Discourse Analysis (ADA)*, a method that enables the identification of the network of statements present in the materiality of discourse and their subsequent description.

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Among the works initially selected to form the bibliographic corpus, two stand out: *Education as the Practice of Freedom*, an essay originally written during Paulo Freire's exile in 1965 and published in 1967 by Paz e Terra, which presents "one of his first reflections and theoretical systematizations on the events related to Brazilian literacy in the years prior to 1964" (Scocuglia, 2015, p. 15); and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the author's classic work, which "represents a step forward toward the formulation of a pedagogy nourished by the values, needs, and emancipatory interests of the subaltern, of the oppressed" (Scocuglia, 2015, p. 15).

Based on these two works, the study sought to identify discursive formations, that is, the statements that give rise to a given object (Foucault, 2000). As Foucault (2008, p. 89) affirms, "no book can exist by itself; it is always in a relation of support and dependence upon others." Therefore, other works by Paulo Freire reinforce his discourse within the field of Sociology, since for the author, education cannot exist apart from the social reality of its subjects (Pitano, 2017), who, from the very beginning of his engagement in education, were the excluded or, as he puts it, the oppressed, the "wretched of the earth" (Freire, 2002).

These works constitute the empirical field in which a given discursive formation was observed, allowing the identification of a **corresponding space** or, as Foucault (2000, p. 104) asserts, "a set of domains in which such objects can appear and in which such relations can be identified." Regarding the referential, Foucault explains:

[...] it is not made up of 'things', of 'facts', of 'realities', or of 'beings', but of laws of possibility, of rules of existence for the objects that are named, designated, or described therein, for the relations that are affirmed or denied therein. The referential of the statement constitutes the place, the condition, the field of emergence, the instance of differentiation of individuals or objects, of states of things and relations that are set in play by the statement itself; it defines the possibilities of appearance and delimitation of that which gives the sentence its meaning, and the proposition its truth value (Foucault, 2000, p. 104).

Therefore, in accordance with Silva (2011), the analysis of a statement leads to a possible referential that allows the understanding of a given object, which, in this case, are the statements present in Paulo Freire's discourse concerning his reflections on society and its social phenomena beyond education.

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As its theoretical foundation, this article relies on authors, in addition to Paulo Freire himself, who discuss social reality and the educational process, all aligned with the main author of this study. Thus, consistent with *Archaeological Discourse Analysis (ADA)*, the discursive formation was constructed as this text was developed.

This article seeks to serve as an inspiring source for broadening the understanding of Paulo Freire as an author who offers significant contributions to the field of Sociology. It aims for his work to be recognized not only within the educational sphere but also as a perceptive analysis of society and its social phenomena, extending beyond the boundaries traditionally associated with his legacy.

## 2 Methodology

Considering the object and objective of this investigation, it is grounded in a qualitative research approach which, according to Minayo (2004, p. 21):

[...] responds to very particular questions. In the social sciences, it concerns a level of reality that cannot be quantified. In other words, it deals with a universe of meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values, and attitudes, which correspond to a deeper space of relations, processes, and social phenomena that cannot be reduced to the operationalization of variables.

This perspective is coherent with the intention to seek, in Paulo Freire's writings, the statements that reinforce his thought within the field of Sociology and its social phenomena beyond education, thus supporting the thesis that he is one of the most important sociologists of Brazilian education, perhaps even internationally, whose ideas make a significant contribution to reflections on social phenomena. Such an assertion is inspired by an interview with Professor Celso Rui Beisiegel, one of the leading scholars of

Paulo Freire's thought, who, in 2013, responded to *Revista Lusófona de Educação* when asked whether Paulo Freire could be described as a philosopher, sociologist, anthropologist, educator, or epistemologist. After recalling Freire's trajectory, from his brief experience in Law to teaching Portuguese and the Philosophy of Education, as well as his work with Sesi workers, Beisiegel concluded: "So, Paulo Freire is all of these: educator, sociologist, philosopher, epistemologist, anthropologist" (Beisiegel, 2013, p. 170).

Ramos (2020, p. 19) also affirms that Paulo Freire's work "is markedly driven by the pursuit of overcoming a social reality he described as oppressive, which, being objective as it is, would not exist by chance nor transform itself without human action." Guided by this understanding, bibliographic research was carried out based on two of his foundational works: *Education as the Practice of Freedom* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In these works, statements were identified to support the arguments discussed here and to meet the stated objective. These references led to other productions, namely *Pedagogy of Autonomy: Necessary Knowledge for Educational Practice* and *Cultural Action for Freedom*.

Additionally, searches were conducted in the digital discourse database of the *Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD)*, within Social Sciences or Sociology programs, aiming to identify the *paulofreirean* framework in other academic fields that extend beyond Education. For this purpose, a non-restricted chronological scope was adopted, using "Paulo Freire" as the subject descriptor in the BD TD search. The goal was to identify whether the author appeared in the bibliographic references of theses and dissertations in the aforementioned areas of knowledge. A total of 33 works were identified in Social Sciences programs and 7 in Sociology programs<sup>4</sup>. Subsequently, a further search was conducted to determine which of these works included one of Paulo Freire's books as a reference. The results and analyses are presented in the section **Brief Bibliographic Survey**, summarized in a synthesis chart (see Table 1).

<sup>4</sup> Of this total, two dissertations were duplicated in the repository consulted, namely: *Onde está o meu filho: a denúncia do desaparecimento de pessoas*.

The information was analyzed through discourse analysis, based on the *Archaeological Discourse Analysis (ADA)* proposed by Michel Foucault (2000) in *Archaeology of Knowledge*. According to Silva (2011, p. 178), ADA “refers to a specific way of understanding how humans have produced their knowledge about phenomena and existing things within the social body, based on the discursive and non-discursive practices of human subjects.”

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In Paulo Freire's works, statements were identified that relate to the field of Sociology and social phenomena, thereby supporting the thesis that he can also be considered an author who, beyond the educational phenomenon, was concerned with studying the social context surrounding it. For Paulo Freire, a truly liberating education would be capable of building a nation that is genuinely democratic and socially just for everyone, especially for the oppressed, that is, those living in socially and economically disadvantaged conditions.

Returning to ADA, it focuses on the statements present in discourse, unconcerned with prepositions or sentences, as Deleuze (2006) notes. According to Foucault (2000, p. 99), a statement can be understood as one of the units of discourse that, beyond grammatical codes, allows for a given inference, “[...] through analysis or intuition, whether they ‘make sense’ or not, according to what rule they succeed or juxtapose one another, of what they are signs, and what kind of act is performed through their formulation (oral or written).” Therefore, for the aforementioned author, statements can be found in various signs that express the social relations of human subjects, in other words, culture, a production that reveals our ways of living, relating to others in society, and constructing these relations historically. Hence, ADA does not aim to analyze sentences or grammatical rules; rather, it seeks to identify what the statements reveal about the object of study in this article. As Silva (2014, p. 153) states:

Statements, in broad terms, correspond to the units of discourse. Every discourse, in one way or another, contains statements. Foucault understands discourse as a dispersed and discontinuous element, outside the logic of linearity. He breaks with the notion of research as a process in which ideas are connected linearly, as if following a chronological order.

The main categories used for conducting ADA are as follows:

**Discourse:** “[...] a set of statements insofar as they are supported by the same discursive formation [...]” (Foucault, 2000, p. 135); **Statement:** “[...] the specific mode of existence of this set of signs, a mode that allows it to be something other than a series of traces, other than a succession of marks in a substance, other than an object made by a human being; a mode that allows it a defined position for any possible subject, to be situated among other verbal performances, and finally to possess a repeatable materiality” (Foucault, 2000, p. 123–124); and **Discursive Formation:** the set of statements that give rise to a given object (Foucault, 2000).

Finally, in the methodological course of ADA, to begin the excavation, it was necessary to define or demarcate the *surface of emergence* of discourse, that is, the space from which statements emerge or appear. Next, the *corpus* for analysis was established, consisting of the selected texts, and finally, the *grids of specification* were analyzed, that is, the possible relations among statements that generate discursive formations.

### 3 Brief bibliographic survey

This section presents the archaeological excavation of knowledge. Before doing so, however, it is essential to provide a brief overview of the state of knowledge, or *state of the art*, in order to justify, among other aspects, the relevance and importance of this study, as well as to identify, within the field of Social Sciences and Sociology research, its engagement with the present investigative proposal and object. In agreement with Kohls-Santos and Morosini (2021, p. 125), the state of knowledge “[...] is a type of bibliographic research based mainly on theses, dissertations, and scientific articles, since this range of studies makes it possible to understand what is being researched at the *stricto sensu* graduate level in a given area on a given topic.”

A search was conducted on the website of the *Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD)*, as previously mentioned. In the end, five dissertations and two theses were selected, as presented below.

Table 1 – Systematization of Dissertations and Theses.

Dissertations
<p><b>1. Title:</b> Paulo e a pedagogia do oprimido: afinidades pós-coloniais. <b>Graduate Program:</b> Social Sciences/UFRN/Master's/2011. <b>Author:</b> José Gllauco Smith Avelino de Lima. <b>Work by Paulo Freire cited:</b> <i>Cultural Action for Freedom and Other Writings</i> (2006); <i>Letters to Cristina: Reflections on My Life and My Praxis</i> (2003); <i>Education and Brazilian Actuality</i> (2003); <i>Education as the Practice of Freedom</i> (2006); <i>Pedagogy of Autonomy: Necessary Knowledge for Educational Practice</i> (1986); <i>Pedagogy of Hope: A Reencounter with the Pedagogy of the Oppressed</i> (1992); <i>Pedagogy of Indignation: Pedagogical Letters and Other Writings</i> (2000); <i>Pedagogy of Tolerance</i> (2005); <i>Pedagogy of the Oppressed</i> (2005); and <i>For a Pedagogy of the Question</i> (1985).</p>
<p><b>2. Title:</b> Recuperando Fábricas, Memórias e Repertórios: Estudo sobre a Cooperativa de Produção de Parafusos do Rio de Janeiro. <b>Graduate Program:</b> Social Sciences/PPGCS/UFRRJ/Master's/2018. <b>Author:</b> Juliana Marques de Sousa. <b>Work by Paulo Freire cited:</b> <i>Pedagogy of the Oppressed</i> (1987).</p>
<p><b>3. Title:</b> Nova Iguaçu dos sonhos: narrativas e imaginários sobre a cidade. <b>Graduate Program:</b> Social Sciences in Development, Agriculture and Society/UFRRJ/Master's/2023. <b>Author:</b> Marília Carolina Asterito Baptista. <b>Work by Paulo Freire cited:</b> <i>Fear and Boldness</i> (1986).</p>
<p><b>4. Title:</b> "A Escola coloca em Risco a unidade inteira": dilemas e conflitos na gestão do processo socioeducativo. <b>Graduate Program:</b> Social Sciences/UFRRJ/Master's/2019. <b>Author:</b> Roseanna de Andrade Moura Silva. <b>Work by Paulo Freire cited:</b> <i>Pedagogy of the Oppressed</i> (2005).</p>
<p><b>5. Title:</b> A influência do perfil dos técnicos de extensão rural na execução do Programa Rio Rural. <b>Graduate Program:</b> Programa de Pós-Graduação de Ciências Sociais em Desenvolvimento, Agricultura e Sociedade/UFRRJ/Mestrado/2023. <b>Author:</b> Thiago Milagres Boechat. <b>Work by Paulo Freire cited:</b> <i>Extension or Communication?</i> (1977).</p>
Theses
<p><b>1. Title:</b> Organizações armadas e camponesas: comunicação, emoções e engajamento político (1968-1975). <b>Graduate Program:</b> Social Sciences in Development, Agriculture and Society/UFRRJ/Doctoral Thesis/2019. <b>Author:</b> Fabricio Teló. <b>Work by Paulo Freire cited:</b> <i>Extension or Communication?</i> (1983) and <i>Pedagogy of the Oppressed</i> (2018).</p>

**2. Title:** Tijolo por tijolo: integração regional e a construção de duas escolas latino-americanas de agroecologia no Brasil e na Venezuela.

**Graduate Program:** Sociology/UERJ/Doctoral Thesis/2021.

**Author:** Tânia Mara dos Santos Bernardelli.

**Work by Paulo Freire cited:** *Extension or Communication?* (1983).

Source: Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD).

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As previously stated, the objective of this article is to identify, in certain preselected works by Paulo Freire, the statements present in his discourse that reveal his reflections on society and its phenomena beyond education. However, it became essential to present some considerations about the research conducted in the field of Social Sciences and Sociology.

Among the works identified, the dissertation by José Glauco Smith Avelino de Lima, titled *Paulo e a pedagogia do oprimido: afinidades pós-coloniais*, uses a qualitative, bibliographic approach to analyze the connections between Paulo Freire and postcolonial theory, as well as to identify postcolonial arguments within Freire's work. Lima (2011) makes an analytical effort that extends beyond the pedagogical field, a perspective often absent among those who study Freire's writings.

From the outset, several findings emerged in this initial excavation. First, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, there are statements that form networks of specification with other fields of knowledge, particularly Sociology, as Lima (2011) notes in his final considerations. Second, the researcher identifies, in the work he analyzed, statements that denounce forms of oppression through a critical discourse opposing Eurocentric thought.

Sousa (2018), in turn, sought to revisit and reconstruct the workers' memory of a screw production cooperative located in Duque de Caxias/RJ, a memory rooted in class struggle as a means of understanding resistance among the working class. In this research, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is used as a theoretical foundation when the researcher discusses solidarity economy and self-management, considering the possibility of an "economy outside the capitalist market." Freire is cited in relation to the concept of

esperançar, or hopeful struggle, as an alternative movement to break consolidated structures, particularly the capitalist logic of the market.

Baptista (2019) aimed to reflect on whether the relationship of certain residents of Nova Iguaçu, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, with their city is influenced by their knowledge of and participation in various leisure spaces. In this study, Freire is cited through the work *Fear and Boldness*, in which he and Ira Shor engage in a reflective dialogue about teaching practice, liberation, the horizontal relationship between educator and learners, dialogue, and related topics.

According to Baptista (2019), the work by Freire and Shor helps to understand that the residents of Nova Iguaçu, through diverse cultural experiences such as music circles, shows, videos, and conversations in public squares, “[...] problematize local reality, express feelings and emotions, recover memories, find calm in contact with nature, and thus discover new meanings to define their relationship with the city and build their identity as citizens of Nova Iguaçu” (p. 110). This occurs not in an individualized manner, but as a collective expression of shared experiences.

Teló (2019, p. 1) defends a thesis on “[...] the relationship between members of armed left-wing political organizations and peasants during their attempts to form rural guerrilla groups to overthrow the business-military dictatorship and develop a revolutionary process within a Marxist-Leninist tradition.”

In pursuing this defense, the researcher establishes communication between militants and peasants as the main axis of investigation. He thus justifies the inclusion of Paulo Freire as a theoretical foundation for his thesis in the field of Social Sciences, within the concentration area of development, agriculture, and society. According to Teló, Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Extension or Communication?*, presents the theory of dialogical action as a key to understanding that “[...] liberation from oppression will only occur through the problematization of reality by the subjects involved in it” (Teló, 2019, p. 3).

Teló (2019) concludes that the revolutionary groups studied by Paulo Freire, from the perspective of dialogical action theory, strove for communication, though not always

successfully. In line with this observation of Freire's contribution to research fields beyond education, Silva (2019) presents in her dissertation a study on young people in conflict with the law who undergo socio-educational measures. In this research, Freire is cited when Silva (2019) observes that the pedagogical approach applied to these youths under such measures reflects a *banking education*, detached from their realities, and that the school fails to fulfill its social role of forming individuals with literacy skills, such as reading, writing, and mathematical proficiency.

For Silva (2019), the dichotomy between the Department of Education and the Department of Public Security of the state of Rio de Janeiro hinders the formation of autonomous individuals capable of leading their own lives, since while the former seeks to educate, the latter conceives the school as a form of imprisonment.

Bernardelli (2021), in her thesis on the process of constructing two agroecological schools – the *Escola Latino-Americana de Agroecologia* and the *Instituto de Agroecologia Latino-Americano Paulo Freire* – draws on Freire's *Extension or Communication?* to reinforce her methodology of *dialogue of knowledges*, based on the idea that different social actors possess distinct forms of knowledge.

In this dissertation, Freire's thought is used methodologically to analyze, comparatively, within a Sociology Graduate Program, the impact of two experiences regarding agroecological action and its integration across Latin America as a political horizon. Along the same line of inquiry, Boechat (2023, p. 12), in his dissertation, presents the topic "Rural Extension in the Context of the Implementation of the Rio Rural Program," focusing particularly on the influence of the profile, social background, and academic and political training of rural extension technicians in the implementation of rural assistance projects. From *Extension or Communication?*, the researcher draws reflections on rural extension and the political and ideological significance of the term *extension*.

For Boechat (2023), inspired by the aforementioned work of Paulo Freire, the rural extension technician plays a crucial role in fostering dialogue and communication with those who are subjects of extension practice. In this sense, the actions of these technicians are influenced by their life experiences and ideological choices.

Considering the studies that share common ground with this article and recognizing that these works belong to academic fields other than Education but nevertheless draw upon Freire's ideas to interpret their objects of study, the relevance of this article's argument becomes evident: reflecting on society and its social phenomena beyond Education, and emphasizing its contribution to the field of Sociology.

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Another justification lies in the scarcity of works, as observed in the brief survey conducted on the BDTD website, within graduate programs in Social Sciences and Sociology, that address this objective — that is, understanding that in Paulo Freire's writings, beyond his educational reflections and experiences, it is possible to identify a sociological analysis of society and its phenomena based on the concrete conditions of educational subjects.

Since Paulo Freire grounded his reflections on education in the lived histories of individuals, the hypothesis here is that he worked from the following understanding:

History, although not a science in the strict sense, is an essential discipline for the scientific understanding of social organization, since every social phenomenon always and necessarily occurs within a historical context, and, moreover, History is always the history of societies. The social sciences are heirs of historical studies because, in earlier times [...] it was History that specifically dealt with social phenomena (Vila Nova, 2000, p. 34).

Thus, it is not possible to separate Paulo Freire's thought, explicitly aligned with the ideas of Karl Marx, from the struggle against the exploitation of labor and the social injustices that affect the majority of Brazil's population. Therefore, the author's discourse aligns with the discourse of critical theory and historical-dialectical materialism. This assertion is reinforced when Paulo Freire (2007, p. 57, emphasis added) states: "Illiterate or not, the oppressed, as a class, will not overcome their situation of **exploitation except through a radical, revolutionary transformation of the class society** in which they are exploited." In this discourse, one can observe a discursive formation that reinforces the theme of class struggle, Freire's connection to Marxist thought, and education as a social

phenomenon. Expanding this discursive web, Scocuglia (2015), when analyzing Freire's writings in *Cultural Action for Freedom*, highlights that:

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[...] we can affirm that few moments represent such significant changes in Freire's discourse as those related to his approximations to Marxist economic thought. Recall that, up to that point, his major works had been influenced by forms of Marxism concerned with superstructural issues, that is, they had prioritized the spheres of consciousness, ideology, and politics, and until then, the sphere of labor, for example, had been treated from Hegel's perspective (master-slave relationship) [...] (Scocuglia, 2015, p. 68).

Therefore, Paulo Freire's discourse points to statements that allow us to infer his reading of society and his analysis of social conditions through the lens of a Sociology of Education. Since Sociology is understood as a science that studies, among other things, "[...] the human being and the human environment in their reciprocal interactions" (Lakatos, 1996, p. 23), Freire's discourse is filled with the presence of human subjects and their relationships within society, including within education.

The following section presents the findings and analyses developed in this investigation regarding the relationship between Paulo Freire's discourse and social phenomena.

## 4 The relationship between Paulo Freire's discourse and social phenomena

The objective of the previous section was to identify master's and doctoral research that employs Paulo Freire's works as theoretical references, found in graduate programs in Social Sciences and/or Sociology. In none of these works is there an explicit argument positioning Paulo Freire as a relevant author for these two fields of knowledge. However, the argument developed in this article allows us to infer that his ideas are also recognized and validated in fields of knowledge beyond Education. Therefore, this section focuses on analyzing certain works by Paulo Freire<sup>5</sup> to reinforce the argument defended here: that in

<sup>5</sup> It is not possible to encompass the entirety of Paulo Freire's works. For the present article, three references were selected, as cited in the introduction of this text.

these works there are statements which reveal his reflections on society and its social phenomena beyond education.

To begin with, in *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1967), published in Chile during his exile following the Brazilian Military Coup (1964–1985), Freire presents an interpretation of Brazilian society undergoing transition in that historical context. One of the first statements in his discourse attributes to humankind the capacity for historical and cultural protagonism, as a rational being capable of creating, transforming, and liberating. This is evident in Freire's discourse (2007, p. 49, emphasis added): "Inheriting acquired experience, creating and recreating, integrating himself into the conditions of his context, responding to its challenges, objectifying himself, discerning, transcending, man launches himself into a domain that is his alone, the domain of **History and Culture**."

The above discourse refers to a discursive formation present in other fields of knowledge concerned with the human being as phenomenon and object of study, such as Anthropology, History, Sociology, Philosophy, and Cultural Studies. In society, the human being produces, both materially and immaterially, social, historical, and cultural facts to express existence in the world as a process in continuous construction. In this sense, the statement present in Freire's discourse allows us to infer that, by placing the human being at the center of discussion and viewing them as the producer of their own history, culture, and social relations, Freire does not focus solely on educational issues but also adopts a sociological lens, especially when asserting that "No one liberates anyone, no one liberates themselves alone; people liberate each other in communion" (Freire, 2002, p. 52). How, then, can we think of social relations in isolation? Society exists only through social relations among human beings.

Therefore, Paulo Freire's discourse on education is inseparable from the historical, social, and cultural conditions of human beings. The human being is indeed central, but it is necessary to consider their real living conditions. As Vila Nova (2000, p. 38, emphasis added) explains:

Sociology is not merely a type of knowledge transformable into techniques that enable some kind of social transformation and control, but also **a means of possible spiritual development, insofar as it can help people to understand more clearly the behavior of others, their own situation, and their behavior in relation to others, to the groups to which they belong, and to society as a whole** (Vila Nova, 2000, p. 38, grifo nosso).

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It is in this sense that Freire's discourse reveals a particular discursive formation connected to Sociology and its specific objects, such as the Sociology of Education, the Sociology of Violence, and social phenomena related to economic inequality. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, we find the following statement: "To the wretched of the earth and to those who discover themselves in them, and thus discovering, suffer with them, but above all fight with them" (Freire, 2002, p. 23). Here, the author reveals a statement that reflects the unfavorable social conditions of much of the Brazilian population in the late 1950s and mid-1960s, when hunger, unemployment, low wages, and limited access to schooling, housing, and health were widespread.

More than half a century after the first publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazil has lived through the COVID-19 pandemic, denialist and anti-scientific discourse, and an attempted coup against democracy (the events of January 8, 2023). Freire's thought in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* remains strikingly relevant in its defense of a fair, inclusive, and equitable society, emphasizing the protagonism of the oppressed in the struggle for social change and liberation, which can only be achieved through active struggle (Freire, 2002).

In *Pedagogy of Autonomy: Necessary Knowledge for Educational Practice*, Freire (2005) reiterates these principles, affirming that teaching requires critical reflection on practice. Moreover, he expresses a "righteous indignation" in his discourse, arguing that it is impossible to conceive or carry out education without indignation in the face of social injustice. Freire illustrates this by citing examples such as Christ's indignation toward the merchants in the Temple, that of progressives against opponents of agrarian reform, of the oppressed in the face of class, racial, and gender discrimination, and of the victims of injustice against impunity. He also refers to the indignation of those who suffer from hunger

when confronted by the excessive ostentation of a few who not only consume but flaunt their wealth and live in excessive luxury (Freire, 2005).

Such a society, marked by its pathologies – socioeconomic inequalities, corruption, precarious labor, and structural racism – was unacceptable within Freire's discourse. A society that discriminates, segregates, and perpetuates injustice through racism, gender disparity, and human misery must be transformed so that education can foster liberation from oppression, particularly that which victimizes minorities and excludes the majority from social benefits.

In another passage of his discourse, Freire (2005) refers to *thinking rightly* as an attitude of resistance against the many forms of discrimination. "The prejudiced practice of race, class, or gender offends the substantiveness of the human being and radically denies democracy" (Freire, 2005, p. 36). Here, the statement on democracy, within the discursive field of Political Sociology, reveals that for Freire, a truly democratic society cannot tolerate the coexistence of multiple forms of prejudice, as these undermine the fundamental principles of equality and civic participation.

Thus, according to Paulo Freire, in a democratic society its citizens should not be subjected to any form of discrimination, since:

Freire's belief in democracy, as well as his deep and enduring faith in people's capacity to resist the weight of oppressive institutions and ideologies, was forged in a spirit of struggle tempered both by the harsh realities of his own imprisonment and exile [...] and by his belief that education and hope are the conditions of action and politics (Giroux, 2008, p. 125).

Regardless of the socio-historical context of Paulo Freire's discourse, the relevance and contemporaneity of his work are evident through recurring statements such as "the wretched of the earth" (Freire, 2002), "the *mocambos*" (Freire, 1958), and "My point of view is that of the 'wretched of the earth,' of the excluded" (Freire, 2005, p. 14). According to Silva (2018), today's social subjects encompass diverse realities: Black people, Roma peoples, peasant women, women from urban peripheries, Indigenous peoples, LGBTQIA+

individuals, and traditional *terreiro* communities. In short, for the author in question, this represents human diversity.

In his analysis, Paulo Freire reinforces his concern with the construction of a society that transcends market logic, that is, capitalism, which oppresses and degrades human dignity through its mechanisms of deception. As he states:

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The discourse of globalization cunningly seeks to conceal, or to cast into shadow, the intensified reappearance, though modified, of the appalling wickedness with which capitalism has manifested itself throughout History. The ideological discourse of globalization attempts to disguise the fact that it strengthens the wealth of a few while deepening the poverty and misery of millions. The capitalist system, in globalizing neoliberalism, reaches the peak of effectiveness of its intrinsic wickedness (Freire, 2005, p. 127-128).

In *Pedagogy of Autonomy: Necessary Knowledge for Educational Practice*, Paulo Freire presents a text focused on “the issue of teacher education alongside the reflection on a progressive educational practice in favor of the autonomy of the learners’ being [...]” (Freire, 2005, p. 13). Throughout his discourse, he does not fail to articulate or contextualize this pedagogical *praxis* (action, reflection, and action for transformation)<sup>6</sup> within a society shaped by the ethics of neoliberal capitalist politics, whose statements evoke discourses of exploitation, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, and the expansion of misery among millions.

The author in question was never concerned solely with the educational phenomenon detached from the social context of life, struggle, and resistance of the world’s excluded. As he himself argued, “[...] education is a form of intervention in the world” (Freire, 2005, p. 98). Such intervention can inspire in those who are victims of an unjust social system the desire to fight for better living conditions, whether social, legal, or otherwise.

Paulo Freire also brings into his discourse a strong statement regarding the ideology of the ruling class. According to him, the Brazilian elite shows no real interest in

<sup>6</sup> In Freire’s discourse, *praxis* “[...] is the reflection and action of people upon the world in order to transform it. Without it, it is impossible to overcome the oppressor–oppressed contradiction” (Freire, 2002, p. 38).

maintaining quality education for the poor or for the middle class, and he denounces the perpetuation of this power structure: "From the standpoint of dominant interests, there is no doubt that education should be a practice of immobilization and concealment of truth" (Freire, 2005, p. 99).

In this way, it becomes clear that Paulo Freire's discourse is closely related to concepts rooted in Marxist thought. Even the very categories that Freire adopts and resignifies for the field of education attest to this connection: *ideology, dialectic, class struggle, oppressed versus oppressor, progressive praxis*, among others.

Freire's identification with materialist dialectics can be reinforced by what it represents. As Chauí (2006, p. 53) explains:

The driving force of materialist dialectics lies in the specific form of the conditions of labor, that is, the conditions of production and reproduction of the social existence of human beings, a form that is always determined by an internal contradiction, that is, by class struggle or by the antagonism between those who own the means of labor and those who do not (serfs, slaves, wage workers).

Freire also exposes the ideological foundations of European colonialism when he states: "Our colonizers did not intend [...] to create a civilization in the newly discovered land. Their interest lay in the commercial exploitation of the territory" (Freire, 2007, p. 75). The statements on colonization as a social inheritance found in Freire's discourse allow us to infer that he was attentive to the social reading of the colonizers' true intentions for the *terra brasilis*.

Thus, in Paulo Freire's discourse, it is also possible to identify statements that point to a postcolonial discursive formation in favor of *decoloniality*, understood broadly as the ongoing struggle against the ideology of segregation based on skin color (racist discourse), against prejudice directed at LGBTQIA+ communities and women (Christian, patriarchal, misogynistic, and LGBTQIA+-phobic discourses), against the exploitation of the wage worker (discourse of the oppressor or the working class), and against the notion that "the sun rises for everyone," which deceives much of the population while spreading the myths

of meritocracy and market logic that Freire calls “neoliberal wickedness” and “the cynicism of its fatalistic ideology” (Freire, 2005, p. 14).

Through his discourse, Paulo Freire demonstrates a profound alignment with the social realities of both Brazil and the wider world, recognizing that domination through the discourse of the inferiority of “the wretched of the earth,” of Black and brown people, and of gender and sexual diversity, remains a living legacy of European colonialism. It is no coincidence that in *Mocambos* (1958), Freire affirmed that education could not “[...] be a total ‘stranger’ to the reality to which it is applied” (p. 1), meaning that education should not be subjected to the logic and order of Eurocentric or colonial discourse. Freire had already warned against oppressive narratives, advocating instead for a decolonized reality that must take into account the lived experiences and cultures of those who live and survive in the mangroves and sandy outskirts of Recife, as well as in the most remote and marginalized corners<sup>7</sup> of the country.

Reinforcing the argument above, Carlos and Silva (2021, p. 3) state: “From this perspective, the works of Paulo Freire [...] generate hope that better days may become a reality for Jews, Catholics, followers of Afro-descendant religions, atheists, agnostics, women, Black people, and homosexuals.”

For Freire, as long as the inhuman ethics of capitalism prevail, the logic of the colonial mentality will remain alive within a form of colonialism, that is, within “[...] a world system of power that defines the various standards of what is valid and what is not,” as Maia and Melo (2020, p. 232) affirm. Consequently, a truly democratic nation founded on social justice for all will not be possible.

Paulo Freire (2007, p. 41), when analyzing cultural action and agrarian reform in *Cultural Action for Freedom*, warns us:

[...] cultural action as we understand it cannot, on the one hand, impose itself upon the worldview of the peasants and culturally invade them, nor, on the other hand, adapt itself to it. On the contrary, [...] starting from that worldview, taken as a

<sup>7</sup> A slang term used to refer to the *favela*, the community, or an area located on the urban periphery, originally expressed in Portuguese as *quebrada* (Cf. <https://www.significados.com.br/quebrada/>).

problem, it must engage, together with the peasants, in a critical reflection upon it, leading to their increasingly lucid insertion into a transforming reality.

In this passage, Freire's discourse reveals statements indicating that resistance against the colonial order must be overcome through a *critical return* to that very order and through a *lucid insertion* into one's reality – that is, through overcoming the colonizer's legacy by means of a decolonial logic that transcends, among other things, racism (white versus Black), misogyny, *aporophobia*, and xenophobia directed toward Latin Americans, Africans, and Palestinians.

Therefore, in Paulo Freire's discourse, beyond the field of education, there are enunciative elements that reinforce his concern with social phenomena, particularly those that exploit, silence, and segregate marginalized minorities, as previously discussed throughout this article.

## 5 Final considerations

By way of conclusion, the effort undertaken in this article was to identify, within Paulo Freire's discourse, the statements that reveal him as a thinker of society beyond the field of education. It was found that few studies and research projects in the fields of Social Sciences and Sociology have sought to identify, in Freire's discourse, the statements that enable a critical reading of society. At most, Freire is generally regarded within Social Sciences as a sociologist or philosopher of education only.

The analysis of the author's writings consulted here demonstrates that it is impossible to consider education and its subjects apart from social reality, discrimination, prejudice, and the colonialist vision of society, founded on phallocentric and Eurocentric models. Paulo Freire, like other major thinkers of Brazilian society such as Florestan Fernandes, offered significant contributions to reflections on society and its various phenomena, including race, class, and people, concepts that shaped Brazilian sociology in its early stages (Pinhel & Alves, 2019). In the same study, the authors highlight the contributions of Euclides da Cunha through his work *Os Sertões (Rebellion in the*

*Backlands*), described as “[...] a text that became a landmark in Brazilian social thought” (Pinhel & Alves, 2019, p. 42).

This article did not aim to compare or to insist that Freire’s works, among them *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, his most widely known academic text, should be recognized as foundational landmarks of twentieth-century Brazilian social thought. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that in this work, as in the others cited, the presence of statements understood as “[...] an event that neither language nor meaning can ever fully exhaust” (Foucault, 2008, p. 93) forms a discursive network that intertwines with discourses of decoloniality and with Freire’s political commitment to the marginalized of the world. His understanding of the educational phenomenon as a liberating action, inseparable from the lived realities of its subjects, reinforces this view.

In conclusion, it was not the intention here to exhaust the discussion of the object under consideration. Gaps remain. There is a pressing need for further exploration, particularly among scholars in the field of Social Sciences, into the critical reading of society present in Paulo Freire’s writings, so that he may be recognized not only as an educator or philosopher of education, but also as one of the most prominent sociologists of education.

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**Responsible publisher:** Genifer Andrade

**Ad hoc experts:** Pedro Claesen Dutra Silva e Lindomar Wessler Boneti.

#### How to cite this article (ABNT):

SILVA, Eduardo Jorge Lopes da. Paulo Freire: a thinker of social phenomena. **Rev. Pemo**, Fortaleza, v. 8, e15743, 2026. Available in: <https://revistas.uece.br/index.php/revpemo/article/view/15743>

Received on June 20, 2025.  
Accepted on August 20, 2025.  
Published in January 1, 2026.

