PROCESS, ORIENTATION, AND SYSTEM: THE PEDAGOGICAL OPERATION OF UTOPIA IN THE WORK OF PAULO FREIRE

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Abstract. Recent years have witnessed a renewed interest in utopianism within educational theory. In this essay, Darren Webb explores the utopian pedagogy of Paulo Freire in the context of what one commentator has dubbed “the educational comeback of utopia.” Webb argues that Freire’s significance lies in the way he embraced both “utopia as process” and “utopia as system.” This is significant because the contemporary rejuvenation of utopianism has extended only so far, embracing utopia conceived as an open-ended process of becoming but shying away from utopia conceived as the delineation of a normative vision to be struggled for and won. Webb outlines the pedagogical operation of utopia as process, cognitive-affective orientation, and system, and he argues that Freire was right in insisting that each is constitutive of effective educational practice.

Introduction

The significance of Paulo Freire, both within the field of education and beyond, is widely recognized. Not everyone, perhaps, would agree that he was the exemplary intellectual of our time or the prime catalyst for pedagogical innovation in the second half of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, even his critics concede that the prevalence of such claims testifies to his influence. An interesting feature of the literature over recent years is that a subtle shift has taken place in assessments of the nature of Freire’s pedagogical innovation and of why he was such an exemplary intellectual. Here we see a shift in emphasis from Freire the grounded inspiration behind critical pedagogy to Freire the visionary instigator of utopian pedagogy. This is evident in various recent collections exploring the interplay between utopia and education, and one now finds Freire’s “utopian pedagogy” informing developments in areas such as drama education and autoethnography as well as in more familiar fields such as critical literacy education.


2. In spite of her trenchant critique, for example, Diana Coben concedes, “To his many admirers, Freire seems to offer a noble vision of adult education as politically liberating and spiritually redemptive, shot through with poetic insights, imbued with hope and crowned with love.” Diana Coben, Radical Heroes: Gramsci, Freire, and the Politics of Adult Education (New York: Garland, 1998), 204–205.

Contemporary interest in utopian pedagogy is part of a renewed interest more widely in utopia and utopianism. Patrick Hayden and Chamsy el-Ojeili talk of “the implicit and sometimes explicit rejuvenation of utopianism” within contemporary social theory. This they explain with reference to the transformations associated with globalization. On the one hand, as has frequently been noted, globalization carries with it a wide range of utopian significations — from the borderless world and global citizenship to unbounded freedom and choice to material prosperity and the satisfaction of needs. On the other, one encounters economic crisis, growing polarization of wealth, cultural and military imperialism, and an overwhelming sense of agentic impotence in the face of an uncontrollable process. For Hayden and el-Ojeili, the revival of utopian thinking is a response to the jarring disjunction between the utopian significations and the dystopian realities of globalization. Related to this is growing dissatisfaction with postempiricist deconstructive social science. Concerned primarily with dismantling and demystifying truth claims and value commitments, deconstructive science is seen to have generated an enfeebled “vocabulary of deficit” within which the concept of future possibilities is absent. Deemed inadequate in the face of the injustices of globalization, what is called for instead is a socially enabling, future-oriented, utopian “vocabulary of hope.” Tom Moylan speaks for many when he argues that the dystopian realities of the present demand as a response “a courageous embrace of the utopian project.”


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Edutopias respond with a sense of urgency to a foreboding anxiety that “nothing like an alternative to global capitalism seems remotely possible”; and those collected in Critique and Utopia are framed by a perceived need to “guide the transformation of society and imagine a postneoliberal era.” Freed of the pejorative connotations that have long been associated with it, the concept of utopia has been embraced more broadly within educational theory. It is not uncommon to find educational theory being cast in positive terms as inherently utopian, concerned as it is with our desires and hopes for the future. In light of these developments, Marianna Papastephanou is not overstating the case when she refers to “the educational comeback of utopia.”

Freire’s significance in the context of this utopian comeback lies in the way he embraces both “utopia as system” and “utopia as process.” The former conceives utopia as the imaginary reconstitution of society, the delineation of a normative, prescriptive vision to be struggled for and won. The latter conceives utopia as an open-ended process of becoming that resists closure: a process giving rise to utopian texts as expressions of critical longing, but one that can never end with the realization of any particular vision. A certain tension exists between these two competing conceptions of utopia, with advocates of process utopianism critiquing “utopia as system” for its totalizing act of closure and process utopianism being critiqued in turn for its retreat from political engagement.

In this article, I explore whether Freire, in simultaneously embracing utopia as system and process, succeeded in resolving the tension between them. Did he succeed in articulating a utopian pedagogy of political engagement that avoids the totalizing act of closure? This is an important question because the educational


comeback of utopia has extended only so far. Utopia has been embraced with a hint of caution, accompanied by warnings against a kind of “bad” utopianism characterized by “unrealistic” visions and prescriptive “blueprints.”¹⁶ Positive reevaluations of Freire’s utopianism have also fallen short of a wholehearted endorsement of his normative, prescriptive vision, focusing more instead on his notion of utopia as a critical process. Here, I seek to offer a presentation and defense of Paulo Freire’s utopian pedagogy of process, orientation, and system.

Utopia as Process

Freire regarded utopia as an anthropological constant, an innate human propensity, “part of human nature ... an integral part of the historic-social manner of being a person.”¹⁷ So integral is utopia to our nature and being that it is “a fundamental necessity for human beings” — without utopia, we cease to be human.¹⁸ For Freire, however, what it is to be human is in a permanent process of becoming. Like many other philosophers of hope (Ernst Bloch, Gabriel Marcel, Josef Pieper, and Jean-Paul Sartre, to name but a few) Freire subscribed to the notion of homo viator — the human being as ontological traveller.¹⁹ Speaking shortly before his death, Sartre suggested that “what a human being is has not yet been established. We are not complete human beings ... we could say that we are sub-beings, beings who have not yet reached a final point, a point we may never reach, though we are moving toward it.”²⁰ Freire, too, was convinced that humans are travelers but not aimless wanderers; rather, “men are searchers and their ontological vocation is humanization.”²¹ Humanization, becoming more fully human, is that toward which we are traveling, and the promise of humanization is experienced as an unconscious ontological pull from the future that drives us on in our journey. By placing repeated emphasis on the inherent openness of the future, however, Freire suggested that our vocation to become more fully human is a point we may move toward but never reach.²²


²⁰. Sartre, Hope Now, 67–68.


Freire thus conceptualized utopia as an open-ended and incessant process of becoming. As human beings, we have a “vocation” or “calling” to humanization, but we are fated never fully to realize this calling; we are traveling the route to ourselves but will never reach our destination. How does utopia, so conceived, operate pedagogically? Looked at negatively, it means “there is no guaranteed prescription nor ready-made project that can be suggested.”23 Because reality, history, and human nature are undergoing constant transformation, all substantive utopian prescriptions and projects become obsolete before they can ossify. Indeed, because the utopia of liberation is a social process, the politico-pedagogical project of striving to realize a single utopian vision is “incompatible with human existence.”24

Looked at more positively, the pedagogical operation of utopia-as-process entails the educator aiding the learner in “the effort of searching.”25 More specifically, “the duty of the educator [is] to search out appropriate paths for the learner to travel.”26 Although reality and being are conceived as open-ended and undecided, the role of the educator is one of ensuring that the learner treads an appropriate path toward humanization. This is important because, while “we live the life of a vocation, a calling, to humanization,” our response to this calling can be exploited, manipulated, and distorted by the material and ideological forces of dehumanization.27 Helping the learner negotiate and overcome the obstacles and perilous dead ends that line the path to humanization is a key educational endeavor. A constant trope within Freire is that of “illumination,” and the pedagogical operation of utopia-as-process is one of illuminating the path toward humanization (even if neither educator nor educand quite knows where this path will end).28

**Utopia as Orientation**

Traveling the path toward humanization and engaging actively in the process of human becoming requires, for Freire, a particular cognitive-emotional orientation. This he termed “the orientation toward being more” or the adoption of “a utopian attitude to the world.”29 The key characteristics of this orientation are “epistemological curiosity” and “radical hope.” Epistemological curiosity

26. Ibid., 10.
27. Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, 84.
is the rigorous and critical interrogation of the world in order to decode and
decipher its inner workings and to reveal that beyond every “limit situation”
there lies “untested feasibility.” Radical hope is a profound confidence in the
transformative capacities of human agency, a confidence that enables real subjects
to insert themselves into history and commit themselves to confronting and
overcoming the limit situations that face them. Driven by such curiosity and
hope, learners are able to respond to their ontological calling and pursue as active
subjects their incessant search for humanization.

This utopian orientation toward the world, however, is not the spontaneous
orientation of the human subject. Here one finds a key role for utopian pedagogy.
For while curiosity is an essential human attribute, in its spontaneous form it
lacks the rigor and methodological exactitude needed to fully “read” the world. For Freire, “It’s precisely because ingenuous curiosity does not automatically
become critical that one of the essential tasks of progressive educational praxis is
the promotion of a curiosity that is critical, bold, and adventurous.” The same
applies to ingenuous hope, which, without guidance and direction, becomes fixated
on ideologically manipulated objectives — such as striking it rich and “private
notions of getting ahead” — and appeals for the realization of its objectives to
external agents such as luck, fate, or God. There is a fundamental role for utopian
pedagogy, then, in educating both curiosity and hope.

Utopia as understood here becomes a cognitive-emotional orientation, the
possession of which enables one to decipher and transform the world in
pursuing the calling to humanization. It comprises, on the one hand, “a
rigorous methodological curiosity” capable of piercing through ideology, myth,
and common sense in order to “reveal the world.” On the other, it consists
of a sense of possibility grounded in a profound confidence in the capacity of
human beings to transform and recreate the world. The pedagogical operation of
utopia-as-orientation requires from the educator “the sharpening of the learner’s
epistemological curiosity” and, as William Morris once put it when describing the
pedagogical imperatives of his own project, “educating people to a sense of their
real capacities as men.”

31. See Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 71–72; and Freire, “A Few Notes about the Word
‘Conscientization.’”
33. Freire, Pedagogy of Freedom, 38.
34. Freire and Shor, A Pedagogy for Liberation, 110; and Paulo Freire, Cultural Action for Freedom
35. See Freire, Pedagogy of the Heart, 31; and Freire, Pedagogy of Hope, 3.
37. Freire, Pedagogy of the Heart, 75; and William Morris, Political Writings of William Morris, ed. A.L.
Freire as Critical Utopian

Little in the preceding accounts will come as a surprise to writers sympathetic to Freire’s utopianism. From the very earliest commentaries on his work, the dominant interpretive frame within Anglo-American theory has been that of utopia-as-process. Since the publication in 1986 of Tom Moylan’s *Demand the Impossible* — still the definitive statement of utopia-as-process — Freire’s ideas have been commonly analyzed using Moylan’s category of “critical utopianism.”

The defining feature of the critical utopia is that it “reject[s] utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream,” and his critical utopian rejection of blueprints has been highlighted and enthusiastically endorsed by those working within the Freirean tradition.

This reading of Freire argues that his critical utopianism resists closure, offers no answers, and presents no blueprints; is open, partial, provisional, and undecidable; and jettisons meaning in favor of metaphor and rejects the quest for certainties in favor of indeterminacy. For Tyson Lewis, Freire’s is a project of “radical uncertainty” that “lacks a blueprint to a utopian future or a manifesto that outlines transformative action” but rather opens up “the possibility of new possibilities.” Embracing the openness that defines humans as indefinable beings, Freire’s pedagogy takes us on “an educational quest for liberation without recourse to a set road.”

The principal function of utopia becomes that of critical demystification — unveiling, uncovering, and unmasking the operation of power so that new [open, provisional, partial, undecidable] spaces of possibility can emerge. Utopia consists of future-oriented critical engagement that resists the hypostasis of closed representation and refuses to focus on a final static goal.

There is much within Freire to suggest that he did reject utopia-as-blueprint. He argued, for example, that “Every prescription represents the imposition of one man’s choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the man prescribed to into one that conforms to the prescriber’s consciousness.”


42. Ibid., 245.


pedagogy of the blueprint — what Mark Coté, Richard Day, and Greig de Peuter refer to as “the indignity of speaking for others” — underpins the warnings against “bad” utopianism found within contemporary educational theory. Freire himself framed his critique of blueprintism using themes and terms borrowed from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Echoing Engels, he emphasized that the shape of the utopian future could be announced only by those who create it; like Marx, he refused to concoct utopian “recipes” for the cookshops of the future; and like both, he attacked the arrogance of “utopian prophets” who seek to fill the empty consciousness of the people with the knowledge they themselves cannot attain. Paraphrasing a key passage from The German Ideology, Freire declared, “The future is not a province some distance from the present which just waits for us to arrive some day…. The future is born of the present, from possibilities in contradiction, from the battle waged by forces that dialectically oppose each other.”

Here, then, one returns to utopia as process and orientation. The utopia of humanization is a future-in-becoming rather than, as Marx and Engels put it, “an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself.” In order to fight for this future, educators and educands together require the adoption of a utopian attitude, an orientation toward being more, so they can engage with the world as active subjects. The pedagogical operation of utopia becomes, as Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren maintain, one of critical demystification (epistemological curiosity) and evoking within subjects a confidence in their transformative agential capacities (radical hope).

**Utopia as System**

The most common definition offered by Freire sees “utopia” as a process of denunciation-annunciation: “Utopia is the dialectical process of denouncing and announcing — denouncing the oppressing structure and announcing the humanizing structure.” In nurturing and evoking both epistemological curiosity


49. Giroux and McLaren, “Paulo Freire, Postmodernism, and the Utopian Imagination.”

and radical hope, the critical role of utopian pedagogy in the process of denunciation is clear. But what about the process of announcing humanization? Here, Freire argued that a “blueprint” (the word is his) of the world in which we would like to live is needed in order to “propel” us along the path to humanization.51

In arguing for the necessity of a utopian blueprint or system, Freire placed emphasis on the purposive nature of human being:

As project, as design for a different, less-ugly “world,” the dream is as necessary to political subjects, transformers of the world and not adapters to it, as it is fundamental for an artisan, who projects in his or her brain what she or he is going to execute even before the execution thereof.52

In order, then, to travel (as curious, hopeful agents) the path toward humanization, we need a clear “design” or “blueprint” depicting the form and shape that humanization will take. Just as artisans cannot operate with an open-ended, undecided, indeterminate understanding of what they are about to execute, so too for humans following their ontological calling to become more fully human. This is an argument commonly deployed in defense of utopia-as-system. For example, Maurice Meisner states that

people must hope before they can act, and their hopes must be lodged in a vision of a better future if their actions are not to be blind and devoid of purpose. Indeed, it is an inherent and unique attribute of mankind that human actions are both purposive and future-oriented. In this respect, the utility of utopias is obvious. Utopian visions of the future not only serve as critiques of existing social orders but offer alternatives to it, and thus not only make people aware of the imperfections of the present but also move them to transform it in accordance with the utopian ideal.53

Utopia is conceptualized here as a representational and prescriptive vision. This is fully consistent with Lyman Sargent’s widely used definition of utopia as “a non-existent society described in considerable detail . . . that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived.”54 The pedagogical operation of utopia-as-system sees the educator engaging the learner in their curious, hopeful ontological journey by presenting to them a detailed vision of that toward which they are striving.

Freire’s reading of utopia-as-system has generated no little criticism. From both left and right, he has been denounced for the elitist, paternalistic, and messianic privilege he afforded the educator in leading the flock of educands toward a vision of salvation that only the educator can fully grasp.55 For Freire, because the masses

51. Freire, Letters to Cristina, 187.
52. Freire, Pedagogy of Hope, 78. This clearly follows Marx’s distinction between the worst of architects and the best of bees. See Marx, Capital, 178.
54. Lyman Tower Sargent, Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6. Sargent’s definition was first formulated over two decades ago and is widely used within the field of utopian studies.
55. From the right, for example, one has Peter L. Berger, Pyramids of Sacrifice: Political Ethics and Social Change (New York: Basic Books, 1974). From the left, one of the more powerful Marxist critiques
with whom the radical educator works are trapped in a culture of silence, “they cannot see, beyond their present situation, the untested feasibility, the future as a liberation project that they must create for themselves.” It is the educator’s role, therefore, to present a vision of this untested feasibility, and it is essential that “the educators have the courage to take responsibility for the job of showing the way.” Importantly, Freire suggested that the radical educator can see the future and can show the way. While the process utopian sees utopia as “naming that space we cannot yet know,” Freire insisted that “Utopia is an act of knowing critically. I cannot denounce an oppressing structure if I do not penetrate into it and know it. Nor can I announce what I do not know.” The utopian educator thus announces the future they know and leads the way.

Recounting a story to illustrate the power of the utopian imagination, Freire described how Amilcar Cabral addressed his followers by closing his eyes and dreaming out loud, speaking for forty minutes on the details of the organization of postrevolutionary Guinea-Bissau, its administration, its education system, and the newly reborn people who would inhabit it. This is presented by Freire as an example of the pedagogical value of utopia-as-system, the educative power of a normative vision described in considerable detail. As Alasdair Morrison once put it, “utopia can, and often does, generate both enthusiasm and determination. It attracts supporters who will not be content with thought-experiments: they want the real thing. That indeed is what utopia is for: it is an inspiration and a goal.” Cabral’s detailed depiction of his systematic utopian vision served as a goal — imbuing humanization with content — for which his ontological wayfaring followers could strive. Freire, too, sought to offer a goal. He once remarked that “I believe my strongest calling is exactly the calling to realize my dream,” and he used phrases such as “revelation” and “conversion” to describe the role of the educator in helping to realize this dream.

This, however, is the kind of “bad” utopianism (the educator leading the masses to redemption with his or her prophetic utopian vision) that contemporary educational theorists warn against. As we have seen, attempts are often made to

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57. Freire, Daring to Dream, 37.


distance Freire from this “bad” utopianism and to construct him positively as a critical utopian who rejected utopia-as-blueprint. Freire, however, did emphasize the necessity of utopia-as-system. Positive annunciation was required not only because humans are purposive creatures, but also as a means to counter the conservative drive to domesticate the future and render it merely “a repetition of the present.”

When so much ideological weight is placed behind the proclamation that “there is no alternative,” utopian pedagogy needs to depict such an alternative to rouse homo viator from a state of ontological paralysis. For Freire, liberatory pedagogies “cannot exist without being driven by fundamental visions of a utopian society.”

**Utopia as Process, Orientation, and System**

The tension in Freire’s work, between an open-ended being-on-the-way historicism and the call for prophetic educators to present a vision of the known goal, is widely recognized. He has been described as simultaneously a postmodernist and a Leninist, and some see this tension as an unresolvable contradiction within Freire’s thought. It need not be seen this way, however. We can begin by pointing to the pedagogical insufficiency of utopia-as-process. Taking *Utopian Pedagogy* as an example, this volume is framed explicitly by utopia conceived as process. The editors emphasize that the contributors reject traditional “blueprint” utopianism and “look to utopia not as a place we might reach but as an ongoing process of becoming.” The utopian experiments outlined in the volume are less concerned with “a point of arrival” than with creating “a point of departure.” These points of departure have dialogue at their heart and are variously presented as dialogical spaces, communities of learning, and participatory classes. Taking place within these spaces is an antinormative series of exploratory encounters, a process of posing questions without the pretense of giving answers, and an “objectless” process of critical questioning.

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67. Ibid., 14.
There are significant limitations to this understanding of utopian pedagogy. The emphasis on creating spaces of dialogue and points of departure misses the point that dialogue “is not a ‘free space’ where you say what you want. Dialogue takes place inside some program and content.”70 As Richard Rorty once put it, all discursive spaces do “is give you freedom of discussion; you still need the poetic imagination, still need revolutionary recontextualizers to give you new alternatives to discuss.”71 In other words, without content and vision utopian spaces run the risk of remaining empty and barren. David Harvey makes much the same point when he argues that utopia conceived as process has “the habit of getting lost in the romanticism of endlessly open projects that never have to come to a point of closure.” Without closure in the form of a vision and a goal, utopia remains “a pure signifier of hope destined never to acquire a material referent.”72

Even Giroux and McLaren, passionate and persistent critics of utopia-as-system, concede that “without a vision for the future — without asking, ‘Empowerment for what?’ — critical pedagogy becomes reduced to a method for participation that takes democracy as an end, not a means.”73 Indeed, in order to prevent it from becoming an empty and endless project that romanticizes the process while losing sight of the goal, Giroux recognizes that “radical pedagogy needs a vision — one that celebrates not what is but what could be, that looks beyond the immediate to the future and links struggle to a new set of human possibilities.”74

Underpinning the reluctance to embrace the need for utopia-as-system is the fear of totalizing closure and the indignity of speaking for others. This fear, however, is misplaced. Freire’s utopian pedagogy was always concerned with creating the conditions for utopia to emerge:

One of the most important tasks of critical educational practice is to make possible the conditions in which the learners, in their interaction with one another and with their teachers, engage in the experience of assuming themselves as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons; dreamers of possible utopias.75

The pedagogical value of utopian visions is that they help create these conditions, that is, conditions through which learners themselves emerge as dreamers of utopia. This was recognized long ago by William Morris. In News from Nowhere

70. Freire and Shor, A Pedagogy for Liberation, 102.
75. Freire, Pedagogy of Freedom, 45.
Morris offered us one of the great utopian visions — a vision of society reconstituted in its totality and a vision full of detailed and normative content. Yet Morris himself was critical of utopian “prophets” and fully maintained that the humanized future would be shaped by those who live in it. Morris’s project is commonly referred to now as “the education of desire,” while Freire described his own as “a pedagogy of desire” and “the education of longing.” For Morris, the crucial role of utopian visions in the education of desire was that “these dreams for the future, make many a man a socialist whom sober reason deduced from science and political economy and the selection of the fittest would not move at all.” Like Morris, Freire believed that “As progressive educators, one of our main tasks seems to be with respect to generating political dreams in people, political yearnings, political desires.” Also like Morris, Freire believed that utopian visions were needed to guide purposive creatures — moved more by announcements of the future goal than by denunciations of the dehumanizing present — along their ontological journey toward humanization. Utopian visions liberate the imagination as to the possibilities for change and help to both generate and shape dreams, yearnings, and desires. Importantly, though, for Freire utopian systems have the status of “draft projects” or “pre-projects” that develop and change shape as they become true projects through praxis. Announcing a pre-project that becomes project through transformative action is, indeed, “the meaning of historical engagement inspired by a prophetic, utopian, but critical hope.”

Utopia, for Freire, is a process of becoming driven by critical curiosity and radical hope toward a vision of a new way of being. Utopia as process, orientation, and system is constitutive of human being. He feared, however, that each element of utopia is currently under threat: curiosity becomes resignation, hope is commodified, the future is foreclosed, and the path of the wayfaring human is channeled increasingly toward dehumanization. We are repeatedly told that there is no alternative, that everything has been worked out, that the future will be a repetition of the present, and that “there is no more place among us for the dreamer and believer in utopia.” For this reason “the struggle for the restoration of utopia” is all the more necessary and must become the animating imperative of political and educational practice. For Freire, “There is no tomorrow without a project, without a dream, without utopia, without hope, without creative work, and work

76. Morris,Political Writings of William Morris, 106–107 and 188–189.
77. Freire, Daring to Dream, 5; and Freire, Pedagogy of Hope, 25.
78. Morris,Political Writings of William Morris, 189.
79. Freire, Daring to Dream, 5.
80. Freire, Cultural Action for Freedom, 71.
82. Freire, Pedagogy of Freedom, 41.
83. Ibid., 103.
toward the development of possibilities, which can make the concretization of that tomorrow possible.” The pedagogical operation of utopia becomes that of sharpening the learner’s epistemological curiosity, educating their ingenuous hope, and illuminating the path toward humanization in light of a design for a new way of being.

**Freire as Active Utopian**

Ruth Levitas describes utopianism in its “will-full” form as *evaluative* in unambiguously declaring one particular vision of society to be better than another; *prescriptive* in advocating the realization of a normatively preferred vision of society; and *totalizing* in advocating the systematic and systemic transformation of society. This she contrasts with the hesitant and restrained process orientation of “utopian proposals which are provisional, temporary and reflexive, or which celebrate the act of imagining rather than what is imagined.” In the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, one finds both at work. While “the educational comeback of utopia” has thus far shied away from embracing utopia-as-system, and while radical educators tend to present Freire as a “critical utopian,” Freire himself highlighted the necessity of the pedagogical act of utopian annunciation. Without a normative vision with which to illuminate the path toward human becoming, utopian pedagogy is reduced to the celebration of objectless discursive spaces.

In practicing a utopian pedagogy of process, orientation, and system, Freire stated, “What is implied is not the transmission to the people of a knowledge previously elaborated, a process that ignores what they already know, but the act of returning to them, in an organized form, what they themselves offered in a disorganized form.” This key point is phrased differently at different times — teaching better what the people already know, transforming knowledge based on feelings into knowledge based on critical understanding, and teaching with precision what the educator receives with confusion. With regard to the design for a new way of being that illuminates the path toward humanization, this, for Freire, emerges from the learners’ reality in confused form and at the affective level. The role of the educator is to work with learners to provide the design with a deeper cognitive foundation and a sharper, more precise shape.

Borrowing a concept from Karl Mannheim, it is possible to interpret Freirean pedagogy as “an active utopia.” According to Mannheim, “it is a very essential feature of modern history that in the gradual organization for collective action social classes become effective in transforming historical reality only when their

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aspirations are embodied in utopias appropriate to the changing situation."89

The role of the educator is crucial here in giving clear utopian form to popular aspirations. For Mannheim, the utopian conceptions of the educator seize on currents present in society, give expression to them, flow back into the outlook of a social group, and are translated by this group into action. Rather than corresponding directly to a concrete body of articulated needs, the active utopia "transmits" and "articulates" the amorphous "collective impulse" of a group.90 While Freire’s utopian pedagogy starts from and is grounded in the experiences of the educands, seizing and reflecting on the "collective impulse" of the group, it is also an active and constructive pedagogy giving positive utopian expression to this amorphous collective impulse.

Conclusion

Russell Jacoby argues that the reshaping and commodification of childhood that has taken place over recent decades has diminished the foundations of utopian thought: "If unstructured childhood sustains imagination, and imagination sustains utopian thinking, then the eclipse of the first entails the weakening of the last — utopian thinking."91 This chimes with Freire’s concerns about the stifling of epistemological curiosity, the privatization of hope, and the foreclosing of the future. It also signals the importance of education as a utopian endeavor. Moving beyond the characterization of education as merely a site of cultural reproduction, it is seen now as — potentially — "the foremost social means" of liberating the imagination, redirecting the paths of human desire, and keeping the future open to new possibilities.92 Educationalists are urged to work and to act to ensure that education operates as a "site of utopian possibility."93

The difficulties are considerable. "Banking education" has increasingly displaced student-centered approaches as the exchange between teachers and students is narrowed to one of teaching and learning for assessment and certification; learning space has been colonized by a testing apparatus designed to measure the extent to which students have digested a prescribed curriculum; the education sector is framed by managerial values and a performative audit culture whose emphasis on measurable outcomes has further entrenched a banking concept of education; and the under-resourcing of the sector, and the struggle of educators to cope with the resultant work intensification, have served to increase

90. Ibid., 185–186.
the distance between students and teachers.94 It is the ensuing closure of critical space within the education system, together with the need for a vocabulary of hope to guide a transformative response to globalization, that underpins the calls for a courageous embrace of utopian pedagogy.

Utopian pedagogy cannot, however, confine itself to creating spaces of critical dialogue and communities of learning.95 Nor is it enough to interrogate the student voice in order to uncover submerged longings and desires.96 As Mannheim rightly highlighted, unless the longings, desires, and “collective impulse” of a group are seized upon and articulated as a utopian system by the visionary educator, then this collective impulse remains just an impulse — an objectless process — because it lacks the “situationally transcendent ideas” that alone can guide and direct transformative action.97 Without a positively enunciated utopian goal to motivate and guide the praxis of purposive human actors, social hope will take the form of a directionless passionate longing and the process utopianism that emerges from and feeds back into this hope will run the risk of getting lost in the romanticism of endlessly open projects — thus the pedagogical necessity, recognized by Freire, of utopia as process, orientation, and system. The role of the active utopian educator becomes one of unmasking reality, of illuminating the path toward humanization, of sharpening the curiosity and radicalizing the hope of the educands, and, crucially, of directing their purposive action toward the realization of a utopian vision, system, and goal.


95. The form of utopian pedagogy advanced by Coté, Day, and de Peuter in *Utopian Pedagogy*.

96. The form of utopian pedagogy advanced by Giroux and McLaren in “Paulo Freire, Postmodernism, and the Utopian Imagination.”