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Education, democracy, ethics and social transformation in Paulo Freire

Educação, democracia, ética e transformação social em Paulo Freire

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Abstract

In the contemporary global context, social and political positions have become increasingly polarized amid a world that, despite its globalization, is retreating from genuine dialogue. Within this scenario, the weakening of institutions, power structures, the State, politics, freedom, and individual rights; that is, democracy itself is being called into question. This article investigates these challenges through the interrelation of education, democracy, and ethics in Paulo Freire's theoretical framework and pedagogical praxis, which he positions as foundational pillars for social transformation. The objective herein is to examine how, in Freire's thought, democracy both demands and is articulated with an ethical stance within educational practice, and to analyze the implications this holds for transformative social change. Employing a qualitative bibliographic review, the theoretical framework draws primarily on Paulo Freire's work concerning the nexus of education, democracy, and ethics oriented towards social transformation, alongside critical reflections on contemporary threats to democracy in the global arena. This study demonstrates how the absence of education as a practice of freedom which cultivates an ethics of life, prevents individuals from rediscovering themselves as historical subjects and from attaining the fullness of being more, that is, from becoming fully humanized.

Keywords: Democracy, Education, Ethics, Social Transformation, Paulo Freire.

Resumo

No cenário mundial hodierno se acirram os posicionamentos à sombra de um mundo, que apesar de globalizado, está fechando-se ao diálogo; nesse contexto se questiona o enfraquecimento das instituições, do poder, do Estado, da política, da liberdade e das garantias individuais, isto é, da democracia. Investigamos esta problemática a partir da inter-relação entre educação, democracia e ética na teoria e prática pedagógica de Paulo Freire, que as posiciona como pilares da transformação social. O objetivo deste artigo consiste, portanto, em examinar como, em Paulo Freire, a democracia exige e se articula com uma atitude ética na prática educativa, e analisar quais implicações ela projeta para a transformação social. A metodologia adotada é a revisão bibliográfica, de abordagem qualitativa, cujo referencial teórico está baseado especialmente em Paulo Freire no que tange à articulação entre educação, democracia e ética, com vistas à transformação social, e nas denúncias às reais ameaças à democracia discutidas na atualidade mundial. Com a presente pesquisa, demonstramos como a ausência de uma educação como prática da liberdade, que faz vingar uma ética da vida, impossibilita o ser humano de redescobrir-se como sujeito histórico e de atingir o máximo do ser mais, ou seja, de ser plenamente humanizado.

Palavras-chave: Democracia. Educação. Ética. Transformação Social. Paulo Freire.

Resumen

En el escenario mundial actual, las posiciones se intensifican a la sombra de un mundo que, a pesar de estar globalizado, se cierra al diálogo; En este contexto se cuestiona el debilitamiento de las instituciones, el poder, el Estado, la política, la libertad y las garantías individuales, es decir, la democracia. Investigamos esta cuestión a partir de la interrelación entre educación, democracia y ética en la teoría y práctica pedagógica de Paulo Freire, que las posiciona como pilares de la transformación social. El objetivo de este artículo es examinar cómo, en Paulo Freire, la democracia requiere y se articula con una actitud ética en la práctica educativa, y analizar qué implicaciones proyecta para la transformación social. La metodología adoptada es una revisión bibliográfica, con enfoque cualitativo, cuyo marco teórico se basa especialmente en Paulo Freire sobre la articulación entre educación, democracia y ética con miras a la transformación social, y en las denuncias de las amenazas reales a la democracia discutidas en el mundo de hoy. Demostramos cómo la ausencia de la educación como práctica de la libertad, que promueva una ética de vida, imposibilita que los seres humanos se redescubran como sujetos históricos y alcancen el máximo de ser más, es decir, de humanizarse plenamente.

Palabras clave: Democracia. Educación. Ética. Transformación Social. Paulo Freire.

1. Introduction

This article, based on qualitative research, aims to delve into the complexity and depth of the educational, ethical, and sociopolitical phenomenon in Paulo Freire's work and to analyze its implications for social transformation. To unveil the phenomenon under investigation, we conducted an extensive bibliographical review, focusing primarily on Freire's writings, which constitute the core of this inquiry, in dialogue with other scholars who currently address the topic in the global context. The critical reflection and analysis of this theme, while contextualized and grounded in Freire's thought as proposed in this study, sought to identify updated elements and some gaps in the existing knowledge. The scope of this research is to reinvent Paulo Freire in the 21st century, a time in which barbarism was fueled by exacerbated nationalism, populism, polarization, and the post-truth era seeks to replace education, while ethics, bent toward profit, stands in contrast to the universal human ethics postulated and practiced by Freire. Democracy is at risk, threatened and weakened by autocracy, which, disguised as a kind of apolitical democracy, has reinvented power and politics in the 21st century. This research is thus both a denunciation and a global call to safeguard democracy, for without an education as the practice of freedom, grounded in an ethical attitude, there can be no democracy and without democracy, there will be no longed-for social transformation.

In this article, organized into two central sections, we examine education and democracy and their relationship with ethics and social transformation. We conducted a bibliographical review of Freire's major works, referenced throughout this paper. The guiding thread of Freire's works is the process of humanization through education as a vehicle for transformation and social change. We are "called to be more fully human" (Freire, 2006a, p. 99), that is, to pursue the being more that Freire envisions as a dynamic, ongoing process of self-becoming, given our inherent incompleteness. Here lies the nucleus of education, understood as a political act, an act of love, courage, and hope, that impels us to make history and realize ourselves as historical subjects.

According to Ana Maria Freire, the connecting thread throughout Paulo Freire's works is his ethical-humanist commitment to a vast and complex project of humanist education. She notes that across all of Freire's "pedagogies" he "did not distance himself but rather completed *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*" (A.M.A. Freire, 2001, p. 28), adding that *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* "embodies Paulo Freire's reading of the world" (p. 27). In the same line, other scholars (Borges, Alcântara & Sales, 2025, pp. 21-23) highlight links among Freire's writings. Our purpose in articulating education, democracy, and ethics in Freire's thought was to rigorously trace the key Freirean concepts pertinent to this study, supported by other bibliographical references to clarify the proposed theme. We emphasize that the Freirean act of educating is always intertwined with an ethical stance, one that requires decision, choice, and even rupture in commitment to social transformation, aiming to generate the "new human being" (Freire, 2005a, p. 35). Freire's concept of the "ontological vocation of being more" (2005a, p. 47) expresses the process of humanization, of rediscovering oneself as a historical subject who becomes emancipated and liberated through education toward social transformation. For this reason, we will examine education and democracy, and subsequently, ethics as the promoter of justice and social transformation implicit in Freire's radical democracy.

Recovering Freire's concrete historical hope, and without moral panic or false alarm, we wish to draw attention to the current human condition, nationally and globally, marked by deep tensions and, as Noam Chomsky points out, the question of who truly governs the world. We live immersed in a vast social, political, and ethical storm, with real threats to democracy denounced in 2017 by Zygmunt Bauman in *Strangers at Our Door* and Adela Cortina in *Aporophobia: The Aversion to the Poor: A Challenge for Democracy*. Both expose the rise of hate speech and crimes, especially against "the last of the earth", the poor and the excluded ones, deprived of all social, political, and economic participation. As Freire wrote in the opening lines of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, addressed to "the wretched of the earth" (Freire, 2005a, p. 23) echoing Frantz Fanon's expression "the Wretched of the Earth".

This inquiry is timely and urgent. It constitutes a cry for the care of democracy, which has been usurped and desecrated by the powerful ones, by large corporations and, above all, by autocrats and dictators. Following Freire's argument for radical and substantive democracy, we analyze several internationally renowned authors, Moisés Naím,

Yascha Mounk, Noam Chomsky, Steven Levitsky, and Daniel Ziblatt, who expose the real threats and weakening of democracy in this first quarter of the third millennium. All these thinkers, along with Bauman and Cortina, share a belief in dialogue, the epistemological and existential category that permeates Freire's work as the communicative action through which we seek consensus, even minimal, to ensure democracy's survival, a democracy that liberates, includes, and transforms the human being in their wholeness.

In this regard, Enrique Dussel, the leading representative of Latin American philosophy of liberation affirms that "Freire is not merely a pedagogue, in the narrow sense of the term, he is something more," for he defines the act of educating as a political act intertwined with an ethical attitude that generates commitment, transformation, and social change. He is an educator of the ethical-critical consciousness of the victims, the oppressed, whom Dussel calls "the condemned of the earth in community" (Dussel, 2002, p. 427). Earlier, he outlined Freire's ethical-critical principle as experiential, an ethics of life (Dussel, 2002, p. 313) as elaborated in (Borges, 2021, pp. 184-194). Ethics is intrinsically woven into Freirean praxis, which cannot exist without reflection and without education as the practice of freedom whose goal is social transformation, emancipation, and humanization, leading to the rediscovery of the human being as free, autonomous, and historically situated subject. As Freire states, "the vocation of human beings is to be subjects, not objects" (Freire, 1980, p. 34). If education is conceived as the practice of freedom, it must necessarily be interrelated with democracy.

2. Methodological Procedures

The core corpus of this analysis consists of Paulo Freire's works that directly address the relationship between education, democracy, and ethics, complemented by contemporary authors who discuss the current crisis of democracy and its social ramifications. Table 1 summarizes the theoretical references central to this study, distinguishing between Freirean contributions and contemporary theoretical inputs that enabled comparative, critical, and interpretive reading, highlighting the relevance of Freire's thought to the challenges of the 21st century.

Table 1 – Theoretical references used in the research.

Category	Freirean Works	Contemporary References
Education, Democracy, Ethics, and Social Transformation	Letters to Cristina (2003c)	
	Pedagogy of Hope (2006a)	How Democracies Die (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018)
	Education as the Practice of Freedom (2007b)	The End of Power (Naím, 2018)
	Human Rights and Liberating Education (2019)	The People vs. Democracy (Mounk, 2019)
	Pedagogy of the Oppressed (2005a)	Strangers at Our Door (Bauman, 2017)
	Pedagogy of Autonomy (2006b)	Who Rules the World? (Chomsky, 2017)
	Cultural Action for Freedom (2007a)	Aporophobia: The Aversion to the Poor (Cortina, 2017; 2020)
	Under the Shade of This Mango Tree (2010)	

Source: Authors (2025).

In an argumentative analysis of Freire's concept of radical and substantive democracy, we engaged with authors such as Moisés Naím, Yascha Mounk, Noam Chomsky, Steven Levitsky, and Daniel Ziblatt, who denounce the real threats to democracy and its weakening in this century. Alongside Zygmunt Bauman and Adela Cortina, they uphold dialogue as a core epistemological and existential category that pervades Freire's work, inspiring communicative action and the pursuit of consensus, however minimal, to sustain a democracy that liberates, includes, and transforms the human being in their totality. Other works were incorporated to enrich the discussion, articulating Freirean praxis with contemporary frameworks and outlining a methodological path that allows for interpreting democracy as a way of life, grounded in an ethics of collective responsibility, and analyzing its implications for educational practice and processes of social transformation.

3. Education and Democracy

Inspired by Freire's dialogical and problem-posing educational praxis, in which human beings, guided by a radical democracy (Freire, 2003c, pp. 191-206) interconnect education, ethics, and freedom, individuals transcend themselves and project toward others in pursuit of social transformation. It is necessary to clarify Freire's concept of radical democracy, it is the quest for a form of democracy that, beyond inclusiveness, promotes the effective participation of the entire society, regardless of citizens' economic or social status. Freire's democratic radicality is rooted in dialogicity, whose apex is freedom and autonomy. In Freire's vision of education as the practice of freedom, the learner discovers themselves as a historical subject and agent of social transformation. This brings us to understand democracy as an ongoing process of humanization, a slow, continuous path toward inclusivity and participation. As Freire notes, "popular participation is not a slogan but both the expression and the path toward democratic realization" (Freire, 2005b, p. 75). He adds that "we are still in the process of learning how to build democracy, and the struggle for it passes through the fight against every form of authoritarianism" (Freire, 2005b, p. 136).

Freire sought to contribute to a substantive and authentic democracy that liberates human beings from dependence, domination, and oppression, enabling them to become emancipated authors and builders of their own history, situated in the realm of possibility. Freirean democracy is substantive because it goes beyond and overcomes formal democracy, which is limited to formal procedures and is more focused on economic issues. It stands out as a humanizing process because it is inclusive, egalitarian, and participatory, a promoter of social justice and fundamental rights, in which educational praxis is used as an instrument of conscientization and emancipation. School, in this view, becomes a space for the critical understanding of reality. The struggle for change loses meaning if education remains banking, that is, "classrooms shielded from the world, with educators who merely deposit content into the empty heads of submissive students" (Freire, 2003c, p. 202). It is "through democratic practice, exposing one's reading of the world to popular groups, that militants, together with the people, come to know" (Freire, 2010, p. 62). Only through mutual respect for cultural identity and dialogue with the learner does education become a political act, a process of knowledge, a democratic practice founded upon respect for the learner, their language, and their class-based cultural identity (Freire, 2005b, pp. 60-61).

The first finding is that education is part of the process of human construction and is intrinsically related to the "ontological vocation of being more" (Freire, 2005a, p. 47), which is nothing more than its humanization. Thus, due to the consciousness of human incompleteness and unfinishedness, one is able to step outside of oneself, projecting oneself onto others, and finding the reasons for one's own existence. For Paulo Freire, as a being of relations, one gives meaning to life, stating that:

Human beings are in the world and with the world. If one were merely in the world, there would be no transcendence, nor would one objectify oneself. But since one can objectify oneself, one can also distinguish between an I and a not-I. This makes one capable of relating; of stepping outside of oneself; of projecting oneself onto others, of transcending. One can distinguish existential orbits distinct from oneself. These relations do not occur only with others, but occur in the world, with the world. The animal is not a being of relations, but of contacts. It is in the world and not with the world. (Freire, 2007c, p. 30)

The second finding is the political nature of education, as "from a critical point of view, it is as impossible to deny the political nature of the educational process as it is to deny the educational character of the political act" (Freire, 2003a, p. 23). What Paulo Freire seeks to break here is "the myth of the neutrality of education" (Freire, 2003a, p. 23); there is no neutral education, "nor an education that is not a political act, implied in an ethical attitude" (Borges, 2021, pp. 194-197). The act of educating will never admit neutrality, because a political-pedagogical project contains a conception of the human being, of history, of the world, and of education. Education is a political, ethical, critical act, forming historical-critical consciousness, whose dialogical nature, together with the collectivity of other subjects,

historically concretizes “the Freirean hope implied with utopia, the dream, and the viable unprecedented, thus projecting another possible world” (Borges, 2022, pp. 31-41).

It is important to remember that for Paulo Freire, in addition to hope, “the dream is also a motor of history. There is no change without a dream, just as there is no dream without hope” (Freire, 2006a, pp. 90-92). And hope is an “ontological necessity, which needs to be anchored in practice,” because “moved by hope, by the ethical-historical foundation of its correctness, it is part of the pedagogical nature of the political process of which the struggle is an expression” (Freire, 2006a, p. 11). In the work, *Education as the Practice of Freedom*, written in 1965 during his exile in Chile, when hope wavered in our country, Freire invites us to reactivate hope, “even in the face of adversities and totalitarianisms” (Freire, 2007b, p. 60).

The third finding is that from educational practice, Freire expresses a liberating pedagogical ethic, through conscientization, autonomy, and freedom, aiming at emancipation from all types of oppression. This is one of the tasks of education: to lead the learner to rediscover themselves as a historical subject in the act of educating (Borges, 2021). There is a “necessary ethicality that expressively connotes the nature of educational practice, as a formative practice” (Freire, 2006b, p. 15). In the relationship between education and democracy, the prophet and wanderer of hope, Paulo Freire, is aware that “no reflection on education and democracy can equally be absent from the question of power, the economic question, the question of equality, the question of justice and its application, and the ethical question” (Freire, 2003c, p. 192). If “the future is problematic, and not inexorable, human praxis, action and reflection, implies decision, rupture, choice. It implies ethics” (Freire, 2003c, p. 213). For a correct hermeneutics of educational practice as an ethical attitude, it is necessary to delve into the “Freirean ethical-critical principle” (Borges, 2021, p. 184).

Based on this Freirean ethical-critical principle, we become aware of the historical-social reality, reading the world and, by speaking the word, we self-construct, acting in the world in which we live, because “it is in the insertion in the world and not in the adaptation to it that we become ethical and historical beings, capable of opting, of deciding, of rupturing” (Freire, 2000, p. 90). The being more is the “ontological and historical foundation for the political struggle around not only democracy, but its constant improvement” (Freire, 2003c, pp. 192-193). Paulo Freire is convinced that radical democracy drives the process of humanization, because any search for equal rights, “in favor of overcoming injustices that is not founded on deep respect for the vocation for humanization, for the being more of women and men” (Freire, 2003c, p. 193), is neither democratic, nor ethical, nor educational practice. He adds that “since the being more has historically become the ontological vocation of women and men, democracy will be the most adequate form of struggle or search for the realization of the human vocation of being more” (Freire, 2003c, p. 192). It follows from this that education, democracy, freedom, rights, equality, and ethics are implicated in the ontological vocation of being more, which is the very humanization of the human being.

For Paulo Freire, emancipation will only occur if educational practice is an education as the practice of freedom, which is the essence of dialogical nature, presented in the third chapter (Freire, 2005a, pp. 89-139) of his masterpiece, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, written in 1967 during his exile in Chile. An education as the practice of freedom overcomes all verbalism and empty discourses, establishing itself in dialogue, defined by Freire in *Pedagogy of Hope* (2006a, p. 118), in communicative action, establishing new human relations that enable the people themselves to develop a critical consciousness of the world in which they live and impelling them to change: “changing is difficult, but it is possible” (Freire, 2006b, p. 79). Any change in the course of history will be made possible by the dialogue between the human being and the world, which is concretized through conscientization, which is “taking possession of reality” (Freire, 1980, pp. 25- 33) “with which human beings, through a true praxis, overcome the state of objects, as the dominated, and assume that of subjects of History” (Freire, 2005a, p. 183).

Rediscovering ourselves as subjects of our own history (Borges, 2021, pp. 197- 204) through our “ontological vocation of being more” (Freire, 2005a, p. 59) is how the process of integral human liberation will be concretized, remembering that “no one liberates anyone, no one liberates themselves alone, human beings liberate themselves in communion” (Freire, 2005a, p. 58). It is in true hope (Freire, 2007a, p. 71), implied with the utopia and the dream of

another possible world (Borges, 2002, pp. 31-41), united with the “dialectization of denunciation and announcement, which has its maximum moment in permanent revolutionary praxis” (Freire, 2007a, p. 70). This is the realization of a cultural action for Freirean freedom, as any “change in the world implies the dialectization between the denunciation of the dehumanizing situation and the announcement of its overcoming” (Freire, 2006b, p. 79).

If education as a practice of freedom, realized in cultural action for freedom, forges an ethics of life, associated with problematizing dialogicity, the basis of a free, autonomous, and democratic society, then how should one act democratically in these modern days of constant threats to democracy? And what is Paulo Freire's conception of democracy? (Borges, 2021). In Paulo Freire, democracy is radical and substantive, or it is not democracy, because what we need is “neither authoritarianism nor licentiousness, but democratic substantivity” (Freire, 2006a, 114). Based on this Freirean acceptance, the axial axis of emancipatory formation, which will lead the student, or any human being, to rediscover themselves as a historical subject, because this radical Freirean democracy occurs in the school for the world and from the world to the school. It is in this amalgam of school and society and society and school that radical democracy is realized, when we consider teaching to think correctly as a risk and an attribute of the democratic school, because “the most decided rejection of any form of discrimination is equally part of thinking correctly” (Freire, 2006b, p. 35).

The notion of democracy in Paulo Freire, interrelated with the act of educating, which is dialogical, free, and autonomous, and which is a political act, implied in an ethical attitude, justice, and social transformation (Borges, 2021, p. 190-194), initially arises from reading Zevedei Barbu's book, *Democracy and Dictatorship, their Psychology and Patterns of life*, originally published in 1956, in which Barbu makes a meticulous analysis of democracy and dictatorship, through the instruments of history, sociology, and, specifically, psychology. Freire learned from Barbu, a Romanian who taught at the University of Brasília for a decade, that democracy is a way of life that influences the behavior and consciousness of people as they engage in debate and problematizing discussion, in freedom and participation, in the tireless search for solutions to the common problems that affect society. Therefore, he observes that, “democracy, before being a political form, is a way of life” (Freire, 2003b, p. 76), as Freire read in John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1936). We can even teach what democracy is, but it would be better to practice it, through participation, because “teaching democracy is possible. For this, however, it is necessary to bear witness to it. Moreover, by bearing witness to it, one must fight for it to be lived, put into practice at the level of global society” (Freire, 2003c, p. 201).

Zevedei Barbu considers “democracy as a group adaptation under conditions of ease, and totalitarianism as a group adaptation under conditions of tension. Hence the feeling of freedom implicit in the democratic way of life” (Barbu, 1962, p. 13). For him, there is no democracy without ethics, because “from the ethical point of view, democracy represents a dynamic balance between an ethics of the absolute and an ethics of empirical life” (Barbu, 1962, p. 72). Democracy always implies a double dimension of human life, verified in almost all aspects of a cultural climate, it is understood “that the structure of a democratic way of life is defined by two dimensions, one ideal and transcendental, and the other empirical and immanent” (Barbu, 1962, p. 72), adding that in a democratic way of life there is a scale of values and not a single value.

Freire's position on substantive democracy is not restricted to school management, as it is not enough to elect directors and school councils, but debate and action-reflection are necessary, which is the experience of democratic praxis in personal life, in school, and in all areas of society, that is, with substantive democracy, the radicality of the exercise of democracy in the act of educating is explained, which is always a political act, implied in an ethical attitude. It is not possible to have democratic management in any area of society by acting “as if assaulting, as if taking possession of some space (Freire, 2019, p. 48), but rather that it be “a space for critical and pedagogical reflection” (Freire, 2019, p. 49).

When referring to school management, in addition to constituting spaces for reflection, they must be guided by autonomy, which emancipates and liberates the human being, therefore, “schools must have autonomy, not only at the level of materiality, but schools must be [...] centers of reflection” (Freire, 2019, p. 51-52), however, Freire insists that “it is not possible to democratize the choice of content without democratizing its teaching” (Freire, 2006a, p. 111).

Understanding “education as an act of love, therefore, an act of courage. It cannot fear debate and the analysis of reality” (Freire, 2007b, p. 104), otherwise it would be empty verbosity, a farce. Paulo Freire is convinced that the student will “learn democracy through the practice of participation” (Freire, 2003c, p. 117). The intrinsic relationship between education and democracy is founded on the belief in the human being as an actor and historical subject of the process of integral liberation, which is humanization, “now, democracy and democratic education are both founded, precisely, on the belief in man. In the belief that he not only can, but must discuss” (Freire, 2007b, p. 104).

If students are treated as subjects, the center of educational practice, participating in the school's political-pedagogical project, the hermeneutics of radical democracy in the act of educating is fostered. This will be guided by “respect for the student, their language, their cultural class identity, the theoretical explanation of defense of education that is hidden, that is unveiled, that challenges” (Freire, 2019, p. 115), recalling that, “it will not be easy to remove from us the taste for authoritarian postures” (Freire, 2019, p. 124). The imperative of authoritarian postures and the dominant rationality that leaves no room for critical reflection models deeply entrenched in our civilization, propel “the necrophilic and oppressive consequences they bring to society as a whole” (Zitkoski, 2010, p. 53). In *Pedagogy of Hope* (2006a), Freire urges us to reclaim concrete historical hope through radical democracy, even amid current threats and contemporary challenges to democracy, for “in the struggle we make moved by hope, by the ethical-historical foundation of its correctness, it is part of the pedagogical nature of the political process of which the struggle is an expression” (Freire, 2006a, p. 11).

We live in times marked by a “great social, political, economic, and ethical storm confronting the human condition in the present era, with real threats to democracy and reactionary forces operating at both global and national levels” (Borges, 2022, pp. 11–19). This situation was already forewarned in 2017 by two prominent authors Zygmunt Bauman in *Strangers at Our Door* and Adela Cortina in *Aporophobia, the Aversion to the Poor: A Challenge for Democracy*. Bauman critiques the moral panic provoked by the profound global migration crisis, which he frames as a humanitarian crisis (Bauman, 2017, pp. 7–26), yet he affirms a hopeful outlook despite humanity's immersion in this profound crisis: “there is no other way out for it than the solidarity of human beings” (Bauman, 2017, p. 24). Similarly, Adela Cortina, whose 2017 Spanish edition adopts an ethical-political perspective denouncing the causes of the shameful universal stigma afflicting the excluded of the earth, a phenomenon that constitutes a “real threat to democracies due to the increase in hate speech and crimes” (Cortina, 2017, pp. 29–59) argues that the only viable path forward is through “cosmopolitan hospitality” (Cortina, 2017, pp. 149–168). She contends that cosmopolitan hospitality, grounded in justice, compassion, and the democratic spirit, will ultimately prevail, thereby displacing the millennia-old Western model of hospitality that perpetuates hatred.

The writer and global political analyst Moisés Naí, has long warned of the genuine threats facing the radical democracy envisioned by Paulo Freire. In his 2013 work *The End of Power*, a timely and essential book that interweaves the state, power, politics, and democracy, Naím demonstrates how emerging and multifaceted forms of power are transforming the world and destabilizing traditional models across politics, business, religious institutions, and the media (Naím, 2018, pp. 11–45). The book concludes with an appendix outlining key post-war trends concerning democracy and political power (Naím, 2018, pp. 355–364), which invites a hermeneutic reflection on the global rise of autocracy at democracy's expense and provides a framework to assess the contemporary evolution of democratic and dictatorial regimes. Building on this analysis, Naím's 2022 work *The Revenge of Power* exposes how autocrats (Naím, 2023, pp. 137–310) are reinventing 21st-century politics through strategies aimed at undermining the very foundations of democracy. This exhaustive examination of the real threats posed by powerful actors, including dictators, populists, and influential entrepreneurs, calls us to embrace the concreteness of Freirean historical hope, persistently striving for democratic ideals amid the intensification of the three Ps: polarization, post-truth, and populism (Naím, 2023, pp. 19–136). These forces imperil and erode global democracy, revealing in contemporary power a new manifestation of political evil.

In this regard, Yascha Mounk, in his 2018 work *The People vs. Democracy*, poses a critical challenge why is our freedom under threat, and how can we safeguard it? Initially, he traces the origins of the crisis marked by the disintegration of liberal democracy (Mounk, 2019, pp. 47-232) alongside the erosion of collective illusions. Subsequently, he outlines strategies to preserve democracy. The proposed remedies to protect our democratic freedom include taming exacerbated nationalisms, reforming the global economy, and, importantly, renewing civic faith (Naím, 2023, pp. 233-315). Building on this analysis of the genuine threats confronting global democracy in the twenty-first century, the American intellectual and prominent activist Noam Chomsky, in his 2016 work *Who Rules the World?*, provides a comprehensive examination of power shifts and the “American decline with its causes and consequences” (Chomsky, 2017, pp. 77-107) in the real dangers to democracy and the future of the global order. It serves as an essential guide for a hermeneutics of the contemporary international situation, revealing dynamics that many fail to perceive as “the invisible hand of power” (Chomsky, 2017, pp. 61-76).

To conclude this section, we urgently seek to provoke critical reflection on the current crisis of democracy, which is agonizing and being systematically undermined in numerous countries worldwide often supplanted or obscured by autocracy, and in some cases, outright replaced by dictatorship. This phenomenon is compellingly analyzed by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt in their influential 2018 New York Times bestseller *How Democracies Die*. These distinguished Harvard University scholars expose the process of democratic subversion (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, pp. 76-98) that unfolded in the United States during the Trump administration, a case that arguably signals a broader global weakening of democratic institutions. After meticulously documenting the erosion, weakening, and potential disintegration of democracy, the authors offer guidance on how democracy might yet be preserved (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, pp. 194-218), emphasizing the vital roles of egalitarianism, civility, the sense of freedom, social and racial inclusion, and social justice.

This was Paulo Freire’s aspiration in his radical democracy: the rediscovery of the human being as a historical subject. For this reason, he proposed a democratic education, which is nothing more than the practice of freedom, an education that drives cultural action for freedom and autonomy, the fundamental foundations of human emancipation in the process of being more, which, in other words, is the humanization of the human being. We hope that humanity, inspired by Freire’s concrete historical hope in democratic ideals, will respond to the appeals of all the aforementioned authors on how to save democracy, now questioned and weakened in contemporary times.

The way forward will be Freirean dialogue (Borges, 2021b), which will generate consensus even if minimal so that we may build bridges of mutual understanding instead of walls of separation. Therefore, it is urgent that we reclaim education for democracy, beginning with Paulo Freire and the other authors mentioned here. Without freedom, autonomy, rights, and equality of opportunities, the longed-for Freirean radical democracy cannot be realized. For this reason, we shall discuss ethics, which stems from a deeply rooted educational practice, it is founded on debate, discussion, and reflection above all, on the human capacity for dialogical and problem-posing engagement. It is this way of conceiving ethics, inseparable from education and democracy and serving as the driving force for justice and social transformation, that we shall analyze next.

4. Ethics and Social Transformation

Addressing ethics in Paulo Freire’s thought means fostering reflection on the great challenges and new perspectives of educational praxis, since “if education alone does not transform society, without it society cannot change” (Freire, 2000, p. 67). Education is a powerful tool that makes learners and citizens critical, raising awareness of the reality of their historical and social context. It transforms and empowers individuals who, in turn, act collectively to change the world, moving toward emancipation. Education is conceived as a practice of freedom, grounded in dialogicity, and functions as a vehicle of changing the driving force of history. In confronting the damage wrought by the great social, political, economic, and ethical storm denounced by philosopher Adela Cortina, particularly the rise of

hate speech (Cortina, 2020, pp. 51, 56), we must focus on the contradictions and adversities embedded in the globalized capitalist crisis, the crisis of the state, of power, of politics, of ethics, and of education, and, most critically, on the real threats to democracy posed by powerful autocrats at the dawn of this third millennium. According to Cortina, what we need is to build together a radical democracy (Cortina, 2020, p. 57). After elucidating various conceptions of democracy in contemporary times, the Spanish philosopher, closely aligned with Freire's radical and substantive democracy, proposes that "the cultivation of ethics requires that freedom be regarded as sacred, but as equal freedom, achieved through dialogue and the mutual recognition of dignity" (Cortina, 2020, p. 63). It is precisely on this equal freedom, rooted in dialogue, that Freire's radical and substantive democracy stands.

Freire's praxis is permeated by ethics, an ethics that educates for freedom and democracy, grounded in transformation and social justice, in favor of the emancipation of the human condition as a historical subject in the process of being more. Ethics in Paulo Freire is an ethics of life, for it does not merely speak of the contradictions and distortions of the existing system, but is lived in communion, mediated by the world (Freire, 2005a, p. 79) with the denied victims, those who have been forbidden to be, whose human dignity has been stolen. This ethical intensity, understood as a principle of life, runs through the entirety of Freire's writings. It appears in the first words of his masterpiece, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which he dedicates "to the wretched of the earth, and to those who discover themselves in them, who suffer with them, but above all, who fight with them" (Freire, 2005a, p. 23). This is his ethical imperative, as he asserts: "my standpoint is that of the condemned of the earth, of the excluded" (Freire, 2006b, p. 14). When the injustices of our historical-social context provoke Freire's just anger and indignation, we enter the ethical-educational field of his praxis.

In his last work, *Pedagogy of Autonomy* (1996), which is not specifically a book on ethics but one that assumes an ethical stance directly tied to the act of educating, Freire presents what may be seen as his testament. In it, he outlines the knowledge required for educational practice, emphasizing that teaching, by its very nature, involves ethical responsibility:

I would like to underline for us, teachers, our ethical responsibility in the exercise of our teaching task. Likewise, I underline this responsibility for those in training to exercise it. This small book is permeated throughout by the sense of the necessary ethnicity that expressively characterizes the nature of educational practice as formative practice. As educators and learners, we cannot escape ethical rigor. But it must be clear that the ethics I refer to is not the lesser ethics, the restricted market ethics, obediently bowed to the interests of profit. [...] I am not speaking of this ethics. I am speaking on the contrary, of the universal human ethics—the ethics that condemns the cynicism of that discourse, that condemns the exploitation of human labor, that condemns judging by hearsay, [...] striking the weak and defenseless, burying the dream of utopia [...]. The ethics I speak of is the one betrayed and denied both in grossly immoral acts and in the hypocritical perversion of purity into puritanism. It is the ethics affronted by discriminatory acts of race, gender, and class. It is for this ethics, inseparable from educational practice—whether we work with children, youth, or adults, that we must fight. And the best way to fight for it is to live it in our practice, to bear witness to it vividly to our students—in the way we handle the content we teach, in the way we cite authors whose work we agree or disagree with. (Freire, 2006b, pp. 15-16)

It is the synthesis of Paulo Freire's ethical-critical position, written just a few months before his death on May 2, 1997, through the essential knowledge for educational practice, which is intrinsically political and founded on the ethical dimension, but on an ethics of life, in which respect for autonomy, human dignity, justice, and social transformation are its fundamental pillars. This ethics of life makes possible the engagement of individuals in transformative action. The Freirean scholar, Telmo Adams, in explaining the entry *Society* in the *Paulo Freire Dictionary*, affirms that "human dignity is only possible if we remain faithful to the universal ethics of the human being, which carries at its core the unconditional valorization of justice, solidarity, and democracy" (Adams, 2008, p. 387). This is the ethics of life, which "rejects the dictatorship of the market, founded on the perversity of its ethics of profit" (Freire, 2006b, p. 128).

Without the ethical dimension, the Freirean praxis, rooted in action and reflection, cannot be realized. As Freire affirms, “it is impossible to think of human beings apart from ethics, much less outside of it. To be far from, or worse, outside of, ethics is a transgression” (Freire, 2006b, p. 33). The author connects education, freedom, authority, democracy, and ethical responsibility as inseparable, explaining:

Coherently democratic authority, recognizing the ethical nature of our presence, that of women and men in the world, also recognizes that one cannot live ethically without freedom, and that there is no freedom without risk. The learner who exercises freedom will become freer the more ethically they assume responsibility for their actions. To decide is to break away, and for that, one must take risks. One does not break away as easily as drinking a pitanga juice on a tropical beach. But, on the other hand, coherently democratic authority never omits its duty. (Freire, 2006b, p. 93).

For a deeper understanding of this ethical, political, and democratic stance in Freire’s praxis, which drives social transformation, we refer to *The Reconstruction of a Liberating Pedagogical Ethics in the Light of Paulo Freire* (Borges, 2021, pp. 194-197).

Against every form of social conformity, especially the fatalism of globalized capitalism, Freire is emphatic: “I reject this fatalism in the name of my understanding of the human being and of history, of my ethical standpoint, and because I cannot deny my faith” (Freire, 2010, p. 81). Fatalism and historical determinism deny the human capacity for meaningful social change and obstruct the being more than Freire envisions. For Freire, history is the place of possibilities, of struggle, of ethically responsible confrontation, since “in history as possibility, we can only be responsible, therefore ethical. This responsibility implies the ethical struggle to assume it” (Freire, 2010, p. 82).

As we emphasized earlier, Freirean praxis is founded on education as the practice of freedom, the defense of democracy, and social transformation, all fruits of an education that liberates and fully emancipates the human being. Ethics in Freire’s educational praxis is grounded in the dialectic of denunciation and annunciation (Freire, 2007a, p. 70), which transcends the neutrality of education and knowledge, continually renewing itself through a socio-historical commitment to human liberation (Borges, 2021, p. 115). This dialectic operates bidirectionally: denouncing class society and historical fatalism, obstacles to change, while announcing the new human being (Freire, 2005a, p. 35), the new society, the locus of historical possibility. Freire reminds us: “there is no annunciation without denunciation, just as every denunciation gives rise to annunciation. Without the latter, hope is impossible” (Freire, 2007a, p. 71). Thus, we can think of the future in terms of new possibilities. The human being rediscovers themselves through social transformation via action and reflection propelled by knowledge: “human beings become subjects through reflection on their situation, on their concrete environment” (Freire, 1980, p. 35).

The Freirean ethical-critical praxis guides us to discern and choose knowledge that, as ethical beings aware of history as possibility, allows us to take risks, to break barriers and fears, since “the future loses its meaning” (Freire, 2007a, p. 71) when divorced from social commitment. He states: “the ability to discern, compare, choose, plan, act, evaluate, commit, and risk makes us beings of decision, ethical beings. For this reason, it is an ethical imperative to fight against discrimination” (Freire, 2010, p. 70). This possibility arises from knowledge anchored in the historicity of the human being’s social context, their concrete environment.

Ethics in Freirean praxis, when it is genuine, authentic, and revolutionary (Freire, 2005a, p. 143), enables the articulation and mobilization of subjects to produce and decide on knowledge that unveils the totality of the historical-social context in which they live, and which demands ongoing social transformation. This is the Freirean ethical imperative, whose foundations lie in educational practice conceived within freedom and the ideals of radical democracy—an ethics that gives meaning to human dignity in its entirety, implicated in the being more, the continual process of humanization. In this way, we interrelate education, democracy, ethics, and social transformation in Paulo Freire.

5. Final considerations

In the articulation between education, democracy, and ethics in Paulo Freire lies the core investigative problem of this study: the hermeneutics of the interrelationship among education, ethics, and democracy, which culminates in a commitment to social transformation forged through an emancipatory process driven by education. Education, when grounded in the practice of freedom and in Freire's conception of radical and substantive democracy, and when implicated in an ethical attitude, becomes authentic and capable of fostering justice and social transformation.

In Freire's conception, education is one of the main agents of social transformation and change. Through a dialogical and problem-posing education, conceived as the practice of freedom, critical reflection upon the reality of one's historical and social context is both encouraged and enacted. From this process emerges a deep understanding of the lived reality, particularly of social injustices and the exclusion from social participation, which Freire calls conscientization. This, in turn, leads to intervention in reality in order to transform it. Such is the Freirean praxis of action and reflection, which breaks with both individual and collective alienation, engaging us as agents of change and social transformation. An education based on freedom and autonomy, as Freire proposed, will promote social engagement, when combined with efforts and investments in public policy, it ensures inclusion and participation. Thus, education remains an effective vehicle and instrument of transformation.

Social transformation requires an education that raises learners' awareness through knowledge and critical thinking, fostering the experience of citizenship in its broadest sense, in order to overcome inequalities. For this, personal skills are not enough; values are required, specifically, the universal human ethics that Freire advocated. This universal ethics, embedded in educational practice and committed to the emancipation of individuals, generates responsibility and enables social engagement in pursuit of a more just, free, and democratic society, where human dignity enhances the quality of life. This is the social role of the school and the university, which must reach beyond their walls, otherwise, they lose their very reason for being. The development of critical thinking and awareness through continuous education, committed to the integral formation of human beings, allows individuals to recognize their rights and duties. Furthermore, an education for autonomy and freedom, grounded in democratic principles and the formation of ethical-social values, serves as the driving force for authentic social transformation. Education is the path to the transformative potential of Freire's pedagogy, a reflection of a critical education that raises awareness and empowers learners, men and women alike, toward social transformation.

We are acutely aware of the contemporary relevance of Freire's proposal for an education tied to democratic ideals, for it is through dialogical and problem-posing praxis ethical in nature that the integral liberation of human beings in their continuous process of being more, that is, of full humanization, can be achieved. This becomes possible when we understand history as the place of possibilities, allowing us to coexist in communion with the broader human community. In this way, we actualize a process of liberation, mediated by the world and conscious that history is marked by a succession of exclusions and social injustices, a constant transgression of ethics. The greater ethics to which Freire refers, as discussed in this article, leads to an ethics of life, a universal ethics inseparable from educational practice. It is our duty, and Freire's historical call, to "do everything we can for ethical dimension, without falling into hypocritical moralism or self-righteous Pharisaic virtue" (Freire, 2006b, p. 17).

This way of conceiving Freire's radical critical pedagogy has made history since the 1960s and remains deeply relevant today, as long as there is an oppressed person, a human being discarded by the machinery of the prevailing system, forbidden to be, deprived of dignity. Education without ethical and political grounding, detached from the freedom of democratic ideals, does not transform the historical and social context of the subject, it merely preserves the status quo, sustaining a fatalistic and deterministic view of the future of humankind and society. Education, when intertwined with ethics and democracy, fulfills the demands of full human liberation, leading individuals to rediscover themselves as historical subjects, capable of constructing and authoring their own life stories and the destinies of their contemporaries, attaining the fullness of being more. These demands of Freirean praxis, of a critical pedagogy grounded in the radicality of democracy, first as a way of life, and then as a political form, prevent complacency with the unjust

and immoral systems that discard the majority as human waste, keeping them on the margins of social participation and transformation.

The rise of extremist indoctrination and the militarization of education in Brazil and other parts of the world are the most concrete examples of the denial of the values defended in this research. Such practices undermine and degrade education as the practice of freedom envisioned and enacted by Paulo Freire. Beyond distorting education as emancipatory and liberating, these extremist ideals of closure and disdain for dialogue discredit education as a political and humanizing act, one capable of fulfilling human existence in its entirety, that is, the Freirean process of being more. In other words, this represents a regression to the banking model of education, detached from social, political, and ethical concerns, contrary to fundamental human rights, already denounced by Freire in the second chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2005a, pp. 65-87). Such extremist positions are an affront to Freirean education, understood as a political act rooted in an ethical attitude and in a social and emancipatory commitment that enables the transformation of learners' historical and social contexts. This study aims to be both a cry of alert and a denunciation, grounded in absolute faith in the hermeneutics of dialogue, in the Freirean sense, interwoven with the themes discussed throughout this investigation.

Dialogue, in Freire's view, is "an existential necessity" (Freire, 2005a, p. 91), a communicative, intuitive, and human rationality, not an instrumental one. When realized through hospitality and cosmopolitan solidarity, democracy will not die. Thus, we will be able to confront the current social, ethical, political, economic, and especially anti-democratic storms. This is how barbarism, the antithesis of education, can be contained, as Bernard Charlot explains in the prologue to his recent work *Education or Barbarism? A Choice for Contemporary Society* (Charlot, 2020, pp. 13-20). This is our collective outcry in the face of the danger that threatens our freedom and our democracy, both of which are being increasingly weakened in the present day.

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