

# Paulo Freire and the Value of Equality in Education<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article seeks to elucidate the philosophical sense of equality affirmed by Paulo Freire as a condition of a liberating education, for which “accepting and respecting difference” is another of its conditions. More specifically, it analyzes his statement that “nobody is superior to anyone else” (FREIRE, 2017, p. 119) in its logical, epistemological, educational and political dimensions. This analysis is developed in five sections. In the first section, a detailed and conceptual examination of the afore-mentioned phrase is proposed. In the second section, the paper considers the implications of this examination for an educational life inspired by Freirean thought; it specifically studies the sense of equality in the pedagogical relationship, that is, between teachers and learners. In the next section, it introduces the ideas of another advocate of equality in education, the French author Joseph Jacotot, in the early nineteenth century. In the fourth section, it compares Jacotot’s ideas with those of Paulo Freire, highlighting commonalities and differences, both in their lives and in their educational thoughts. Finally, it draws some conclusions about the value of equality in education, inspired by the reading of these authors, in particular with regard to the place of knowledge and thinking in an emancipatory education.

## Keywords

Paulo Freire – Joseph Jacotot – Equality.

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*Intellectuals need to discover that their critical capacity is of neither greater nor less worth than the sensitivity of the people.*

(FREIRE; FAUNDEZ, 1985, p. 58 [1989, p. 29]).

*We are all different, and the manner in which living beings reproduce is programmed for what we are to be. This is why the human being eventually has need of fashioning the concept of equality. Were we all identical, like a population of bacteria, the notion of equality would be perfectly useless.*

(FREIRE, 2014, p. 135 [1994, p. 97]).

From his earliest writings, Paulo Freire argued in favor of the equality of teachers and students, a position maintained over the course of his entire life. “Nobody is superior to anyone else” (FREIRE, 2017, p. 119 [1998 p. 108]), he states clearly in his last book published before his death. He portrays this claim as “one of the few certainties that I am sure of” (FREIRE, 2017, p. 119 [1998 p. 108]). The context of this phrase elucidates the importance of educators putting equality into practice and knowing how to listen to their students. The implication is that true, attentive listening demands permanent availability to others and a series of:

[...] qualities or virtues, such as a generous loving heart, respect for others, tolerance, humility, a joyful disposition, love of life, openness to what is new, a disposition to welcome change, perseverance in the struggle, a refusal of determinism, a spirit of hope, and openness to justice. (FREIRE, 2017, p. 118 [1998, p. 108]).

In his justification of these requirements, Freire (FREIRE, 2017, p. 118 [1998, p. 108]) argues that “to accept and respect what is different” is one of the conditions for listening to others. Anyone who believes that their opinion is the only correct one, or who thinks that “standard” grammar is the only acceptable way to speak or write, is not listening, but rather disdainful or mistreating. Thus, according to Freire, humility is a fundamental virtue for an educator, because it is based on the presupposition that anyone who sees themselves as superior will never listen to others. As a result, the affirmation of humility as a pedagogical virtue is, for Freire, a value that is simultaneously ethical, political, and epistemological. Its absence indicates arrogance and a false sense of superiority that render impossible an education based on the aforementioned principles. So from the equality implicit in the statement, “Nobody is superior to anyone else,” follows a requirement that education be emancipatory. But what does this requirement mean?

This is a complex question. On the one hand, the society that gave sense and meaning to Paulo Freire’s life and work promotes a vast array of inequalities: economic, political, social, cultural, and educational. Seen in these terms, equality is completely absent, and, thus, Freire is not referring to this type of equality. Does this mean that the Brazilian educator, as has been argued many times, dreamed of a form of education that prioritized equality as a goal in the struggle for a less unequal society? Is equality the objective of the type of education that Brazil’s reigning social inequality requires?

Certainly equality is a worthy goal to pursue in the economic, social, and political spheres. But as we have seen, there are strong indications that in other areas Freire argued in favor of equality as a basic principle. One of these planes is ontological. As Carlos Rodrigues Brandão has noted, for Freire one of education's fundamental postulates is "the ontological equality of all people" (BRANDÃO 2015, p. 172).

In his widely-known work *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), Jacques Rancière restores to his rightful place the legendary Joseph Jacotot, who in the 19th century affirmed human beings' intellectual equality as a basic principle of an emancipatory education of the people. In an interview published a year after the Brazilian version of the work was released, Rancière notes some differences between Joseph Jacotot and Paulo Freire, both defenders of emancipation: the former promotes intellectual and individual emancipation, based precisely on the principle of equality of intelligence, Freire envisions social emancipation. Still, as Rancière suggests, the difference rests upon a common point: "There thus exists a distance between Jacotot's project of intellectual emancipation and movements like Freire's. But they also have something in common, for this process of intellectual emancipation is a vector for movements of political emancipation that break with a social and institutional logic" (VERMEREN; CORNU; BENVENUTO, 2003). So does Paulo Freire share the axiom of an equality of intelligence that makes social emancipation possible? The answer to this question appears to be yes: without this conviction of the equal intellectual capacity of human beings, it would be difficult to envision equality in other areas where social inequality reigns. Along these same lines, Lidia Rodriguez shows that in Paulo Freire's conception of education, for those who a banking education dismisses, initial equality is a necessary condition for their ethical and political liberation (RODRÍGUEZ et al., 2007; RODRÍGUEZ, 2015). In a recent book on Paulo Freire, Moacir Gadotti and Martin Carnoy argue, following Muniz Sodré, that intellectual emancipation should be understood as a general principle, one that Paulo Freire understands as awareness raising. (GADOTTI; CARNOY, 2018, p. 16).

Another scholar of Paulo Freire, Alípio Casali (2001), suggests that in the wake of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and in the environment of anti-authoritarian rebellion of the 1970s, a literal understanding of this equality was taken to an extreme, in a reading that he calls romantic-anarchical-egalitarian. He argues, moreover, that problems arose over the pedagogical roles of teachers and learners, since, "if teachers and students are equal from the get-go, what, then, is the purpose of education?" (CASALI, 2001, p. 18). He concludes that eventually people realized that Freire was referring to an ethical and civic equality in education, but that this equality did not cancel out the "indispensable epistemological inequality that ultimately legitimates all pedagogy" (CASALI, 2001, p. 18). Casali (2001, p. 20) also argues that there exists a cultural inequality that justifies the pedagogy proposed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In other words, the act of teaching encounters its justification in cultural inequality and the knowledge that the educator has and the student does not. For these reasons, both are unequal.

It is clear, however, that we need to examine the epistemological dimension of the problem more deeply. It is true that some human beings know more than others. But it is no less true that all possess an equal capacity and vocation to know and that, as a result,

a liberating education ought to demonstrate a commitment to restoring this capacity and vocation when they are oppressed.

Thus the issue of equality is a delicate and complex one that requires greater conceptual clarity regarding its foundations. Equality is an eminently political term that, upon being applied to other fields, like the ontological, epistemological, pedagogical, economic, or cultural ones, can carry a certain political character that needs to be specified on the basis of the field to which it is being applied. However, the issue also requires the greatest possible clarity regarding the political principles adopted.

What, then, does it mean in concrete terms to say that nobody is superior to anyone else? If this equality did not have some application to the epistemological field, would we not run the risk of perpetuating a political inequality that would reduce the symmetry in the relationship between the one who teaches and the one who learns? Could we instead retain equality as a principle in this field and differentiate levels of knowledge according to other criteria? How to think about equality in relation to the cognitive and intellectual capacity of educators and students? In the end, what is the real applicability of the idea of equality for education?

These are some of the questions that this article will address in several steps. First, it will offer a conceptually detailed examination of the claim that “No one is superior to anyone else.” It will then consider the implications of that examination for education. Next, it will introduce the ideas of another advocate of equality in education, Joseph Jacotot, and contrast them with those of Paulo Freire. Finally, it will return to the central issues relating to the value of equality that were just raised.

## **Meaning of the Claim of Equality**

Let’s go back to Freire’s claim, “Nobody is superior to anyone else,” using an exercise in logic. There are three claims that can logically be deduced from this. The first is equally negative: “Nobody is inferior to anyone else.” Superior and inferior are semantically dependent, relative terms, for if nobody is superior to anyone else, then it necessarily follows that nobody is inferior to anyone else. If there are no superior people, then there necessarily are no inferior people. This is what Paulo Freire seems to say when he points out the negative consequences that would follow if a teacher considered themselves superior to their students. When this happens, others are inferior, and nobody dialogues with an inferior – or, for that matter, a superior. Dialogue can only happen between equals. Thus, nobody can feel superior to anyone else.

The second proposition that can be deduced is also negative: “Nobody is unequal to anyone else,” which constitutes a sort of combination of the other two claims. The concept of inequality encompasses both superiority and inferiority; or, rather, superiority and inferiority are both forms of inequality. According to this logic, if neither superior nor inferior people exist, then neither do unequal people.

The third proposition is affirmative. If there are no unequal people, then there can only be equal people. Thus, the third proposition that can be deduced from Paulo Freire’s “Nobody is superior to anyone else,” is “We are all equal.” This phrase expresses equality

in affirmative terms, just as the other three imply, denying either superiority, inferiority, or the combination of both, as well as inequality.

It is worth pointing out that equality is not opposed to difference, but rather, more precisely, to inequality. Thus we can all be both equal and different. What we cannot be is equal and unequal, superior and inferior. And this is exactly what Paulo Freire appears to be saying. More than that, he establishes difference as a condition of equality, which can be thought of in the following way: if we were not different, there would be no need for equality. Consequently, we can state that the concept of difference is logically a condition of the concept of equality; that is, without difference, equality would be superfluous. And the opposite? We can see that equality is not logically necessary for difference. We can be different and unequal. However, equality is a political condition of difference. Only among equals is a politically desirable affirmation of difference possible. This also seems to be what Freire suggests: Only someone who considers the other an equal can affirm their difference. Paulo Freire ties this claim to the difference in the way others are treated; thus, we can consider respect for the other a measure of the value that exists in our consideration of the other as equal.

We can conclude from Freire's proposition and from the others we have incorporated that if educators and students place themselves above - or below - each other, there can be no liberating education, that is politically fair, and a truly democratic politics of education will be impossible. For the educator, there is a political requirement for equality; nobody above, nobody below. No superior lives, no inferior lives, for when some lives are superior to others, the result is an emphasis on blind obedience, following orders, pleasing, reward, and punishment, rather than on thinking together, dialoguing, and listening. Paulo Freire gives the example of a simplistic educator who caricatures their working class or rural students by changing the way they speak to "diminish our own speech or limit it to copying theirs" (FREIRE; SHOR, 1986, p. 95 [1987, p. 153]). In this example, the educator sees students as possessing lower intellectual capacity and underestimates them - even as they overestimate their own capacity. This follows from the principle that the students are inferior. (FREIRE; SHOR, 1986, p. 95 [1987, p. 153]). Consequently, there is no politically democratic education here: this educator is transmitting a hierarchy incompatible with an education that liberates. The students learn from their teacher to feel inferior, when it is precisely this feeling from which they need to be liberated.

## **Equality in Life, Inside and Outside of School**

I have shown elsewhere (KOHAN, 2018) the way in which Paulo Freire joins theory and practice, thought and life. In effect, what matters is not just equality as a concept or an idea, but its impact on the lives of educators and students. Seen in this way, it is important not only to think about or postulate equality, but, above all, to live it through educational practices.

However, the affirmation of equality is disavowed by the realities of social life. It is obvious that we are not, in fact, all equal in our societies. Some are on top and others are on the bottom, some can accomplish more than others, at least in social, cultural,

and economic terms - all areas in which, under capitalism, there are clearly superior and inferior people. Schools also appear to disavow equality; some students never set foot in them or are soon expelled, while others succeed, from beginning to end, at the proper age, with some progressing much more quickly than others. What, then, does it mean for an affirming politics of education to say that all lives are equal or that no life is unequal? Or, in what sense is equality necessary (and possible) as a principle for a democratic education when our societies and their institutional institutions are wracked by inequality? Would it be nothing more than a romantic, idealistic claim? Can equality actually be educationally practiced and lived in a social reality like ours, laden as it is with such a wide variety of inequalities? In what way? How?

The principle of equality means, on the one hand, that within the pedagogical relationship the inequalities that reign outside are suspended or interrupted (MASSCHELEIN; SIMONS, 2013). The pedagogical relationship can take place within an institutional setting or outside of it, informally, but the suspension of inequalities is a requirement for a democratic politics of education, whatever the institutional setting. This means that if the teacher and the learner do not position themselves as equals while participating in this relationship, the political power of their educational practice will be curtailed significantly. This is what happens, for example, when the pedagogical relationship takes place in an institutional setting that precludes or renders unviable the realization of equality in pedagogy. If the educator fails to disrupt this logic, they will have no choice but to teach what the institution demands of them: their place of superiority, and their students' place of inferiority. They can teach the most liberating and relevant theories, but the student will learn and live the logic of the relationship that is being imposed, whatever content is transmitted.

Therefore, the affirmation of equality that we are proposing is relatively simple. It depends only on the educator's decision and the practice that follows. It can exist in the most varied institutional settings, from the most to the least authoritarian, as long as there are cracks, crevices, holes that enable the disruption of non-egalitarian practices. This is a moment in which an educator's political role acquires a deep salience and meaning, including even times when the broader macro-political educational context is more conservative and authoritarian.

On the other hand, this political role is tied to the public nature of the school (MASSCHELEIN; SIMONS, 2013; RODRÍGUEZ, 2016). Not public in the sense of being administered by the State, or of not being run by a private organization; rather, the school is public and for everyone in the sense that it can be inhabited equally by anyone. It is a space where the inequalities between its inhabitants are suspended and disrupted, whenever anyone and everyone takes up residence there. Differently from the political nature of education instituted by those who practice it, the public nature of this practice precedes it; it is constitutive of the egalitarian nature of the school system, and, if it is not, it cannot be instituted by a political decision of the teacher.

Along these lines, the Latin American tradition of the popular school (RODRÍGUEZ, 2016; DURÁN; KOHAN, 2018) offers a radical vision for public schools that can only be simultaneously social, general, and popular (KOHAN, 2013; RODRÍGUEZ, 2016, p. 26). A

school is not truly public when it establishes requirements that renders equals unequal, when it expels instead of welcoming, or when some of its students can accomplish more than others in terms of the pedagogical relations established therein by the reigning principles of the society in which it exists - principles that wind up reproducing themselves in the educational system.

Although equality is a condition of the institution and pedagogical relations, this does not mean that educators and students know the same things, or that educators possess no knowledge that students need to learn (just as students also have knowledge that their teachers need to learn). Of course educators know many things that students do not, and that is why they hold the positions they do, particularly in societies like ours that regulate their institutions according to the knowledge possessed by those who aspire to those positions. But this does not make these people superior. Educators know things that students do not, just as students know things that they do not. Educators know different things and may even know more in terms of information, books, and libraries, but that does not make them superior to students. The only thing that sets them apart is that they have developed more fully an equal capacity to learn, think, and know. They are only superior due to education structured by a hierarchical logic.

### **Another Advocate of Equality from Another Tradition**

Among all those who have treated equality as a precondition or political principle for education, perhaps no one has been clearer and more emphatic than the 19th century French pedagogue Joseph Jacotot (1770-1840), creator of universal teaching, also called “panecastic philosophy,” popularized today by Jacques Rancière (2003). Universal teaching consists precisely of affirming the principle that all intellects are equal and in the postulation of the freedom of method to teach and learn, on behalf of students’ intellectual liberation.

According to Jacotot, the principle of equality of intellect is not a scientifically proven fact, but an opinion that should be verified. This opinion is a type of faith, a political belief in the emancipation of the poor, drawn from a militant of the philosophy of the popular classes (VERMEREN, 2017). This opinion is based upon Jacotot’s reading of authors like Descartes, Locke, and Newton. On this basis, he explains that the obvious intellectual inequalities that we observe in the social sphere, like, for example, between a rural farmer and a doctor or university professor, are not due to some sort of natural inequality between them, but rather the different stimuli that their intellects received over the course of their education.

For Jacotot, then, an education that liberates is only possible on the basis of the equality of intellects: liberation only exists when all human beings are intellectually equal. The teacher who ignores this principle and places themselves above their students has necessarily stultified students’ intellectual capacity, leading to an insignificant conversation with people they see as inferior. Their students necessarily end up intellectually stultified, as they learn and internalize this intellectual hierarchy that the teacher assumes and transmits. Conversely, a teacher who liberates transmits the equality of intellects, which is

the only thing needed to liberate someone: confidence in their own intellectual capacity and that of every human being.

When universal teaching works, the teacher ignores what they are teaching and does not know what their student is learning. They are simply a travel companion who walks the path of learning with their student, only watching over them so that they pay attention, while trying to ensure that their own will never fails to trust in their students' intellectual capacity (VERMEREN, 2017; RANCIÈRE, 2003). Indeed, according to universal teaching, teachers must be ignorant on two levels: they must ignore what their student is learning, but, above all, they must ignore the inequality of intellect that the educational institution presupposes and is founded upon. This is the deeper meaning of their ignorance: a refusal, a non-acceptance.

In universal teaching, there is, in fact, no method for teaching or learning. The method belongs to the ones who teach and learn. The teacher's freedom to teach leads to the student's freedom to learn. And people who learn freely think and live freely. In an 1828 letter to the Marquis de Lafayette, Jacotot responds to interest in the United States in his way of teaching and practicing education:

Any man who is taught is no more than half a man. Wherever schools exist, teachers exist. When the intellect is not free, I do not know what else could be free. I warn the Americans: it is possible to be independent without being free; independence is relative, and freedom is absolute. I am independent when I do not have a teacher, but it is still the work of another. I am free when I do not want a teacher, because then it is my own work. For this desire to be firm, stable, and unchangeable, one must feel its strength, all its strength, not only morally, but intellectually. (JACOTOT, cited in VERMEREN, 2017, p. 221).

Upon reading this passage from Jacotot's letter, it is impossible not to be reminded of "No one teaches anyone else" from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (FREIRE, 1987, p. 79 [2000, p. 80]). Both proclaim the freedom of those who learn. In this case, Jacotot argues in favor of the absolute value of freedom, emanating from confidence in one's own intellectual capacity; that is to say, a free person is one who considers themselves intellectually equal to anyone else. There is no freedom when there exists the will of superior and inferior people. The issue is not simply that the teacher should not set themselves up as a superior teacher. Rather, it is that the student must set themselves up as an equal. In a relationship based on oppression, both oppressors and the oppressed are oppressed, because the relationship that has been established is an oppressive one. A free person does not want a teacher who stultifies them intellectually, because their will trusts in their own intellectual capacity to learn. However, in order to not want that kind of teacher, it is necessary to experience one's own intellectual capacity to begin with.

Does this mean that Jacotot believes that we do not need teachers? Of course not. What Jacotot seems to mean is that a emancipated person does not want a teacher who explains things to them or who stultifies them intellectually. We do not need teachers who stultify us, but we do need teachers who emancipate those who have been stultified and facilitate a liberated relationship between liberated people. According to intellectual

emancipation, then, we need teachers who help all people to develop confidence in their own capacity and who accompany, along the course of their education, those who already have this confidence in themselves. Even among the emancipated, teachers can remain important to help others maintain their confidence in their own intellectual capacity, to want the strength of freedom for themselves.

## The Equality of Intellectuals in Brazil

Jacotot's approach was also known in Brazil, where the Panecastic Institute of Brazil was created on May 3, 1847. The institute's goal was "to propagate the immortal Jacotot's principles of intellectual emancipation and to substitute the rights of human reason for authority and pedantry" (SCIENCIA, 1 (3), 1847, p. 15).<sup>3</sup> One of the proponents of Jacotot's ideas in Brazil was the French homeopathic doctor Benoît Jules Mure, who left his attestation to what he called Jacotot's great principle: "God created the human soul capable of instructing itself, without resorting to teachers to explain [things]" and of the maxim that should orient intellectual labor: "The one who wants to is able to" (SCIENCIA, 2 (16), 1848, p. 194). What does this mean? It means precisely that the one who wants to do something is able to, but since not everyone does want to - and society seems to be inclined to do as much as it can to stop some people from wanting to - perhaps this is where there is space for a teacher who is concerned with education as intellectual emancipation. This work, however, would be an attempt to influence the wills of those who were taught by an unequal society to mistrust their own capacity.

Mure proposed that the Panecastic Society develop a "University Plan for Brazil," intended to eliminate monarchical and Catholic principles, emancipate intellectuals, and elevate Brazil to the highest pinnacle of knowledge and Enlightenment" (SCIENCIA, 1 (5), 1847, p. 82).<sup>4</sup> *Sciencia* held a dim view of both the plan itself and its prospects for success in Brazil. These studies highlight the virtues of the universal method (which in fact is not a method, because the learning processes are not prescribed, but rather depend on each person's free will) in the following way:

This method not only offers the advantage of considerably shortening the time of instruction and making it more profitable, but also, of allowing every father to have his children learn what he himself ignores, it establishes a true equality among men. This is what should sear the name of Jacotot upon the heart of every true friend of humanity. Universal teaching is the method of the poor. (SCIENCIA, 2 (16), 1848, p. 195).

As we can see, the non-methodical method offers pedagogical advantages. It permits reducing the time of instruction and lets students want to learn rather than being obligated

**3-** Suzana Lopes de Albuquerque (2019) has conducted research on the sources that prove that Jacotot's ideas were circulating in Brazil: the letters of Castilho and the journal of homeopathy *Sciencia*, which is available in digital form on the site of the Hemeroteca Digital of Brazil's Biblioteca Nacional. Altogether, 25 issues are available, with 5 from 1847 and 20 from 1848.

**4-** We also know that the first director of the Normal School of Niterói, José da Costa e Azevedo, was responsible for developing a reading method based on Jacotot's ideas (ALBUQUERQUE, 2019).

to do so, as usually occurs. Ackermann also reveals the political value of Jacotot's teaching: above all, it serves the poor, the education of the people, because through it an illiterate parent can teach their children to read, educate them, and emancipate them. It enables the sons and daughters of the poor and illiterate to learn with their parents what their parents never learned. A rich father or mother can pay for a teacher or a school for their children. However, a poor parent themselves, through universal education, can emancipate their own child. For this to happen, the only thing necessary is for the parents to themselves be emancipated. Thus, universal teaching is the method of the poor, because it allows them to overcome the limitations of their own condition and to achieve the power of which their intellect is capable. Jacotot's universal teaching is revolutionary - which undoubtedly explains its lack of success in Brazil.

## Jacotot and Freire

Despite the obvious differences between someone who lived in post-revolutionary 19th-century France and someone who lived in Cold War Brazil, there are significant similarities between the ways Jacotot and Freire thought and lived education. As I have shown elsewhere (KOHAN, 2018), Paulo Freire is part of a tradition of intellectuals who combine philosophy and pedagogy. As is Joseph Jacotot. Upon the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, he left France to teach in Louvain, in the Low Countries. To be sure, Jacotot was not forced to flee his country, and his life does not seem to have been at risk, but regardless, both Jacotot and Freire shared, as a result of their politically engaged lives, the experience of exile. For both, exile, however forced or unforced, was a political act that contributed decisively to their educational discoveries and practices, their philosophical bets, and the political effects of these discoveries among the popular classes. Despite his exile, through difficulty and hardship, Freire had an experience that was ultimately positive. He came to value exile, which he called an anchorage, a song that helped him "connect recollections, recognize facts, deeds, and gestures, fuse pieces of knowledge, solder moments, *re-cognize* in order to *cognize*, know, better." (FREIRE, 2014, p. 27 [1994, p. 18]). Freire gave such importance to exile that he saw himself as having lived three exiles, not just one: a first in the uterus of his pregnant mother; a second when his family, beset by economic crisis, fled Recife for Jabotão dos Guararapes, and finally, a third exile abroad, in Bolivia, Chile, the United States, and Switzerland, imposed by the military dictatorship after the coup of 1964 (FREIRE, 2000, p. 51 [2005, p. 51]).

Foreign languages also play a key role for both authors. For Jacotot, language played a decisive part in his discovery of the principle of the equality of intellects, through his exile in Louvain, where he was unable to speak his own language (French) with his Flemish-speaking students. Thus, it was through exile and the experience of being a foreigner that he was able to escape, once and for all, the comfortable role of a teacher who could explain things in his native language. It was the impossibility of using his own language to explain the things he knew from literature that allowed him to discover the secrets of intellectual liberation. This would not have been possible without his forced encounter with the foreign language of his Flemish students.

As we just saw, Paulo Freire was exiled more than once. Without a doubt, the most brutal of these came after Brazil's 1964 military coup. Initially he went into exile in Bolivia, but soon after his arrival, a military coup there forced him to seek refuge in Chile, a move that he welcomed, due to his difficulties adapting to the altitude in La Paz. As a result, Freire's thought on liberation in his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, would only be published in 1970 - in English (New York: Herder and Herder), without the preface by Ernani Maria Fiori, but with an introduction by Richard Schaul and a preface by Freire himself. It was published in Spanish that same year (Montevideo: Tierra Nueva), also without Fiori's preface. Only later that year would it be published in Portuguese (São Paulo: Paz e Terra).<sup>5</sup> It is not that Freire needed to hear a foreign language to stimulate his thinking, or that his ideas can be separated from his pedagogical experience pre-1964. Rather, as a result of his experiences living in other countries, Freire had to translate himself, to express himself and communicate his ideas about emancipation in foreign languages. And according to Freire himself, exile played a decisive role both in helping him rethink Brazilian reality and in developing his pedagogy and his understanding of the political aspect of education (FREIRE; SHOR, 1986, p. 26 [1987, p. 30-32]). Thus, foreign languages and linguistic difference played a key role in the thought, writings, and life of both Jacotot and Freire.

Another important coincidence is that both are commonly associated with methods: Jacotot with the universal method, and Freire with a method of teaching reading and writing to youths and adults. However, neither actually has anything like a method, or, to put it more radically, the method is not one of the most important issues, but rather the political meaning of using this or that method. Although both are known because of their methods, methods are decisive for neither. For Jacotot the method belongs to the student (RANCIÈRE, 2003, p. 26). For Freire the transformation engendered by an education that liberates is not a question of method, but rather of establishing "a different relationship to knowledge and to society" (FREIRE; SHOR, 1986, p. 28 [1987, p. 35]). Or, more specifically and in greater detail:

This is why we have never gotten caught up in studying methods and techniques for adult literacy for their own sake, but rather in studying them in service to and in accordance with a certain theory of knowledge put into practice, which for its part, should be faithful to a certain political choice. So if the educator's choice is revolutionary and their practice in keeping with that choice, adult literacy training, as an act of knowledge, has, in its student, one of the subjects of this act. Thus, to such an educator falls the search for the best ways to proceed, to help the student exercise the role of the subject of knowledge in the process of becoming literate. The educator should be a constant inventor and re-inventor of these means with which they facilitate ever more the problematization of the object to be unveiled and, ultimately, learned by the students. (FREIRE, 1978, p. 12-13).

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**5** - See, "Nota sobre as edições da *Pedagogia do oprimido*," in the commemorative 50th anniversary edition (FREIRE, 2018, p. 25-26).

There is no specific method for the revolutionary educator. Rather, there is a commitment to revolutionary politics that requires a concomitant educational practice dedicated to affirming human beings' equal inventive power, which renders the educator capable of opening up some of the possibilities of an education that liberates.

Following a point already raised by Rancière, another strong commonality between the authors is their political commitment to the liberation of the people. Both counter the positivist motto "Order and Progress," inscribed on Brazil's flag; both interrupt and interpellate the supposed harmony between the order of knowledge and the social order (VERMEREN; CORNU; BENVENUTO, 2003). In other words, both are critical regarding the role that pedagogical order might play in achieving a more just social order for the excluded. Therefore, both are suspicious of any order and progress originating with the powers that be in their respective republics. To put it another way, they are skeptical of the pedagogical order imposed by positivist republics and affirm the need to interrupt their excluding effects and produce emancipating, liberating effects.

Regarding the main differences between Jacotot and Freire, we have seen, in part, how Rancière depicts them. For Rancière, nothing is more alien to Jacotot than a method to achieve social "conscientization" (VERMEREN; CORNU; BENVENUTO, 2003). Differently from Freire, Jacotot asserts that equality can only happen between individuals, but that it is impossible to institutionalize or propagate it as a form of social emancipation. However, as we have seen, although intellectual emancipation is only possible individually, there is no social emancipation that does not presuppose individual emancipation. Thus, Jacotot's pessimistic anarchism does approach Freire's optimistic progressivism, through as Rancière suggests, "a process of intellectual emancipation as a vector for movements of political emancipation that break with a social and institutional logic" (VERMEREN; CORNU; BENVENUTO, 2003, p. 199). Freire himself suggests something similar, even as he implicitly criticizes Jacotot's merely intellectual and individual conception of emancipation. In book with Ira Shor, he claims not to believe in individual liberation or emancipation and appears reluctant to endorse any individual, rather than social, feeling of freedom. But, like Jacotot, he considers the former a precondition for the latter (FREIRE; SHOR, 1986 [1987]). In Freire's words:

While individual empowerment or the empowerment of some students, the feeling of being changed, is not enough concerning the transformation of the whole society, it is absolutely necessary for the process of social transformation. Is this clear? The critical development of these students is absolutely fundamental for the radical transformation of society. Their curiosity, their critical perception of reality, is fundamental for social transformation but is not enough by itself. (FREIRE; SHOR, 1986, p. 87 [1987, p. 110]).

This could not be any clearer. Although Jacotot championed individual emancipation and asserted that this was the most that was possible, both his life and the application of his ideas made him ever more pessimistic about their social application. On the other hand, Paulo Freire, although he also encountered enormous difficulties to put his ideas into practice, never stopped believing that the social emancipation of the oppressed was the primary meaning not only of his own life, but also of the life of any educator. Without

this social application, emancipation would have little value. Moreover, the emancipation that Freire has in mind is not just intellectual or cognitive, but economic, social, and political, with all the complexities and difficulties that the relationship between education and society encompasses.

At any rate, *conscientização* is not a simple term in Paulo Freire. The main point is to know whether the fullest or most critical consciousness belongs to the educator. (If it did, the pedagogical relationship would not seem to be very emancipatory). How far does the educator lead their students, or do they only contribute to a form of consciousness that they can neither anticipate nor control? In this way, if we think that there is such a thing as a set historical knowledge - for example, historical materialism - which in some way exists *a priori* to educators' and students' own knowledge, the political consequences of this logic are not especially promising for the pedagogical relationship. In other words, if the educator already knows what is necessary to achieve the emancipation of those who are being educated, we could question the value of such an emancipation. In a recent book, Freire's foremost disciple, Moacir Gadotti, combines *conscientização* with the equality of intellects as a principle that allows every human being to express their own word (GADOTTI; CARNOY, 2018).

Paulo Freire seems to have gone back and forth on this question. For example, in his book-length interview with Ira Shor, he states that the role of the educator who liberates is "directing a serious study of some object in which students reflect on the intimacy of how an object exists" (FREIRE; SHOR, 1987, p. 171 FREIRE; SHOR, 1986, p. 104 [1987, p. 171]). Freire calls this position radically democratic, because it simultaneously takes a gamble on liberty, does not abdicate the teacher's role in guiding their students, but, even so, does not deny students their freedom, inasmuch as it trusts in their capacity to think. The *conscientização* work of the educator is not about transmitting knowledge that liberates, but rather stimulating students' own thought so they can "unveil the actual manipulation and myths in society." (FREIRE; SHOR, 1986, p. 104 [1987, p. 172]). Of course, if the actual manipulation and myths in society are known in advance by the educator and can only be explained in terms of certain categories and theoretical models (which Freire's own terminology appears to assume), we could question just how much they actually do trust in educators' and students' equal capacity.

In Paulo Freire's later works the idea of *conscientização* becomes less prominent, since by this point he seems to be more skeptical regarding the explanatory power of a revolutionary theory and more receptive to a conversation that is open to other forms of knowledge. The certainties in Freire's texts gradually diminish and, by the end of his work, appear closer to several relational principles, like equality, and less situated in the explanatory theories of reality he had previously favored.

Finally, we can return to our initial concern and the common points between Jacotot and Freire, inasmuch as they both affirm equality as a principle, not only in their thought and writings, but also in their lives. Let us examine how this happens. An anecdote about Jacotot shows how he received an emissary from Paris to Louvain, sent by the Paris Society of Methods to learn about his proposal. "Before speaking about this, I would like to emphasize that I do not see in you anything more than a curiosity seeker, which is why

I place you in the fourth line. If a poor person, a person from the countryside, or a father came to me, he would pass in front of you” (VERMEREN, 2017, p. 211). This story shows that Jacotot lived the very equality that he affirmed and in which he believed. In the same way, Paulo Freire describes several situations in which this same vital feeling of equality can be observed. For example, when he refers to the lectures he gave during the time he worked at the Industrial Social Service (Serviço Social da Indústria - SESI), he relates an event that happened in a SESI center in Recife when, after he had spoken about Piaget, a factory worker gave what he called a class lesson, demonstrating how Freire’s academic discourse belonged to someone from a different social class and was very distant from the class that was listening to him. Freire (2014, p. 35 [1994, p. 26]) states, “This talk was given about thirty-two years ago. I have never forgotten it.” This demonstrates that his belief in equality - the word he uses in the following quote, in which he comments on the great influence this experience had on his entire subsequent pedagogical trajectory - was always dear to him.

[...] Nearly always, in academic ceremonies in which I have had an honorary doctorate conferred on me by some university, I acknowledge how much I owe, as well, to persons like the one of whom I am now speaking, and not only to scholars - other thinkers who have taught me, *too*,<sup>6</sup> and who continue to teach me, teachers without whom it would have been impossible for me to learn, like the laborer who spoke that night. (FREIRE, 2014, p. 35-36, grifo nosso [1994, p. 24, emphasis mine]).

In several books (including, among others (FREIRE; BETTO, 1985; FREIRE; FAUNDEZ, 1989; FREIRE; GUIMARÃES, 1982), Paulo Freire describes similar situations around the world. A factory worker is a thinker equal to and perhaps greater than any scientist, inasmuch as, as in the episode just discussed, they teach a knowledge about life that intersects with a political condition, and that can never be learned in an academic ivory tower. No longer is the teacher the one who society legitimates as the official transmitter of knowledge, but rather the one who knows life’s knowledge for having lived it. Factory workers do not teach an institutional knowledge, but rather a knowledge for a shared life. It is a form of knowledge indissolubly tied to a collective existence, which reveals its truth and its secrets, intellectual capabilities that these very societal institutions routinely attempt to disguise or belittle.

## **The Value of Equality in Education**

Therefore, inspired by Joseph Jacotot and Paulo Freire, we can state that equality is an important and cross-cutting principle for a democratic politics of the pedagogical relationship. This equality is claimed as a principle or starting point, not as a goal or objective, and intersects with several areas: intellectual life and capacity, but also knowledge, thought, affection, that which is not known. The issue of knowledge is crucial

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**6-** In Portuguese Paulo Freire uses the word “igualmente,” which, translated more literally, is “equally.”

for Freire, and the equality of knowledge can easily but mistakenly be equated with the emptiness of the pedagogical role. Political equality means that although teachers and students occupy different relative positions of power, hierarchy need not follow. Their knowledge can have distinct epistemological or aesthetic value and meaning, but this has no relation with the people who possess that knowledge. No form of knowledge has more legitimacy than any other as a result of the position of power occupied by the people who employ it in the pedagogical relationship.

In absurdly unequal societies like ours, there may indeed exist unequal political effects outside of the pedagogical relationship, but never within it. Neither teachers nor students, while they occupy these roles, can accomplish more than each other as a result of what they do or do not know. This is what Paulo Freire teaches: To teach and learn in dialogue, all forms of knowledge deserve to be heard and treated equally, placed in dialogue on the same level. And it is precisely in this dialogue than an educator teaches and learns, reconstructing their own knowledge through the knowledge of their students.

As Freire states in the passage included as the epigraph to this article, the need to postulate equality is born of the confirmation of the differences among all forms of life. If we were not different, equality would be unnecessary. But our societies are made of differences and inequalities. It is inequality, not difference, that is opposed to equality. It is inequalities that inhibit a pedagogical relationship based on dialogue, not differences. Differences, when based on equality, nourish and potentiate dialogue.

Paulo Freire greatly emphasizes the issue of knowledge for an emancipatory perspective on education. Thus, I am not arguing that knowledge is not important, but if we place an emphasis on thought, then, inspired by Jacotot, the affirmation of the equal capacity of all human beings as a principle of education is strengthened. In this way, an egalitarian understanding of teachers' and students' capacity to think becomes a necessary political condition for those who participate in this educational practice to manifest, in a coherent way, their equal critical capacity and to call into question a given state of affairs.

To be sure, lives are different, or, rather, the life that permeates existence reveals itself in different ways in human beings, animals, and plants. To educate means to listen, to respect, all while attentive to these differences. Without them, life would be less alive. The political principle of the equality of all lives who are part of an educational practice is a requirement for differences to be enriching and not crushing, to lead in a politically democratic direction - so that education can help enable these existences to manifest all the life that they are and that they contain.

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