

# LEARNING TO NO END: TENSION AND *TELOS* IN PEDAGOGY AND POLITICS

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ORIGINALLY PRESENTED

March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015 at 3:00 p.m.

ORIGINAL TITLE

Learning to No End

I would like to address the question concerning post-neoliberal education in Latin America—of whether it is always already present or yet to come—in a very broad sense. That is, not by discussing the history, farther or nearer, of the practice and theory of education in the subcontinent, nor by looking at whatever changes or new experiences in the field can be discerned in the last decades that would signal a shift towards something that might be identified as post-neoliberal education, or post-neoliberalism *tout court*. Rather, I would like to reflect on the present conjuncture, after almost two decades of left-leaning governments in the region, from a point of view that is central to much Latin American thinking of education: that of political processes understood as pedagogical processes, as collective learning—what Paulo Freire once referred to as the “eminently pedagogical character of the revolution”.<sup>1</sup>

This approach automatically reframes the question as: can the political processes of the last decades also be understood as processes of collective learning leading to something that could be called post-neoliberalism? That, in turn, could be rephrased in two intimately connected, but nonetheless distinct ways. The first: have these political processes produced conditions of sociability that are beyond those of neoliberalism, or which can provide material and political support for a post-neoliberal project? The second: are these political processes widely appropriated, by the least privileged sectors of society in particular, as having a post-neoliberal sense—in the double sense of “meaning” and “direction”?

1 → Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Begman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2005), 67.

It is difficult to provide unequivocal answers to those questions if looking at political processes as different (and internally differentiated) as those of Venezuela, Bolivia, Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil; such an intention, at any rate, would be best served if it were to be the object of a collective enquiry. My scope here, accordingly, will be more modest, and focus on the Brazilian case in relation to which I should say straight away that I would answer both questions in the negative. Thinking through the reasons of that failure will consequently be my starting point.

Doing so also requires me to think through the legacy of the conception of politics as pedagogy that runs as a red thread through the political culture that produced the ruling Workers' Party (PT) and all major existing Brazilian mass movements, from the pioneering work of Paulo Freire and others in the 1960s up until the Liberation Theology *comunidades eclesiais de base* (ecclesial grassroots communities) of the 1970s and the popular organizing of the 1980s. This reference is three times justified. Firstly, because this legacy is an essential component in the common background of many of the protagonists of recent Brazilian politics, and therefore significant to how they interpret and justify their circumstances and actions. Secondly, because, despite its transformation into something quite different or its instrumentalization into disputable narratives, it still possesses that insistent virtuality of the "always present", offering us useful elements for a critical examination of what is happening today. Finally, because the question of its inheritance is truly at stake now: the seemingly irreversible wane of the main organizations spawned by the political culture, and their discredit among a younger generation of militants,<sup>2</sup> places the transmission of that legacy—by which I mean not only a shared set of ideas, values and practices, but also what that culture itself would call *vivência*, a shared lived experience—in doubt. That, in turn, not only entails a potential break in the learning process whose accumulation began in the 1960s and has continued into the present in spite of two

2 → I have discussed this generational break in reference to the protests that took place in Brazil in 2013 and 2014, in Rodrigo Nunes, "Juin N'est Pas Fini," *Les Temps Modernes* 678 (2014): 4-32; Rodrigo Nunes, "Generación, Acontecimiento, Perspectiva. Pensar el Cambio a Partir de Brasil," *Nueva Sociedad* 251 (2014): 42-54.

decades of military dictatorship, but has significant consequences for any “post-neoliberal” projects in the years to come.

The place to start would then be an evaluation of the present conjuncture in Brazil, whose impasse I have elsewhere described as the paradox of the Workers’ Party rule: namely that now, thirteen years into what can be broadly construed as a leftwing government, we seem farther rather than closer to the structural transformations that the prospect of PT in power always carried as a promise. Since the last elections, however, for reasons that combine the deterioration of the economy and the government’s disastrous handling of the 2013 and 2014 protest wave, that diagnosis needs to be taken one step further. It is not only that the already considerable inertia and insularity of the political system have grown. What is more, the government’s *Realpolitik* has led it into a corner in which it is increasingly beholden to the interests of finance, agribusiness and other corporate sectors; the forces that would resist any deepening of the positive changes brought about in the last decade, or even try to revert them, have become stronger, the recently elected parliament being regularly described as the most conservative since the military dictatorship; and even the potential for finding widespread social support for measures that would make Brazil “go on changing”—Dilma Rousseff’s slogan for the 2009 elections—seems to have shrunken.

In short, we have gone from the impasse of a centre-left government under a political hegemony of the centre-right to a situation in which the far right has gained traction and the prospect of a rightwing *social* hegemony is not inconceivable. In the process, from the early editions of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre until now, PT has increasingly gone from “another world is possible” to “there is no alternative”. Not only a political failure, then, in the sense of the impossibility of anything that could be conceived as a post-neoliberal transition, but a bona fide pedagogical failure, in that it might eventually fail to find support even among those who benefited the most from it.

How did it come to this? I am not particularly original in suggesting that the seeds of failure were already present in PT’s success. It is by now a familiar narrative, how the cycle of expansion of rights and drastic reduction of poverty in Latin America was made possible by the China-driven commodity boom that preceded the global financial

crisis. This meant that the then newly elected leftwing governments could fulfill the mandate of change handed to them by the ballots without having to change *much*, in two senses. First, by maintaining their countries' productive matrix and position as primary commodity exporters in the global market, generating what Uruguayan sociologist Eduardo Gudynas has dubbed "neo-extractivism".<sup>3</sup> Second, by taking advantage of that in order to surf on a win-win situation in which the rich could get richer and the poor, less poor, meaning that it was possible to avoid or postpone picking the fights that initiating structural reforms would inevitably involve.

For as long as the international scenario was propitious, this solution worked. But in the case of Brazil, and to different degrees in other countries as well, this had three major long-term consequences. First, not only did it leave the existing structures of political, economic and media power intact, it strengthened sectors such as mining and agribusiness without ever truly shaking the grip of finance, further empowering those that would stand to lose from structural reforms if these were attempted. Second, it inevitably led to the opening of new frontlines of violent accumulation by dispossession, such as the encroachment on indigenous lands and the Amazonian territory, as well as property speculation and the attacks on the urban poor, of which the World Cup and the upcoming Olympics are but the most visible example. Third, while it created the buffer that allowed for anti-cyclical spending when the global crisis first hit, it wagered the government's legitimacy on the capacity to maintain that win-win balance (what in Brazil has become known as the "*Lulista* pact"), so that when the rainy days arrived and it became impossible not to choose sides, there was little room for maneuver for, even if the government so wished, choosing the side of the poorest.

All of this is true to a greater or lesser extent of all the so-called "Pink Tide" governments, but Brazil now stands as a good candidate

3 → Eduardo Gudynas, "Diez Tesis Urgentes sobre el Nuevo Extractivismo. Contextos y Demandas Bajo el Progresismo Sudamericano Actual," *Extractivismo, Política y Sociedad* (Quito: Centro Andino de Acción Popular and Centro Latino Americano de Ecología Social, 2009).

for the title of country where this model ended the worst.<sup>4</sup> Truth be told, this may also be because it was one of the places where it started the worst: unlike those countries that were coming out of a period of upheaval, like Argentina and Venezuela, or where social movements were on the rise, as in Bolivia and Ecuador, when PT came to power, its transformation into a regular parliamentary party was well under way and its social base's capacity for mobilization was already in decline. What is more, the economy was in a delicate state, there was great pressure from global finance and the national media, which to this day remains firmly under the hegemony of neoliberal dogma, and the idiosyncrasies of Brazil's political system made it impossible for any party, let alone a left or centre-left one, to build a political majority. As a consequence, even before the elections, PT had already signaled that no sudden radical changes were to be expected, and that the pillars of the neoliberal macroeconomic policy of the previous decade (inflation targets, fluctuating currency rate and primary surpluses in public accounts) would be upheld.

For years to come, one of the most thought-provoking interpretations of the Lula period will no doubt be André Singer's *Os Sentidos do Lulismo*,<sup>5</sup> which has the added importance of having been written by an intellectual with close ties to PT and who participated in the party's first term in power. That lends it both analytical and political importance: it formulates something like an *ex post* rationalization that not only can be publicly invoked by members of government in their defense, but may very well be something that several members of that government will tell themselves in private.

- 4 → At the time of writing, polls indicate that president Dilma Rousseff's approval rates are down to 8%, while her administration is rejected by 71%. This is a consequence of several factors, the three major ones being an ongoing corruption scandal in state oil company Petrobrás, rising inflation and unemployment, and the introduction of an austerity package that goes against everything that was promised during the 2014 presidential campaign. For an attempt at an overview of the present state of Latin America's progressive experiments, see Salvador Schavelzon, "El Fin del Relato Progresista en América Latina," *La Razón*, June 21 2015, [http://www.la-razon.com/index.php?url=/suplementos/animal\\_politico/fin-relato-progresista-America-Latina\\_O\\_2292970735.html](http://www.la-razon.com/index.php?url=/suplementos/animal_politico/fin-relato-progresista-America-Latina_O_2292970735.html).
- 5 → André Singer, *Os Sentidos do Lulismo. Reforma Gradual e Pacto Conservador* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2012).

In a nutshell, the argument runs as follows: the decision not to break with neoliberal macroeconomic policy—and perhaps also more ominous ones, such as becoming integrated into the existing political system—was not merely a defensive move in the face of a hostile conjuncture, but “political and ideological”<sup>6</sup> in a positive sense. That is, it was strategic not only in that it effectively was the path of least resistance, but in that it communicated with a social sector until then practically untapped by the left—those who Singer, following his father, Paul Singer, an economist himself long associated with PT, identifies as the “subproletariat”: “domestic workers, wage workers hired by small direct producers, generally workers lacking the minimal conditions of participation in the class struggle.”<sup>7</sup> Whereas the organized, unionized proletariat that is PT’s historical base have legal and collective means at their disposal, and so will tend to be less fearful in the face of moments of instability, the subproletariat do not. Their weak and atomized condition makes them constitutively more susceptible to agitation against the risk of “disorder”, and generally politically more conservative. The choice for “a fight against poverty within order,”<sup>8</sup> therefore, at once neutralized this sector’s natural resistance to a left-wing government and prioritized it through public policy: direct wealth transfer programs, the valorization of the minimum wage, and the expansion of credit. This produced both the electoral and political shifts that Singer identifies with *Lulismo*; namely, PT becoming the party of the subproletariat *par excellence*, and its ideological move from a proletariat versus bourgeoisie to a poor versus rich cleavage.

There are many merits to Singer’s analysis, which has been the most rigorous attempt so far to propose an interpretation of what has happened under Lula and afterwards. There are also some problems, not least of which that it obscures the fact that sectors of this subproletariat were also at some point successfully organized, not necessarily as workers as such, but for example into neighborhood movements, by activists in PT or close to it; and that their allegedly “natural”

6 → Ibid., 74.

7 → Paul Singer, *Dominação e Desigualdade. Estrutura de Classes e Repartição de Renda no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1981), 83.

8 → Ibid.

conservatism was intensified by the penetration of the neopentecostal “theology of prosperity” that filled the vacuum left by the dismantling of Liberation Theology during the papacy of Karol Wojtyla. In any case, what interests me here is the currency that a certain compression of Singer’s argument has acquired among partisans and detractors of the government. It runs as follows: if the government turned out the way it did, it is either because (according to its partisans) there was only so far it could go starting from a hostile conjuncture and a conservative middle ground; or because (according to critics), taking that conservatism for granted, it overestimated the inertia of its initial conditions, and thus rather than test and force the limits of the conjuncture so as to transform them, it accommodated itself to those initial constraints, which as a consequence grew more and more restrictive.

It would of course be possible to fall back here on the familiar narrative of the betrayal of leaders who detach themselves from those whom they purport to represent in order to perpetuate themselves as mediators between the masses and a political system that can only allow for the latter’s representation for as long as it remains within certain bounds. Though not untrue, that would perhaps be a little too easy. It would assume an already constituted political subject, conscious of its interests and ready to fight for them, that would have been betrayed—thus minimizing the fact, acknowledged in both the partisan and the critical accounts, that a lack of social mobilization was also an important factor in things turning out the way they did. It is true, as someone like Singer himself would point out, that *Lulismo* made the conscious decision to put the brakes on extra-parliamentary action so as not to endanger its parliamentary project. It remains the case, nonetheless, that this was a game that PT’s organized social base accepted to play; that the mass of people who rose from poverty have so far not constituted themselves as a political subject in their own right; and that it was only with the 2013 protests that a new source of pressure from below emerged—when arguably it was, or it became clear it was, too late.

It is important to notice, then, what exactly is the nub of the accusation leveled by critics against PT. If the party is faulted for failing to relinquish the position of leaders, choosing to mediate rather than facilitate organization from below, it is also, in a sense, charged with shunning its responsibility to fully occupy that position. In other words,



it failed to perform the role of the *leader as educator*; it forfeited its pedagogical role. To the extent that it assumed in its social base a natural conservatism that it was necessary to adapt to rather than work to transform, we could ironically conclude that, in this respect, its sin would have been not distancing itself from the masses, but not distancing itself *enough*: taking as a given what should have been the object of a pedagogical process.

The irony deepens if we consider that the choices that have led to the present impasse could be defended with the invocation of the old Liberation Theology maxim according to which “it is better to be wrong with the people than right without them.”<sup>9</sup> This sentence no doubt expresses an attitude that is central to the tradition of grassroots organizing and popular education that was the backbone of the political culture out of which PT emerged. It is the idea that emancipation is autotelic: it aims to produce itself, that is, subjects “who discover themselves as [reality’s] permanent re-creators.”<sup>10</sup> And consequently, that a politics that is not a process of collective learning and does not temper its urgencies with the rhythm proper to that process is bound to either dissolve into an aestheticized assertion of radicalism for its own sake or work against its own ends by its choice of means—since “one does not liberate men by alienating them”<sup>11</sup> and a “revolution *for* the people” is “a revolution *without* the people.”<sup>12</sup>

There is little doubt now that there are those who, if they invoked that defense, would be doing so in bad faith; but the most thought-provoking truth is that there are many who would still do so earnestly. This double irony—that the failure of that pedagogical process could be blamed on a lack of leadership, and that this lack could be defended on pedagogical grounds—takes us to the heart of the problem that I would like to discuss here.

What is at stake in this irony or paradox is something we could call, following the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon, “haecceity” or “tension of information”, by which is meant “the property that a scheme

9 → Clodovis Boff, *Como Trabalhar com o Povo* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1988), 72.

10 → Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 69.

11 → *Ibid.*, 79.

12 → *Ibid.*, 127. Italics in the original.

has of structuring a domain, of propagating in it, of ordering it".<sup>13</sup> That property is relational to the extent that "signification is relational":<sup>14</sup> "a signal [alone] does not constitute signification", since signification is something that happens between an external signal and a domain that has intrinsic qualities of its own. Thus, "there is, in the *possible couplings* of matter and form, a certain freedom, but a *limited freedom*"; not any signal can structure a domain, and one "that strays too far from the structurable field's characteristics no longer has any tension of information in relation to [it]."<sup>15</sup>

In other words, a signal's haecceity or tension of information varies according to its difference in relation to the field to be structured. But, and here is the crucial thing, this variation has not only a superior threshold beyond which the tension drops to zero—"for signals to have a sense within a system, it is necessary that they do not convey something entirely new"<sup>16</sup>—but an inferior threshold: the closer the signal is to the system, the less tension, and so the less likely it is to have an effect on it.

[I]f signals do no more than correspond exactly to local reality, they are no longer information, but merely the external iteration of an internal

13 → Gilbert Simondon, "Forme, Information, Potentiels," *L'Individu à la Lumière des Notions de Forme et Information* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2007), 544. "Haecceity of information" is first proposed as an alternative to "quality of information"—for the reason that "quality seems to be the absolute property of a being, while we are dealing here with a relation"—as a way to designate "what makes it so that this is information and is received as such, while that is not received as information." Simondon, *L'Individu à la Lumière des Notions de Forme et Information* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2007), 222-3.

14 → Simondon, *L'Individu*, 223.

15 → Simondon, "Forme, Information, Potentiels," 546. Italics in the original. Simondon draws a distinction between his hypothesis and that of Claude Shannon's theory of information to the extent that "*a theory of the tension of information supposes an open series of possible receivers: the tension of information is proportional to a scheme's capacity to be received as information by receivers that are not defined in advance*". Ibid. 544. Italics in the original. This means that "while a probabilistic theory of information [such as Shannon's] can measure the quantity of information in a predicted exchange between an emitter and a receiver, a measure of tension of information can only be established experimentally [par expérience], in actuality at least."

16 → Simondon, *L'Individu*, 223.

reality; if they are too different, they are no longer apprehended as meaningful, no longer signifying, so they cannot be integrated [...] <sup>17</sup>

That inferior threshold, beyond which there can be no learning because there is no tension, is at once what puts in question the attempt to excuse “weak reformism” with the idea that it is “better to take one step with a thousand than a thousand steps with one”<sup>18</sup> and what explains that one could criticize leaders for *too little* rather than *too much*.

The trauma of the horrors perpetrated in the name of emancipation in the last century<sup>19</sup> instinctively lead us to think as if the only possible sin were excess. Thinking in this way allows us the comfort of simplifying the pathologies of leadership into the story of masses with an inexhaustible and unambiguous potential for good led astray time and again by those who betray them. What an experience such as Brazil’s maybe calls us to do is to recast the problem of leadership in more complete, thoroughly relational terms, and consider that it is equally possible to sin through *lack*. For politics as pedagogy, even while it aims at eliminating the difference between leaders and masses *as a result*, nonetheless recognizes its necessity *as a starting point*, both historical—people concretely exist in situations of bondage—and for the pedagogical process itself: there is process because there is tension, and there is tension because there is difference. Rather than something to be denied or expiated like an original sin, this tension *as such* is the object of the highest skill that the educator must have: the capacity to manage it for the benefit of the process, avoiding the extremes of lack and excess, searching for the balance best suited for each situation, being sensitive to the fluctuations that the process undergoes—and, above all, being aware that he or she is not the only one who is or should be responsible for that regulation.

Seen under that light, pedagogy as politics does not idealize an absolute equality that could be taken for granted but, on the contrary,

17 → Ibid.

18 → Boff, *Como Trabalhar com o Povo*, 82.

19 → “Our catastrophe—our Thebes—is the seventy years from 1914 to 1989.” TJ Clark, “For a Left With No Future,” *New Left Review* 74 (2012): 60.

is a meditation on “[t]he correct method for a revolutionary leadership.”<sup>20</sup> That this method is based on dialogue does not mean that it is linear; that this dialogue is respectful does not mean that it is smooth or seeks easy consensus; and while it has equality as an aim, it necessarily does not start on an equal footing. To speak of “revolutionary leadership,” “educator” (Freire) or “external agent” (Boff) indicates that the starting position is one of “pedagogical *difference* or *otherness*,”<sup>21</sup> which quite often will be a consequence of the fact that the reality that the pedagogical process starts from is that of “the social division of labor between intellectual (decision) and manual labor (execution).”<sup>22</sup> While the aim of the relation is overcoming that difference, otherness must be occupied with neither superiority nor a false egalitarianism that would be no more than disavowal:

If someone is or becomes an agent, it is because they have something to offer to the people, they have a contribution to make to their journey. The agent is an agent because she is different. This must be taken into account and acknowledged.<sup>23</sup>

“Leadership” names the site of that otherness: the *formal* position of the one who initiates a pedagogical process, without indicating anything about who comes to occupy it [they may come from inside as well as outside a community, may be an individual or a group, etc.].<sup>24</sup> In fact, if emancipation is autotelic in that it produces “permanent re-creators”, this means it is less about eliminating that formal position than making it circulate freely. While each new process of re-creation would

20 → Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 67.

21 → Boff, *Como Trabalhar com o Povo*, 23. Italics in the original.

22 → Ibid., 15. Both Freire and Boff’s reflections arise not from an ideal situation, but from their actual experience in a country with extreme social disparities in which “[u]sually [the] leadership group [among the dominated] is made up of men and women who in one way or another have belonged to the social strata of the dominators.” Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 163.

23 → Ibid., 24.

24 → “This role may be political, technical, pastoral, educational. For lack of a more appropriate word, we could speak of a *pedagogical function*, so as to bring together all the functions relating to the integral development of the community or the people.” Boff, *Como Trabalhar com o Povo*, 23. Italics in the original.

involve some difference, and hence the reinstatement of that otherness, the goal would be to arrive at a situation in which extrinsic factors such as disparities in wealth, gender, race or formal education could not prevent anyone from occupying that position.<sup>25</sup> Conceiving the pedagogical relationship in this way did not prevent the likes of Freire and Boff from believing that what they proposed was not a repetition of the “dominant pedagogical model” in which “the most advanced guide the less advanced, in order to reduce their backwardness,” nor that it could not but “infinitely [reproduce] the backwardness it is supposed to reduce.”<sup>26</sup> This was because they did not substantialize this formal difference into a simple disparity between those who possessed a correct scientific knowledge and those who did not, which was why it could not be resolved by means of a one-way transfer of knowledge. Instead, the pedagogical process was understood as a confluence of different knowledges held by “teachers” and “students” alike, and as striving towards whatever emancipation participants managed to produce together, rather than the realization of some pre-established goal set in advance and from the outside.<sup>27</sup>

25 → See Gramsci: “The pedagogical relation cannot be limited to specifically “school” relations [...] It exists throughout society taken as a whole and for each individual with respect to other individuals, between intellectual and non-intellectual strata, between elites and followers, between leaders and those led, between vanguards and army corps. Every “hegemony” relation is necessarily a pedagogical relation...” Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere* (Turin, Einaudi, 1977), vol. II, 1331.

26 → Jacques Rancière, Todd May, Saul Newman, Benjamin Noys, “Democracy, Anarchism and Radical Politics Today: An Interview with Jacques Rancière,” trans. John Lechte, *Anarchist Studies* 16(2008):182.

27 → “In fact, the pedagogical process is a two-way thing: it consists in the *reciprocal encounter* between the agent and his knowledge and the people and their knowledge. And this takes place in a *context of reciprocity*, dialogue and vital sharing. It is only in the exchange of knowledges that the education process can develop, on the side of the people as well as on the side of the agent.” Boff, *Como Trabalhar com o Povo*, 30. Italics in the original. It is worth comparing this to a recent, well informed analysis of Black Lives Matter: “Those who romanticize the concept of leaderless movements often misleadingly deploy Ella Baker’s words, “Strong people don’t need [a] strong leader.” Baker delivered this message in various iterations over her 50-year career working in the trenches of racial-justice struggles, but what she meant was specific and contextual. She was calling for people to disinvest from the notion of the messianic, charismatic leader who promises political salvation in exchange for deference. Baker also did not mean that movements would

That otherness is at once the thing to be abolished and the instrument of that abolishment is the reason why its essential nature is tension: *too little* and nothing will happen, *too much*<sup>28</sup> and it will be reinforced. Hence why the appeal to a “primacy of practice” can be seen as having a deeper meaning than merely a pious gesture by which theory pays lip service to the humble realities of the everyday: if practice is the ultimate “criterion of truth,” it is because tension can only be dealt with and verified experimentally, *par expérience*, in actuality.<sup>29</sup> Hence also why the “correct pedagogical relationship”<sup>30</sup> should be constantly characterized in the terms of what Deleuze and Guattari would call “an art of dosages,”<sup>31</sup> balancing extremes of lack and excess: “neither frivolous pragmatism nor coarse activism,”<sup>32</sup> “neither objectivism nor subjectivism,”<sup>33</sup> neither “voluntarism” nor “spontaneism.”<sup>34</sup>

This control of measures does not always seek consensus or balance; there is no “golden mean” that would be applicable to all situations. It is an art of “calculated risk.”<sup>35</sup> Mastery of an art of dosages necessarily involves a strong sense of timing and the political tact to choose which instruments to employ: it is a matter of *when, how much and how*, “the moment, the measure and the means [*o momento, a medida e o*

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naturally emerge without collective analysis, serious strategizing, organizing, mobilizing and consensus-building. (...) Baker was not against leadership. She was opposed to hierarchical leadership that disempowered the masses and further privileged the already privileged.” Barbara Ransby, “Ella Taught Me: Shattering the Myth of the Leaderless Movement,” *ColorLines*, June 12 2015, <http://www.colorlines.com/articles/ella-taught-me-shattering-myth-leaderless-movement>.

28 → In the case of Joseph Jacotot, which Rancière generalises from in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, the tension did not inexist—it was given in the very fact that students and teacher could not communicate. See Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster. Five Lessons on Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

29 → Cf. Simondon, “Forme, Information, Potentiels,” 544.

30 → Boff, *Como Trabalhar com o Povo*, 20.

31 → Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Minuit), 198.

32 → *Ibid.*, 10.

33 → *Ibid.*, 68.

34 → *Ibid.*, 80.

35 → *Ibid.*, 10.

*modo*].”<sup>36</sup> Neither is there any linearity to it, because “[t]he people’s journey can be accelerated by [...] historical opportunities (*kairós*).”<sup>37</sup> The agent is not only someone who coordinates or assembles “the collective word,”<sup>38</sup> she can also “incite the community to leap ahead”<sup>39</sup> if the occasion arises. “Taking risks is indispensable.”<sup>40</sup>

If attentive and respectful listening are among the top qualities the agent must have, *listening* to the people does not mean necessarily *going with the first thing that is said*. There is nothing “less educative” than aversion or disdain towards the people’s word, but respect does not “imply automatic approval.”<sup>41</sup> If “the group manifests a particular desire or expectation, it must be respected and taken seriously. But it is the agent’s duty to question that desire, to problematize that expectation,”<sup>42</sup> even if the right to criticize can only be earned by “respecting the people’s freedom of initiative and their final decision.”<sup>43</sup> There is only process if there is movement, there is only movement if there is tension, there is only tension if there is difference. The agent, leader or teacher must always be ready to “meet people halfway”—a reciprocal encounter—but the very object of the relationship consists in constantly redefining where “halfway” is.

This idea of tension explains then why a politics of “weak reformism” or “passive revolution” does not necessarily follow from nor can be too easily justified by appealing to the dialogism advocated by Freire or Boff. According to the latter, in fact,

36 → Ibid., 20.

37 → Ibid., 81.

38 → Ibid.

39 → Ibid., 65.

40 → Ibid., 81.

41 → Ibid., 48. This corresponds to the distinction drawn by Carlos Nuñez Hurtado between a “*basista*” (literally, “grassrootist”) leadership and a “*saber preguntar*” (“knowing how to ask”) one: whereas the first raises the people’s immediacy (of attitudes, opinions, etc.) to the level of an argument of authority, the second sees its own role as building alongside the people. I thank one of my anonymous reviewers for this observation. See Carlos Nuñez Hurtado, *Educación para Transformar, Transformar para Educar* (Quito: CEDECO, 1987).

42 → Ibid., 69.

43 → Ibid., 49.

[...] the simplified disjunctive—reform or revolution—is false. For a reform can have a revolutionary content. That is when it takes on a revolutionary orientation, when it signifies one more step in the direction of social transformation. The real disjunctive is reformism versus revolution, for here reform no longer poses the perspective of creating a new society, but only the [improved] continuity of the existing one.<sup>44</sup>

But if the criterion according to which good and bad reform can be differentiated is the direction in which they point, this necessarily poses the problem of *telos*: what direction? Who gets to decide it? How to stop it from becoming a program imposed by “the most advanced”, regardless of whether they are “external” or “internal” agents, on “the less advanced”? These questions, of course, speak directly to the anxieties around political action that we have inherited from the tragic history of revolutionary movements in the last century, which are summarily expressed in remarks such as these:

Since the 19th century, great political institutions [...] have confiscated the process of political creation; that is, they have tried to give to political creation the form of a political program in order to take over power.<sup>45</sup>

But the idea of a program [...] is dangerous. From the moment a program is presented, it becomes a law, an interdiction against invention.<sup>46</sup>

[That] has always, or nearly always, led to abuse or political domination from a bloc—be it from technicians or bureaucrats or other people.<sup>47</sup>

It is for precisely those reasons that the idea of goals, ends and directions have for some time now been handled with suspicion. And yet, is it not the problems of forsaking any kind of *telos* or strategic horizon that we are discussing here? In the absence of any sense of a direction towards which to strive, is it at all possible to differentiate what one does from the “business as usual” management of present states of affairs?

44 → Ibid., 95. Italics in the original.

45 → Michel Foucault, “Une Interview: Sexe, Pouvoir et la Politique de l’Identité,” *Dits et Écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), vol. II, 1565.

46 → Michel Foucault, “L’Amitié comme Mode de Vie,” *Dits et Écrits*, vol. II, 986.

47 → Michel Foucault, “Une Interview,” 1565.



And should we not recognize that when we inquire into something like 'post-neoliberalism,' it is of something like a *telos*, however indeterminate, provisional or processual, that we are talking?

Out of the impasse between the fear of program-driven politics and a politics without goals (and hence without transformative orientation or immanent criteria), one temptation would be to sever the relation between act and finality: to obviate the problem of *telos* by conceiving of a political act that is self-contained, not a means to something but an end in itself. This is only possible, of course, if time is flattened into a single moment, process compressed into a concentrated gesture. If by revolution we understand a transformation that takes place over time, made up of moments that are "coordinated over the mid- to long-term towards ultimate objectives," this move would amount to substituting the idea of revolution with that of an insurrection or revolt that "suspends historical time, establishing a time in which everything that is done has a value in itself, independently of its consequences and of its relations with the transitory or perennial complex that constitutes history."<sup>48</sup>

Such an alternative would, of course, be unacceptable to Freire or Boff; for them, the aspiration for a self-contained act would probably appear as no more than an abstraction of actual politics, a quest for purity that leads to a preference for an imaginary model over the humbler, more ambivalent realities of practice. If "what matters is not the step as such, but its orientation," it makes no sense to conceive of an act in abstraction of a process; "[t]he weight of an action comes from the direction in which it points."<sup>49</sup> Ignoring that is the basis for an aestheticization of politics in the form of either a celebration of its impossibility or the "coarse activism" that would rather take a thousand steps on its own rather than walk more slowly with others.

48 → Furio Jesi, *Spartakus. The Symbology of Revolt*, ed. Andrea Cavaletti, trans. Alberto Toscano (Calcutta: Seagull, 2014), 46. An example of this temptation can be found in The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011). Another manifestation of it is the ethos of "the lulz" in Anonymous—a non-instrumental critique-as-mockery that does not distinguish between worthy and unworthy targets in any *a priori* way, and thus enables the denunciation of "moralfags" (members of Anonymous who would wish to harness its capacities in favor of campaigns with concrete goals). See Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy. The Many Faces of Anonymous* (London: Verso, 2014).

49 → Boff, *Como Trabalhar com o Povo*, 94.

We should identify in Freire and Boff another alternative, which is neither the elimination of every *telos* nor the separation of act from finality. If emancipation is in some sense autotelic—it aims to produce itself, or the conditions of its own reproduction—then *telos* cannot be mistaken for a program that leaders or educators would already carry with them from the start. It is a *learning to no end* in the sense that it is an unfinishable task by definition; there is no final state in which it could be said to be complete. But that does not mean that it has “no end” in the sense of no inherent direction, not least because it is a fact that some concrete social situations are more enabling than others when it comes to everyone being a “permanent re-creator” of reality. What matters is that, at every moment, this direction and the steps that it implies be “*taken on by the people* as [their] potential protagonist.”<sup>50</sup> This means, in turn, that the tension of the pedagogic relationship never stops acting back on the direction itself, which is continuously transformed in the very process of being taken on by those who participate. *Telos*, then, not in the sense of a program, but of something like what Simondon called a “structural germ”, which structures a field according to the potentials that are present in it; not the realization of something already given (the program), but the individuation of something new, unique to the process itself. ■

50 → Ibid., 90. Italics in the original. See Foucault again: “Without a program does not mean blindness—to be blind to thought. [...] [B]eing without a program can be very useful and very original and creative, if it does not mean without proper reflection about what is going on, or without very careful attention to what is possible.” Michel Foucault, “Une Interview,” 1565.