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"Political literacy" in South Africa

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Kontakt / Contact:

peDOCS
DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation
Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung
E-Mail: pedocs@dipf.de
Internet: www.pedocs.de

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‘Political literacy’ in South Africa

Zamalotshwa Thusi

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa (zamalotshwas@gmail.com)

Anne Harley

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa (HarleyA@ukzn.ac.za)

Abstract

Research over the last few decades has supported the contention that ‘there are different literacy practices in different domains of social life[and] these change over time’ (Hamilton, Tett, & Crowther, 2012, p.3). In this article, we use ‘political literacy’, as conceived by Paulo Freire, as a theoretical lens through which to consider non-formal education in the changing context of South Africa. After considering the influence of Freire’s thinking in the black consciousness (BC) movement in South Africa during the 1970s, we consider a current BC-aligned non-formal education intervention in Freedom Park, a township outside Johannesburg, drawing on research conducted in 2018. This used snowball sampling and qualitative data collection methods, including observation of a ‘political class’ currently run in the community. We found that, in contrast to ways in which Freire was used in the BC movement in the anti-Apartheid struggle, the ‘political class’ leaned towards what Freire termed the authoritarian left.

Keywords: Authoritarian left, Paulo Freire, political illiteracy, political literacy, South Africa

Introduction

In 1968, Paulo Freire published what was to become his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (published in English in 1970). The book had a profound effect globally, including in South Africa. Whilst he was living in Geneva and working for the World Council of Churches, Freire says that he was frequently visited by ‘intellectuals, teachers, students, religious, blacks, whites from South Africa’ (Freire, 2014, p.134), who wanted



to talk to him about his work, and its implications for the South African context. However, it was primarily through his writing that Freire's thinking profoundly affected a wide range of individuals and organisations in the 1970s and 1980s.

Freire and 'political literacy'

Freire specifically used the term 'political literacy' in an essay probably written in the early 1970s (but published in *The politics of education* in 1985). In the essay, he outlines a number of his key ideas – that education is never neutral, but either domesticating or liberating; that education for freedom involves reflecting on reality/experience, in order to become more conscious of why things are the way they are ('conscientisation'), and then act on them to change reality.

Freire contrasts political literacy with political illiteracy: 'a political illiterate – regardless of whether she or he knows how to read and write – is one who has an ingenuous perception of humanity in its relationships with the world... One of the political illiterate's tendencies is to escape concrete reality... by losing himself or herself in abstract visions of the world' (1985, p. 103).

Political literacy thus requires that both the educator and the learner play a particular role:

At the very moment when she or he begins the process, the educator must be prepared to die as the exclusive educator of the learners. She or he cannot be an educator for freedom if she or he only substitutes the content of another educational practice for a bourgeois practice and thus preserves the form of that practice (1985, p. 105).

Freire specifically contrasts what is required of 'political literacy' with Stalinism, in which 'through an education that contradicts its real socialist objectives... educators instil political illiteracy by making thought ant dialectical' (p. 106). 'Political literacy' also requires that the future not be foreclosed with certainty. Freire is deeply critical of promises that 'once the transformation of the bourgeois society is achieved, a "new world" will be automatically created. In truth, the new world does not surface in this way' (p. 106).

'Political literacy' in South Africa in the 1970s: Biko and the BCM

Freire's work was being spread within South Africa from the late 1960s, and profoundly influenced the Black Consciousness movement (BCM) (Hadfield, 2017; Magaziner, 2010); a contemporary, Bennie Khoapa, argues that 'it was Paulo Freire who made a lasting philosophical impression on Steve Biko' (Khoapa, 2008, p.1).

Biko approached Anne Hope, who had met Freire whilst he was at Harvard, (Hadfield, 2017) and told her that they had heard she knew Freire, and they wanted to learn more (Hadfield, 2017; Magaziner, 2010). Thus from May 1972, Hope held four week-long workshops with fifteen activists from five different regions (Magaziner, 2010; Hadfield, 2017). Between the sessions, the activists went out to do community-based research ('listening surveys'). They met with Hope every month; but progress was very slow – whilst many Freirean 'codes' were created, very little literacy was ever done. For the activists, though, the purpose of the process was conscientisation (Magaziner, 2010):

Conscientisation is a process whereby individuals or groups living within a given social and political setting are made aware of their situation... 'conscientization' implies a desire

to engage people in an emancipatory process in an attempt to free them from a situation of bondage (Biko quoted in Nekhwevha, 2002, p.137).

The BC activists involved were clear that their role was not to tell people what to think – as one of them said, ‘we did not say, look, we have come to teach you about Black Consciousness’ (quoted in Magaziner, 2010, p. 130). Their role was slow, methodical work to help people analyse their reality, reflect on this, and then act. ‘Our idea was not party political, our idea was conscientization of society’ (quoted in Magaziner, 2010, p. 131). They thus rejected what they saw as the indoctrination of people by political parties (ibid.). ‘Imposing doctrine from above could create mass consciousness... but doing so was antithetical to the dialogic, reflective processes implicit in conscientization’ (ibid.).

Many of the BC projects were halted with the banning of BC organisations and individuals in 1977; but by then, although his work was banned, Freire was being drawn on heavily way beyond the BCM, by the student movement, the worker movement, the Churches, and the radical education and adult education movements. He also influenced the United Democratic Front (UDF), which emerged in the 1980s (though less so the more formal liberation movements such as the ANC and PAC).

Ironically, even as his works were unbanned in the early 1990s, Freire’s influence in South Africa waned fairly rapidly. This was something Freire himself noted and was highly critical of:

Today, I fear that some men and women... who sought me out in those days, may now be among those who have allowed themselves to be tamed by a certain high-sounding neoliberal discourse... The competent run things and make a profit, and create wealth that, at the right moment, will ‘trickle down’ to the have-nots more or less equitably. The discourse upon and in favor of social justice no longer has meaning... Among these persons are to be found those who declare ...that what we need today is a *neutral* education, heart and soul devoted to the technical training of the labor force. (Freire, 2014, pp.135-6).

South Africa after 1994

For many South Africans democracy has not delivered, as the country has undergone a fundamentally neoliberal shift, accompanied by the simultaneous practices and processes of de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation (Hart, 2013). This is exactly what Biko predicted might happen as long ago as 1977:

This is one country where it would be possible to create a capitalist black society, if whites were intelligent, if the nationalists were intelligent. And that capitalist black society, black middle class would be very effective....South Africa could succeed in putting across to the world a pretty convincing, integrated picture, with still seventy percent of the population being underdogs (Biko, 2008, pp. 41-42).

In this respect, of course, South Africa is not unique; as Gibson (2011) asserts, ‘Post-apartheid South Africa has become much the same as other parts of Africa, where the mass of people experience the daily anti-humanism and economic authoritarianism of structural adjustment and its political enforcement’ (p. 105). The process has been met with a sense of betrayal and with resistance, with some 2 million people involved in protests in the country every year since 2008 (Plaut & Holden, 2013). In this context, there has been a recent resurgence in interest in Freire.

The story of Freedom Park - a story of displacement, resistance, poverty, and political conflict - is in many respects a useful case study of post-Apartheid South Africa. Situated

some 30-40 km from the centre of Johannesburg, Freedom Park came into existence in the early 1990s, as the result of a 'land invasion' by people hoping for a place of their own in the run up to the first democratic elections (Hoag, 2009). It is now a semi-informal township with a combination of informal shacks, Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses¹ as well as bonded houses (Centre for Education Rights and Transformation [CERT], 2010).

In 2018, one of the authors (Zama Thusi) undertook research in Freedom Park towards a Masters' degree in adult education (Thusi, 2018), supervised by the other author (Anne Harley). Both of us have been deeply influenced by Freire for decades. In her research, Zama specifically wanted to look at any current projects that were Freirean-inspired; and a Freirean-inspired Community Literacy and Numeracy Group (CLING) Project, initiated by the Education Policy Consortium (EPC) together with the Centre for Education Rights and Transformation (CERT) at the University of Johannesburg, had been formally launched in Freedom Park in 2009. It apparently faced a number of issues, including tensions arising from different political affiliations (Baatjes, 2016). Zama chose to focus her research on the Freedom Park CLING, including the 'political classes' which had apparently morphed out of the project.

The research used snowball sampling to access learners and facilitators who took part in the CLING Project as well as CLING Steering Committee members and members of *Abahlali baseFreedom Park* ('Dwellers / Residents of Freedom Park'), a community organising committee established in 2011.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal ethics committee, as was informed consent from all parties concerned (CERT, Abahlali, the Steering Committee, the facilitators, the adult learners, and the community activists). All participants were aware that they were free to withdraw should they wish to. Participants were also assured of anonymity, and all names have been changed and in certain instances certain personal information has been removed.

Six men and six women were involved in the larger study, ranging in age from late 20s to 70s, and all were unemployed. Some were amongst the first to move to the area, whilst others moved much later. They are from different areas within Freedom Park. Nine of the participants were involved in CLING – one as the co-ordinator; five as facilitators; and three as adult learners. Of these, two were involved in Abahlali, three in the BC-aligned Socialist Part of Azania (SOPA)², and two in the political classes. Of the three not involved in CLING, all were members of Abahlali, and one was also involved in SOPA and the political classes.

The research revealed precisely the larger story of post-Apartheid South Africa. People spoke of moving to the area in the early 1990s, at the dawn of democracy, to begin a new life: 'We told ourselves that this (securing land) was going to be our freedom' (Phaks³).

Christopher maintains that they were evicted daily by the police and would come back each morning to erect plastic houses that would later be demolished. He was only finally able to move into his RDP house in 2014. Sarah, an Abahlali member, does not yet have a house: 'I stay in people's backyards. I keep being moved, being moved, being moved. When the landlord tells you they are building rooms you have to move your shack with your children'.

Much of the displacement has been the work of the state, particularly at local government level, often violent; and it has been matched with on-going resistance as 'the municipality police removed us and took our shacks but then we would resist and fight'

(Christopher); 'Bebesisusa sibuyele. Basisuse sibuyele (They would remove us and we would go back, and they would remove us and we would go back)' (Velaphi).

From fairly early on, one of the strategies used to resist the government was blocking main roads that abut the settlement. According to Velaphi, 'we started protesting, we closed the freeways and everything'.

Throughout its existence, then, there has been a struggle for the right to remain, and for a house; but the settlement's story also echoes a wider story of growing corruption. According to Gladys, who is also a member of Abahlali and a backyard dweller:

I registered for a house in 2010 but young children, who registered for the houses as late as 2014, now have their own houses. These old ladies (pointing at the two elderly ladies, about 75 years old or so, who were there) have been on the list since 1996 and still do not have houses. (Gladys)

Gladys believes that she and her mother had been cheated on their RDP because 'one girl at the Housing Department told me that my mother's house had become available, but she still does not have a house ...to date. They sell them'. Indeed, many residents believe that there has been corruption in the allocation process, and many see this as specifically politically motivated:

When the houses were distributed, only eight SOPA members got houses because the ANC claimed to have led the fight and the councillor was theirs so there was nothing we could do. (Phaks)

Christopher confirmed this:

We won that development, but the people who are in charge are not SOPA, they are ANC. When the houses were allocated, abantu (people) that were involved in the occupation and fought for the land were not allocated. Abantu (people) that were allocated abantu be-ANC (are ANC people)... yet our people, including old age people, were excluded in the process. (Christopher)

The community organising group, Abahlali, have demanded a forensic investigation into the allocation of houses.

Although Freedom Park residents have won the right to remain, many still live in homemade shacks. There is one part of Freedom Park that is called Ekuhluphekeni ('place of poverty'); but indeed the socio-economic situation of the entire settlement is dire, with high levels of unemployment. Most families depend on social grants (CLING Project, n.d.). Many of the residents in the area lack basic services like water and toilets, having to use, for example, portable toilets at a local church.

'Political literacy' in South Africa in the current period: The Freedom Park political classes

Zama's research revealed that there was considerable unevenness in terms of the extent to which the CLING project reflected a Freirean influence – whilst it was very clear that it was intended to be Freirean, and was informed by Freirean ideas, in terms of its implementation, there was in fact little evidence of this. She also found that there was a lack of clarity about the exact status of the project after funding for the project formally ended in 2011, but according to at least some of those from Freedom Park who were involved in the CLING project (including the CLING co-ordinator, Christopher, and two

of the CLING facilitators, Khule and Phaks), the project has morphed into a new non-formal educational project, the 'political class'.

There is no clear story of how the political classes came into being, or who started them. However, according to Christopher, they are facilitated mostly by 'members of the political organisation...the Socialist Party of Azania, which is people that belong to the Black Consciousness'.

Phaks is very involved in the political classes, arguing that they are where 'political', 'real' education happens because:

We learn about burning political issues. When the subject is on the land for example, we all go and read on what has to go into the discussion. The teachings are dependent on what is burning at the time; some topics get carried over. (Phaks)

Velaphi, a member of Abahlali, who was also involved in the classes, contends that the political classes are important because:

In the Friday classes we teach people about umzabalazo womuntu omnyama (the struggle of the black person). There are people who are knowledgeable about the whole notion of black power so they teach that. You see, the government of the day is teaching lies, so in these classes we correct those lies. They (the ANC) are now adopting the concept of Black Consciousness as their own, we go back to what it is, what it means, we help them separate the truth from lies. (Velaphi)

This Friday we will discuss State Capture. What is our understanding of state capture, how does it impact our life as ordinary people. So we discuss different issues and concepts like socialism, capitalism, understanding of the state, power, power relations between genders. Things like that we call political education, black consciousness, what is Pan-Africanism, what is Marxism, different ideologies and theories that are prevalent and developed politically and the economy how it is going? What is this market economy that is being talked about? What is Marxist economy? So we engage with different concepts. (Christopher)

Zama first heard about the 'political classes' during a march by the community whilst she was conceptualising her study. They told her that people who had been involved in the CLING Project were running 'political classes', and we agreed that it would be useful to observe a class to try to establish its relationship to the CLING, and whether it might have been influenced by the Freirean intent of the project as a whole.

The class observation was the final research method used in the study. By this point, it was clear that the classes were an important current adult learning experience in the community. It also seemed clear that in-depth data and 'hands-on' experience of the issues that were discussed and how they were discussed could only be obtained through actually observing the class.

Khule had been a CLING facilitator (and had participated in facilitator training) and is also a member of Abahlali. He had been part of the transect walk and the facilitator focus group, and had also been interviewed. Khule had invited Zama to the political class so she could get a sense of what happens in these classes. Thus, in September 2018, Zama observed and recorded one of the classes⁴. Below we present her extensive observational notes, in order to allow us to analyse the interactions in detail and theorise this through Freire:

The lesson was held in one of the classrooms at Freedom Park Primary School. Khule waited at the door, it seemed to me hopeful of more participants. He then stood in front of the class and waited for everybody to take their seats and settle down. I got the impression this is not something he had anticipated; I think he was in fact waiting at the door for

someone else, he hoped someone else would come and when they did not he had to take the lead.

The group started off with eight people, but once others came there were ten people. They were mostly young, the youngest being around fifteen or sixteen (Carla), but with two elderly women (pensioners around seventy years or so). There were only three men, including the facilitator. The two elderly women did not talk much, not to the facilitator nor to the other members of the group. The discussion was predominantly in English for the benefit of Carla and Cleo (who are both 'coloured') with some isiZulu and a bit of Sesotho. Cleo spoke a bit of isiZulu and Sesotho. Cleo and Carla, I learned later, were Freedom Park residents. Cleo is also a member of Abahlali (the community organising committee). I was not sure if Carla was simply accompanying Cleo, but from her later engagements, it seemed she was really enjoying the class. The rest of the group, like Muzi (who joined in later, but seemed like a regular member), really struggled to speak English but continued nonetheless. The facilitator (Khule) spoke both English and isiZulu.

Khule started off by asking the 'learners' if they remembered what they had to research as the subject for the day's discussion. They did not seem to remember, so he isolated those that were not present and therefore could not know what was to be researched, and paid attention to those that were present in the previous session. Zoleka remembered that they were supposed to do research on socialism. Khule then reiterated that socialism was indeed the subject that was meant to be discussed for the day. The interaction was that of a teacher and his students.

He asked them to share what their research had discovered socialism to be. Carla responded that socialism has to do with the social media where one says what they want to say without fear. Cleo said it referred to the system where the means of resources are shared. The facilitator then said he had looked up the word in the dictionary, and proceeded to read out the dictionary meaning. He read, 'socialism is a political and economic theory advocating that land, transport, natural resources and the chief industry should be owned and managed by the state'. He asked if everybody understood that meaning. Cleo asked for the definition to be repeated. He repeated it and said that according to his understanding this means that the land in which they live should not be owned by anyone, but it has to work for everybody who lives in it. The economy should also belong to the people, and the people should suggest how they want it to work. When it came to industries, he continued, like Devland (the industrial area across the Golden Highway from Freedom Park), they must support the people; the profit that Devland makes on the land must be shared amongst them as the people living in the surrounding area. That would be how the system of socialism would work; the state would be us, with 'us' being the people. Nobody will have the power over the money but the people.

Cleo raised the issue of state capture⁵ and asked how the people will own resources in view of the events around state capture and how the minority is taking hold of the state. Sonto (who had been sitting quietly and minding her own business) argued that the state could not be all of us, but only a few of us; even though they are part of us, how do we ensure that once they have power it does not corrupt them? She asked how the sharing of resources would work, because not so long ago teachers went to courses to learn to teach in an outcomes-based manner, but what they did was to teach the same way as they had always taught because that is the only way they knew how to teach - in an authoritarian manner. Her question, she said, had to do with people doing the same thing which they had seen work, as opposed to embracing a new concept.

At this point Cleo suggested that they change the seating arrangement and form a circle such that the facilitator is not the one dominating as this was supposed to be a discussion. At that point we moved to the front of the class where the facilitator had been standing and sat in a circle. Cleo continued to say she feels as if the class is dominated by three people only; the facilitator concurred and said he also did not want to dominate the discussions.

After a lot of shuffling and chair dragging, Cleo responded that what they could do to address the issue of power corrupting people, is that they could all decide to have a co-operative and run it in the socialist manner; everyone would work for the same salary. So, she continued, it cannot be true that people could ever be part of the state because the state is on another level and they are the majority at the bottom. The facilitator, who was now part of the circle, urged the class to talk and said he did not want this to be a conversation between himself and Cleo but a discussion amongst all of them. He continued to remind them that they had agreed to do research on socialism and BCM (Black Consciousness Movement). He, however, did not do his research on BCM and will only do it next week. He then thought to stick with the definition that he had found in the dictionary and work with it to gauge how much they understood socialism. He reminded them to take things seriously so that whenever people were asked to do research on a certain topic, they did that (i.e. disciplining them).

Muzi said he understood socialism to be inclusive no matter what, from the means of production to everything, everything must be shared, 'Such that there is nothing for anybody...all of us we are equal and we equally share everything'. He was therefore not sure how socialism worked when it came to defence and security services; would they also belong to the state? The facilitator asked the group to respond. Cleo asked Muzi to elaborate. Muzi said what he was saying was that, as mentioned, socialism is about sharing everything, means of production, loss, profits, everything gets to be shared; what he failed to understand was where soldiers and security services like policemen, fitted under socialism.

Muzi commented that at the core of socialism there was Black Consciousness, therefore they should have started the discussion with a brief recap of Black Consciousness because that would have reminded them that they are the same by identity and as people. That discussion would have reminded them that when you are black, by nature you are a socialist, because as black people sharing is in our nature... Muzi went on to say socialism is therefore not easily accepted by capitalists; when one speaks about socialism 'the capitalist will kill you because you will be pulling meat out of their mouths'.

Carla said her understanding of socialism was that it focused on people that have money; how was it going to be possible to make people on social media change this and make the world see that they also wanted security and food. Cleo said to help Carla understand, she was going to go back to the 'poisonous' definition of the dictionary about the land belonging to the state. She said socialism was on a different level and there was socialism as a government system, and socialism on the social media level. The socialism as a government system is thus totally different from what Carla was saying, in that it did not focus on people who have money and is totally against maximisation of profits. She then reiterated the need to go back and do research because clearly they did not do it.

Muzi had a question and wanted to know why, if socialism was such a good thing, it was only practised by a few countries. The facilitator responded that it was because people do not want 'us' and 'we' but want 'I'. For example, it is better for people to say, 'this is my phone', and not 'this is our phone'. He said people hated socialism because of greed.

Sonto had a question about how they were to curb the need to discriminate which is in all of them. Solo (a member of Abahlali) apologised for being late, and said it was only then that he got back from work. Solo said there was a need to return ubuntu to the people. He said that the root of the problem was that as a nation they had essentially taken over other people's cultures and were now failing because what they were now doing was foreign to them. Muzi said the language had been central to the 'colonisers' fight. They fought through dividing the black nation with (or through) language. At this point I had to leave as it was getting dark.

Whilst, as discussed, the research as a whole and the class observation in particular did not intend to specifically look at the issue of 'political literacy' as Freire understands it, this (and his notion of the 'authoritarian left') is something that both authors are interested in, and have been discussing together for some time. Our experiences of both Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa are very different (one of us being black, and one of us being white), but we were both involved, in different ways, in the anti-Apartheid struggle and have always considered ourselves politically 'left' whilst being deeply sceptical of party politics. We are both also involved in a project to record Freire's legacy in our country, including the ways in which the BCM drew on and used Freire's ideas. We thus wanted to think through how this particular class compared to those run by the BCM in the 1970s, using the lens of 'political literacy'. Whilst clearly this is a single class, and our claims must thus necessarily be very tentative, we would argue that using it as a case study is helpful in teasing out what Freire meant by 'political literacy', and the usefulness of this concept in current times.

Freire and the pitfalls of political education

Right from the start, Freire was clear that there is a fundamental and critical difference between the kind of political literacy he was advocating for, and what he variously described as authoritarian left or Stalinist education. In an interview in 1973, Freire critiqued the revolutionary 'avant-garde' who fall into 'bureaucratic authoritarianism': 'In smothering the people's capacity for conscious action, they would transform those people into simple objects to be manipulated' (1985, p. 161). Freire argued that the problem was that the revolutionary leader/educator saw themselves as 'exclusive owners of the truth' (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 112). Rather s/he needed to 'reject giving the solution and... be honest. Say first, I don't know; and secondly, if I did know I would not tell you...' (ibid., p.127).

Freire frequently pointed to the disjuncture between what revolutionary leaders say, and what they actually do (Freire, 1985, 1997, 2014; Horton & Freire, 1990), 'a certain contradiction between the speech of a revolutionary and his or her practice' (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 217). He felt that this was often the result of an inability or unwillingness to trust the masses:

Insofar as they keep within themselves the myth of the natural incapacity of the masses, their tendency is one of mistrust, of refusing dialogue with those masses, and of holding to the idea that they are the only educators of the masses. (1985, p. 163)

In contrast to this, the democratic educator cannot avoid 'insisting on the critical capacity, curiosity, and autonomy of the learner' (Freire, 1998, p. 33). The distrust in the thinking of the people leads to an emphasis on content: 'It is precisely the authoritarian, magical comprehension of content that characterizes the "vanguardist" leaderships, for whom men's and women's awareness is an empty "space" waiting for content' (2014, p.105):

They feel they belong to a special group in society... which 'owns' critical awareness as a 'datum'. They feel as if they were already liberated, or invulnerable to domination, so that their sole task is to *teach* and *liberate* others. Hence their almost religious care – their all but mystical devotion – but their intransigence, too, when it comes to dealing with content, their certitude with regard to what ought to be taught, what ought to be transmitted. Their conviction is that the fundamental thing is to teach, to transmit, what ought to be taught. (2014, p.105)

For Freire, this happens in the classroom, in the trade union, and in the slum, where it is ‘imperative to “fill” the “empty” consciousness that, according to this individual, the workers [or shackdwellers] do not have’ (2014, p. 106). An emphasis on content is also sometimes at the expense of action – which is, after all, the point: ‘reflection alone is not enough for the process of liberation. We need praxis or, in other words, we need to transform the reality in which we find ourselves’ (Davis & Freire, 1980, p. 59); and this must be communal, not individual. The emphasis on content can also lead to the reification of ‘the text’, something about which Freire is particularly rude:

Intellectuals who memorize everything, reading for hours on end, slaves to the text, fearful of taking a risk, speaking as if they were reciting from memory, fail to make any concrete connections between what they read and what is happening in the world, the country, or the local community. They repeat what has been read with precision but rarely teach anything of personal value. They speak correctly about dialectical thought but think mechanistically. (Freire, 1998, p. 34)

Reifying the text is thus about emphasising content, but specifically content which conforms to ‘the party line’, that which the educator/revolutionary leader knows and the learner/follower does not know. It is thus disconnected from their lives – and hence ahistorical and decontextualized.

‘Political literacy’, by contrast, is rooted in context and history, something which is essential because ‘theory is always becoming...knowledge always is becoming. That is, if the act of knowing has historicity, then today’s knowledge about something is not necessarily the same tomorrow. Knowledge is changed to the extent that reality also moves and changes. Then theory also does the same’ (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 110).

This means, as discussed above, that the future is open-ended. Over time, Freire became increasingly critical not only of those who had the answers, but those who promised a given future. He felt it was important to ‘make the popular classes more aware of the problematic nature of the *future*’ (1997, p. 79) – socialism will not come simply because it is announced. ‘The truth is that the future is created by us, through transformation of the *present*’ (1997, p. 79).

As discussed above, this transformation requires action, and it has to be practical: ‘I don’t believe in the kind of education that works in favor of humanity. That is, it does not exist in “humanity”. It is an abstraction. Humanity for me is Mary, Peter, John, very concrete’ (Horton & Freire, 1990, pp. 100-101).

The Freedom Park political classes and Freire’s ‘political literacy’

In thinking about the ‘political class’ in Freedom Park, we can see a number of the issues Freire raises in connection with ‘political literacy’. One of these is the issue of content. In the class, the facilitator began by reminding the learners that they were supposed to have done research on socialism – socialism, then, as a topic of content, was intended to be the basis of discussion (rather than, for example, what was going on in Freedom Park, or even previous discussions). After asking them to talk about what they had found out in their research, the two English-speaking learners responded – either of which response (although very different) could have been a useful basis for discussion. But instead, Khule immediately turns to the ‘text’, in this case, the dictionary definition. After re-reading this, when Cleo asks that it be repeated, Khule explains it to the class – i.e., he is the one who ‘knows’.

What follows is a fascinating discussion, led by Cleo and Sonto. Both immediately refer to actually existing reality as they perceive it – state capture, the problem of authoritarian teachers. But what both are trying to do is to express their frank scepticism that any state – socialist or otherwise – would actually act in the way that the theory of socialism (as portrayed by Khule) suggests. They are raising two possible problems – that a state may be derailed by ‘capture’ by a small group (i.e. become corrupt); and that the state is not, ever, actually everyone (i.e. it consists only of a small number of representatives). Cleo’s answer to this conundrum is to bypass the state, and create actually existing practical socialism within the community – a co-operative.

By this point, the classroom geography has shifted a bit – what had been Khule at the front of the class (much like the ‘banking’ model of education Freire was so critical of) is now a circle of chairs, to encourage discussion. Khule makes the point of this explicit: he urges the class to talk, saying that he did not want this to be a conversation between himself and Cleo but a discussion amongst all of them. However, at this very point, he then reminds them what the ‘real’ topic of conversation is – i.e. that they had agreed to do research on socialism and BCM (Black Consciousness Movement) (by asking ‘old members who knew’ or searching the internet on their cell phones if they could). He takes them back to the pre-defined content; and suggests they stick with the definition that he had found in the dictionary and work with it to gauge how much they understood socialism – this with a suggestion that not doing the research (i.e. sticking with the content) suggests that people are not taking things seriously.

Another ‘learner’, Muzi, now takes the floor for a fairly long period – partly, he is asking a question (essentially about who controls the security forces – a really important point, given the history of Freedom Park!), but partly he is bringing in the other pre-set topic of the day, Black Consciousness. He argues that since socialism and Black Consciousness are so integrally entwined, they should have started the discussion with a brief recap of Black Consciousness - that discussion would have reminded them that when you are black, by nature you are a socialist, ‘because as black people sharing is in our nature’. Muzi is here arguing that understanding socialism requires starting from an understanding of what it means to be black – he is, like Cleo and Sonto, trying to grapple with an abstract concept by relating it to lived experience, in this case, the lived experience of being black.

Muzi also expresses some scepticism about the possible socialist future. He suggests that the capitalists are not likely to give up easily, and thus the struggle will be a long one; and then (a bit later) he asks why, if socialism is such a good thing, so few countries have adopted it.

After Muzi raises his concern about a potentially violent future, there is an interesting exchange between Cleo and Carla. Carla is still clearly confused about what socialism actually is, conflating it with social media – despite Khule’s definition and explanation. It is Cleo who now helps her, precisely by starting with Carla’s very first contribution to the class – that which was ignored by Khule in favour of ‘the text’.

This discussion allows an opening for a critique, by Sonto, of the earlier argument made by Muzi, that socialism is an inherent part of what it means to be black – she is disputing this, by arguing that everyone has an innate need to discriminate – she wants to explore how socialism might be possible, given her analysis of human nature. This question is immediately dealt with by Solo (a member of Abahlali), who draws on the African cultural concept of ‘ubuntu’ – by arguing for a return to ‘ubuntu’, he is arguing (as Muzi does) that socialism is somehow an innate part of being African, one which other people’s cultures have displaced.

What we see in the class are thus a number of the traits that Freire expressed concern about in ‘left’ education. Despite the evident will of the learners to engage and explore the concept of socialism by relating it to their context, the facilitator (possibly because of his lack of confidence, or his lack of experience (although he was a trained CLING facilitator), or an inability to reflect and theorise his own practice), whilst encouraging the ‘learners’ to enter into a dialogue, in fact shuts this down to reaffirm ‘the line’ (as set down in his text – the dictionary definition). There is a disjuncture between what he says and what he actually does. He is not prepared to say ‘I don’t know’, much less to refuse to say what he knows. His intention is to transmit that which the ‘learners’ need to know. This echoes Freire’s argument about:

the certitude, always, of the authoritarian, the dogmatist, who knows what the popular classes know, and knows what they need even without talking to them. At the same time, what the popular classes already know, in function of their practice in the interwoven events of their everyday lives, is so ‘irrelevant’, so ‘disarticulate’, that it makes no sense to authoritarian persons. What makes sense to them is what comes from their readings, and what they write in their books and articles. It is what they already know about the knowledge that seems basic and indispensable to them, and which, in the form of content, must be ‘deposited’ in the ‘empty consciousness’ of the popular classes (2014, p. 106).

By using the definition as the starting point – ‘socialism is a political and economic theory advocating that land, transport, natural resources and the chief industry should be owned and managed by the state’ - socialism becomes abstracted, ahistorical and decontextualized. This is in stark contrast with Freire’s requirement that conscientisation begin with lived experience. In this class, there is very little evidence of starting with the experience of people, much less their thinking; and (although this may have happened after Zama left), no evidence of moving towards any kind of action – the only concrete action proposed (after the reflection on the very possibility of a truly socialist state) is completely ignored, in favour of returning to the ‘line’.

It could be argued, with some justification, that this, single (part of a) class might be atypical of the ‘usual’ political classes in Freedom Park. But, as we have discussed above, in what people involved have said about the political classes, some of the same key tendencies are evident – that of an emphasis on content, on text, over the lived experience of ordinary people in Freedom Park; and that of a dichotomy between ‘those who know’ and ‘those who have to be taught’. When Christopher speaks of ‘Ama-issues akhona (dominant issues) get to be discussed in these classes. Like this Friday we will discuss State Capture. What is our understanding of state capture, how does it impact our life as ordinary people?’, he speaks of it as a macro issue impacting on ordinary lives, rather than something emerging organically from the lived experience of people in Freedom Park – despite the fact that corruption, as we have seen, is such a dominant discourse and experience in Freedom Park. As Khule somewhat poignantly says, ‘each time there are new people and this requires that the facilitator Ntate Mabasa starts all over again and starts with black consciousness’.

We can also see a stark contrast between this project and the BC project of the early 1970s, in the overtly party political nature of the classes, and conscious teaching of BC. According to Khule, ANC members are not part of these classes ‘since most of our problems are created by the ANC . . . the party of black people which is oppressing other black people’. He argued that the discussions in the class would expose the ANC members as they may have to speak ill of their organisation. He also said of the ‘political classes’ that:

They teach us about being black. They tell us to be proud of being black ... These classes have taught me to have pride in my being black and to refuse to be treated as a sub-human.

Whilst this clearly links with Freire's notion of dehumanisation, it also presents Khule with a dilemma, in that he recognises his oppressor as potentially also black. In this sense, Khule seemed to be struggling to reconcile the analysis he was learning in the class (to be proud of being black, and reject the dehumanisation of racist oppression) with what he was actually experiencing in the community (i.e. black people acting as oppressors or sub-oppressors).

Conclusion

Hamilton et al. (2012) argue that 'literacy is socially constructed and cannot be seen outside of the powerful interests and forces that seek to fix it in particular ways' (p. 2); and that it 'only has meaning within a particular context of social practice' (p. 3). In this article, we have considered two BC-related projects in very different historical contexts – that of Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa. We argue that left education also needs to be carefully considered in terms of 'powerful interests and forces', and the particular context within which it takes place; and that, if it is to be truly emancipatory, it needs to be located within the 'old' theory of Freire's 'political literacy'.

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Notes

¹ A house that was built as part of a government-funded social housing project. Named RDP after the Reconstruction and Development Programme of the African National Congress (ANC) government policy in terms of which such housing was made possible.

² SOPA was founded in 1998, when a group of Black Consciousness stalwarts broke away from the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO). SOPA participated in a number of national general elections, but did not achieve sufficient numbers for representation in the national parliament. In the 2014 elections, SOPA agreed not to stand independently, but to support a new party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF).

³ Not his real name. All names have been changed. The interviews were conducted in 2018 by Zama Thusi.

⁴ Zama made extensive notes during the observation, as far as possible verbatim.

⁵ South Africa recently underwent a period of 'state capture', in which particular individuals and companies exercised undue influence over the government, including the then president. This process is currently under investigation by a Commission of Enquiry.

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