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The Self-saying of a People: word, praxis and performativity in Paulo Freire

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ABSTRACT – The Self-saying of a People: word, praxis and performativity in Paulo Freire. This essay sought to problematize the concept of word through the performative interpretation of the concept of praxis in Paulo Freire's works *Cultural Action for Freedom, Education, the Practice of Freedom*, and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, given the inherent connection between reflection and action in both concepts, according to Freire. By analyzing the aporias arising from a still representationalist understanding of the word and approaching the notion of performativity, as discussed by Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, it was possible to arrive at an understanding of the power inherent in words to initiate new situations and transform social reality, and through which a people could, with words, make themselves as a people.
Keywords: **Paulo Freire. Word. Practice. Performance. People.**

RESUMO – O Dizer-se de um Povo: palavra, práxis e performatividade em Paulo Freire. Este ensaio buscou problematizar o conceito de palavra através da interpretação performativa do conceito de práxis nas obras *Ação cultural para a liberdade, Educação como prática da liberdade* e *Pedagogia do oprimido*, de Paulo Freire, haja vista a ligação entre reflexão e ação, para ele, inerente a ambos conceitos. Da análise das aporias advindas de uma compreensão ainda representacionista da palavra, bem como de uma aproximação da noção de performatividade, segundo Jacques Derrida e Judith Butler, foi possível dar lugar a uma compreensão do poder que teria a própria palavra de encetar novas situações e transformar a realidade social, e por meio do qual um povo poderia com palavras se fazer um povo.
Palavras-chave: **Paulo Freire. Palavra. Práxis. Performatividade. Povo.**

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Introduction

"There is no true word that is not praxis" (Freire, 2011, p. 107). It is not new that word and praxis are indispensable notions for Paulo Freire to think about education as dialogicity. On one hand, comparing it to praxis, he would say that the word would be constituted by two essential elements, namely, action and reflection. That is, in the "true word", reflection and action, theory and practice, would be inseparable and undichotomizable. Furthermore, there would be no word that would not already articulate itself in these two dimensions. Thus, its apparent disarticulation would be one of the effects proper to the violence of oppression. On the other hand, in problematizing the conditions that would enable the word to transform the world, he would call "inauthentic" the word in which such elements have already become disarticulated and dichotomized. "Empty word", "verbalism", "verbosity", would thus be names given to the word emptied of its practical dimension, of the commitment to transformation that would make it capable of denunciation. And, exhausted of its reflexive dimension, the word would be nothing more than "activism", blind to its own doing. In short, whether as an "empty word" or as "blind activism", the word would be inauthentic when through it a people could no longer express or pronounce their own world.

To think of the word as praxis, that is, as the relation between reflection and action, would be to think of it beyond the process of signification that structurally gives it meaning. It would be to understand it in the close relationship established between how we interpret reality and the practice that ensues from it (Rossato, 2010, p. 650). Words, therefore, would gain their meaning not only through their relation with the concepts that, by subsuming things in the world, would serve as their meaning, but especially through the social rituals in which they would be inscribed and which would make them function, giving meaning to this very world and fixing places of speech and power within it.

The word would then be the foundation for all liberating action, which, for Freire, would essentially find its place in dialogue. And, due to this dialogical nature of liberating action, the word could not come before or after action (Govender, 2020, p. 220). It would not be before or after the word either that, from a "peopleless society" (Freire, 1967, p. 35), a people could emerge or invent itself. Therefore, just as in praxis, in the word, action and reflection should occur simultaneously (Freire, 2011, p. 173; Carvalho; Pio, 2017, p. 434).

However, notwithstanding the constitutive concomitance between reflection and action, between theory and practice, with which the word is conceived by Freire and interpreters, the "close relationship" between these essential elements would still be marked by an apparent dichotomy, producing between them a hiatus, a division that separates them into two distinct instances: on one side, the interpretation of the historical situation, in the form of diagnosis or denunciation, and on the other, the action itself that transforms reality.

Praxis would appear as a juxtaposition of two spheres: on one hand, in the material sphere, there would be a doing; and on the other, in the spiritual sphere, a reflective knowledge about this same doing, that is, a guide for action. It would thus be understood either as practical activity imbued with knowledge, reflections, and questioning, aimed at transformative actions in reality (Carvalho; Pio, 2017, p. 435), which would maintain the juxtaposed separation between the spheres; or as the connection between the theoretical explanation of the oppressive social reality and the practical aspect of how society should be in order to enable the realization of an emancipatory project within it (Govender, 2020, p. 217), which would ultimately eliminate the material sphere of action itself within the word.

The word as reflection, as an understanding of oppressive reality, would "demand" the transformation of this reality, becoming inseparable from the "need" for action (Rossato, 2010, p. 650). However, due to this apparent caesura in the word, then taken as praxis, we would be led to understand that theory - a set of ideas from which a given phenomenon or historical moment is interpreted, diagnosed, or denounced - and practice - the action that produces and transforms this interpreted reality - could no longer belong to the same sphere without thereby eliminating the other, or even forming *a* duality between them.

As a result of theoretical investigation, this essay[1] sought to problematize the concept of the *word* based on the performative interpretation of the concept of *praxis* in the works *Cultural Action for Freedom* (1981), *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1967), and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2011) - texts produced in the second half of the 1960s[2] - in order to shed light on aporias and, based on them, with an approach to the notion of *performativity* as conceived by Jacques Derrida (2017) and Judith Butler (1997; 2015; 2021), to allow for the transformation of these concepts themselves. By *performative interpretation*, or "performative writing", we understand "an interpretation that transforms what it interprets" (Derrida, 1994, p. 75), allowing for the folding of its very conceptual frameworks, leading to the displacement of thought itself.

Thus, by performatively interpreting the concept of the word as praxis, we seek to "study", that is, "reinvent", "recreate", or "rewrite" (Freire, 1981, p. 9) Freirean thought, problematizing the relation between the word and the effects it produces, which forms the basis for understanding the connection between reflection and action, theory and practice, in the process of reproducing or transforming ourselves and the world, inherent, in this case, both to the notion of praxis and to the notion of the true word. In this sense, we believe that such a connection - through which the "true word", as an act, should be more than an "act of knowledge", already producing effects on reality - cannot be thus conceived from a representationalist understanding of language: an understanding present not only in Freire's production but also in interpreters (Agostini, 2018, p. 189; Carvalho; Pio, 2017, p. 435; Rossato, 2010, p. 650; Freire, 1981, p. 20; 1967, p. 115; 2011, p. 121).

As this essay is not an exegetical research, its intention was not to unveil or fix an unique or "true" meaning of the concepts of praxis and word in Freirean thought. Nor was it about indicating the ideal key for interpreting the texts studied or even guiding a more faithful reading. This essay sought, through articulations of the theoretical framework of these texts, to problematize the concepts in question. In other words, it aimed to analyze how, in relation to other notions, they fix their meanings, attempting, through aporias, their transformation. We assume that by putting Freire's thought in contact with philosophies or traditions still foreign to him, we introduce a certain tension into his theoretical framework. However, for us, it is only through such tension that we could bring thought to dislocate itself, giving rise to the potentiality and movement towards what we prefer to call *a reading otherwise*.

"There is no true word that is not praxis"

In summary, in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire establishes a conception of the word, whose criterion of truth would then be linked to the notion of praxis, which serves as its conceptual matrix:

> When we attempt to delve into dialogue as a human phenomenon, something reveals itself to us that we can already say is inherent to it: the word. However, as we encounter the word in the analysis of dialogue as something more than a means for it to occur, we are compelled to also seek its constitutive elements. This search leads us to discover within it two dimensions: action and reflection, so closely intertwined, in such a radical interaction that if one of them is sacrificed, even partially, the other immediately suffers. *There is no true word that is not praxis*. Hence, *to speak the true word is to transform the world* (Freire, 2011, p. 107, emphasis ours).

Roughly speaking, to think of the word as praxis, following Karel Kosik, a philosopher read and cited by Freire, would be to think of it as revealing the "[...] secret of man as an ontocreative being" (Kosik, 1995, p. 222). It would be necessary to understand the praxis of man and, therefore, also the word, not as a practical activity juxtaposed or opposed to theory, but as part of the very process that defines human existence: constant elaboration of reality.

It is important to note that this understanding of praxis carries a persistent, that is, *reiterated*, mark of both Revolution and radical rupture with the speculative tradition of philosophy. However, the concept of praxis dates back to ancient philosophy. Originating from common Greek, "praxis" meant "action" or "activity", that is, "everything that is done." It was with Aristotle that it entered the conceptual framework of Philosophy. For him, distinct from "production", whose purpose would not coincide with production itself, "acting" - praxis - would have its end in itself. Therefore, acting could not correspond to the knowledge of technique or theory: since the former serves production, having in the products its own end; and the latter refers to the

invariable, that is, to the necessary principles of nature and being as being. In acting, due to its deliberative and therefore variable nature, it could only correspond to practical wisdom itself (Aristotle, 1991, p. 128). It is possible that it was from this distinction, which permeated Aristotle's work as a whole, that the classic separation between theory and practice (Rossato, 2010, p. 652) arose - no longer applicable, in the thought of the Stagirite, to the relationship between thinking and acting[3].

It was only with critical philosophy, that is, with Hegel and later with Marx, that the concept of praxis would come to denote the inseparable relationship between thinking and acting, philosophy and reality, theory – as a guide for action, illuminating human activity, especially revolutionary activity – and practice - the production and transformation of human reality (Sánchez Vázquez, 2007, p. 109). For Paulo Freire, as historical beings who both think and make their own reality, in men - beings of "decision" [quefazer][4] - theory and practice should be thought of in an original, essential connection. In other words, for human action, which, unlike that of other animals, presupposes a decision [quefazer] (Freire, 2011, p. 127), a theory to illuminate it would be indispensable, serving as its foundation, orientation, and guide (Freire, 2011, p. 167).

In this sense, praxis, for him, should be understood in a dual register. On one side, through "true", "authentic" praxis, individuals would understand and assume themselves as ontocreative beings in constant relation with the reality they themselves create, awakening a commitment to their own transformation. On the other side, through the oppressive praxis of the "dominant elite", the "inverted praxis", individuals would perceive themselves and, unknowingly, produce themselves adapted to a reality that serves the dominator, denying the masses the right to "admire" the world, question it, and transform it for their humanization (Freire, 2011, p. 170). By already thinking of the word as praxis, therefore, we would have, respectively, in the realm of true praxis, or in the "true word", the inseparability of thinking-speaking and acting, so no word thus would not act upon the world; and in the realm of "inauthentic praxis", or in the "inauthentic word", the disarticulation and dichotomization of these two essential dimensions of the word. Considering that a *people* could not express themselves and, by expressing themselves, produce themselves without the "true" word, in this case, we would have nothing more than the paradox of a "peopleless" society (Freire, 1967, p. 35).

This dual register of praxis, therefore, would mark the two moments of a pedagogy of the oppressed: the first, in which, through "liberating" or "revolutionary" praxis, the oppressed would unveil the oppressive reality - veiled to them by inauthentic praxis - and commit to its transformation; and the second, in which pedagogy - no longer "pedagogy of the oppressed", since the oppressive reality would already be transformed - would become "pedagogy of people in the process of permanent liberation" (Freire, 2011, p. 57).

The people and the word

Considering that, for Freire, a people would be itself a subject (Freire, 1967, p. 35), we could start the problematization with the question: would there be a subject before the word? Answering "yes" might revive the presumption of Cartesian *res cogitans*, that is, of a substance or essence that would precede the subjective production of its own existence, assuming that reality would already be given outside the subject and that it would be nothing more than a thinking thing among things. In the case of a people, we would be led to question the constitutive role of the linguistic contract that binds its members and allows them to recognize each other: would it be possible for a people to exist before its members could declare themselves belonging to it through any signifier? And what else would enable a "peopleless society"?

It was in response to the specific challenges of Brazilian society at his time, a society in transition, divided between a time that in its passing was becoming empty, although it "intended" to persist and perpetuate itself, and a time yet to come, that Paulo Freire made use of a philosophical and pedagogical effort, then materialized in the works studied here, placing the reader in front of a dilemma, a choice:

> From then on, any search for answers to these challenges would necessarily involve a choice. A choice for *that yesterday, which meant a peopleless society*, commanded by an 'elite' superimposed on its world, alienated, where the simple man, minimized and unaware of this minimization, was more 'thing' than man himself, or a choice for Tomorrow. For *a new society, which, being subject of itself, would have in man and in the people subjects of its History*. A choice for a partially independent society or a choice for a society that would 'decolonize' itself more and more. That would increasingly cut the chains that made and make it remain as an object of others, which are subjects to it (Freire, 1967, p. 35, emphasis ours).

So, what would make a social formation a "peopleless society" according to Freire? Moreover, what would be a people? What would make a group of individuals a people? Broadly speaking, for him, it would be the very activity inherent in this group of individuals, making it, therefore, a political subject and creator of its own social reality. In other words, "people" would designate, as a collective subjectivity, the condition of freedom and solidarity in which men, through dialogue, would meet to pronounce themselves and their own world (Freire, 2011, p. 109).

Of course, if we were to consider a discourse still marked by a positivist pretension in the social sciences or anthropology, the relationship between the notions of "people" and "society" would result from the way in which, from the viewpoint of these sciences, such notions would frame the people as an object. In this sense, society would frame a human group marked almost always by territoriality, by the welcoming or "recruitment" of new individuals mainly through the sexual reproduction of its members, by a relative self-sufficiency of its

economic and institutional organization, which would allow it to persist over generations, giving it a cultural distinctiveness, and – why not? – an identity. In this sense, we would understand "people" to the extent that we had in mind the population composition of a society, with the organization that would give it its own form and regularity, as well as a symbolic system through which the cognitive and affective contents of its group life would be produced (Viveiros de Castro, 2002, p. 298).

More than just an aspect in a sociological framework, *people*, or at least the word "people" in modern European languages[5], would be marked by a curious ambiguity that historically encompassed the very contradiction inherent in the various social inequalities of Western modernity. The same word would designate, both in common language and in political lexicon, on the one hand, the set of citizens as a unified political body – as evidenced by expressions such as "Brazilian people", "Italian people", "vox populi", "the good people"; and, on the other hand, those who, within this same political body, would belong to the lower classes or would be partially or totally excluded from it – a sense present in expressions such as "homem do povo", "*rione popolare*", "*front populaire*". "In other words, the same term names both the constitutive political subject and the class that, in fact, if not by right, is excluded from politics" (Agamben, 2015, p. 24).

In other words, it's as if, under the force of an oppressive reality, what we call "people" undergoes a scission, a fracture, a schism, which would split it between two opposing poles: on one hand, we would have the people as an integral political body, as a totality - that is, as an inclusion that would aspire to be complete, without residues; and, on the other hand, the fragmentary subset of the needy and excluded, the wretched, the "condemned of the earth", who would be nothing but its own excluded part, the internal surplus that should remain outside the whole, thereby challenging the presumed universality of the notion of people as a totality. In other words, "[...] in becoming oppressive, reality implies the existence of those who oppress and those who are oppressed" (Freire, 2011, p. 51), inscribing under the signifier "people" both the crack that prevents it from coinciding with itself and the revolutionary destiny inherent to its excluded part.

In speaking of a "peopleless society" to problematize the dilemma or choice faced by any pedagogical effort in times of transition in a society that is "intensely changing and dramatically contradictory", experiencing a state of "historical-cultural pororoca", as would be the case in Brazilian society, Freire resurrected the notion of "closed societies." However, it should be noted in passing that although this notion was recurrent in the works of thinkers like Álvaro Vieira Pinto and Franz Fanon, since it was still linked to the defense of liberal democracy, it could also generate aporias and contradictions within the framework of Freirean thought[6].

When discussing the essay *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1967), by "closed society", it would be necessary to bear in mind Bra-

zilian society during the colonial period; and by "open society", a free and democratic society yet to come, in the Brazil of that time (marked by military dictatorship), still not fully realized. By situating the context of this effort – which resulted in the aforementioned essay – as a time of transition and choice for a society in "parturition", Freire would repeat the Kantian gesture of 1783, of "emergence from minority" and of announcing a society enlightened by reason and founded on autonomy, of a fully emancipated society.

In this sense, it would indeed be about the parturition of a future, of a "Tomorrow." But it would also, and above all, be about the parturition of a people, whose possibility would depend on this very process of societal transformation. From "intransitive consciousness" to full "conscientization", little by little, men should overcome the conditions of "uncommitment" to their own existence, the conditions of a "peopleless society": according to Freire (1967, p. 58), animalized, confined to a more vegetative life plan, where they would be more things than people, characteristic of the "closed society" in which colonial Brazil found itself. For him, closed within themselves and objectified, men would no longer dialogue and, thus, through the very word then usurped, they could no longer form community or make of themselves a people.

It should be noted that, in order for the word not to be emptied, it would be necessary to understand it already within the relation humans-world, that is, to understand it from the thinking of humans always and inevitably referred to the surrounding reality and their action upon it, their praxis (Freire, 2011, p. 136). Hence, in an "education for freedom", the word - at least in the potent form of the "generative word" or the "generative theme" - would not separate or isolate the human subject from their reality, that is, from a reality whose existence and meaning would depend on the "ontocreative" gesture that would make them "more-being." The word, in this sense, would be appropriated, created, and recreated in such a way as to allow for a critical reading of objective reality, that is, its expanded and demystified *representation*, making it possible for humans to unveil themselves in their own process of perpetual liberation (Agostini, 2018, p. 192).

If, on one hand, it should no longer be possible, in this sense, to separate in praxis the "critical insertion into oppressive reality" from action upon that same reality (Freire, 2011, p. 52); on the other hand, would it be possible for conscientization alone, that is, for the "true recognition" of reality, to produce the objective, material transformation of the reality it unveils? Freire himself seemed attentive to the material conditions of "rupture in the forces that kept the 'closed society' in balance" (Freire, 1967, p. 48) and that would lead to its gradual opening and to the transitivity of men's consciousness. What role, then, would conscientization play in relation to the transformation of a society in transition? Through conscientization, insofar as men critically unveiled reality, stepping back to "admire" it, they could discover themselves capable of consciously acting upon it and guiding such

action (Agostini, 2018, p. 188). Reflection and action, in this case, would belong to distinct moments in the process of transforming reality. However, once it is assumed as essential to the concept of praxis, the inseparability of the unity formed by reflection and action, shouldn't conscientization itself be linked to effects of transforming reality, themselves produced by the word? And, in the case of a "peopleless society", given this very unity of action and reflection, of word and world, shouldn't a people *really* emerge through the very use of *their own* word? However, would such a possibility be conceivable, starting from a conception of language and of word that encloses them in the spiritual sphere of representation? And, in the case of understanding oppressive reality itself, starting from such an understanding of language, wouldn't one be reducing oppression – hitherto understood as the usurpation of the word that would deny man his condition of "being more" – to a problem of representation?

The caesura between saying and doing

In Freire's work, the notion of praxis, that is, the "close relationship" or "indissoluble unity" between reflection and action, theory and practice, thought and reality, could not be translated into a single form or type of relationship. Furthermore, the very notion of relationship, as he addresses it in contemplating the "human sphere", would also reflect a certain complexity. Unlike the "pure contacts, typical of the other animal sphere", relationship would be one of the main traits that make the human a human being, illuminating the bond between man and the world, considering its very historicity. Marked by connotations of plurality, transcendence, criticality, consequence, and temporality, such a notion would thus maintain a strong connection with the concept of praxis. In this sense, man, as a being of praxis, would himself be a being of relationships. He would not just be in the world, but with the world, with others (Freire, 1967, p. 39). Relationship, in other words, would be the very openness of man to his own reality:

> Inheriting the acquired experience, creating and recreating, integrating into the conditions of one's context, responding to its challenges, objectifying oneself, discerning, transcending, man launches himself into a domain that is exclusive to him – that of History and Culture (Freire, 1967, p. 41).

However, beyond the complexity of the notion of relationship, in elucidating praxis in its terms – and by no longer treating it in terms of a single type or form of relationship – Freire would make us lean sometimes towards the material sphere of action, and sometimes towards the spiritual sphere of representation. When discussing the relationship between humans and the world, for example, humans would appear as the *producers* of it; which, in the dialectical relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, would be expressed in the idea that, through *labor*, the subject would objectify itself in the world (Freire, 2011, p. 52) – an idea that would make understandable the very possibility of material alienation (Sánchez Vázquez, 2007, p. 125). Note that in both cases, praxis as a relationship, when translated into

production or *labor*, would confine the proper place of transformative action to the material sphere of the economy. On the other hand, when addressing the relationship between reflection and action, the role of reflection would be to *illuminate* action, to give clarity to the decision [quefazer] inherent to the transformative action in reality (Freire, 2011, p. 167). An analogous role to that of theory in relation to practice, that is, to guide or to *orientate* practice (Freire, 2011, p. 172) – especially of revolutionary practice. Or yet, in problematizing the relationship between thought and reality, what we see being addressed is the problem of the *representation* of oppressive reality and of man as a being of praxis (Freire, 2011, p. 52). Forms of relationship in which praxis sometimes keeps the material and spiritual spheres separate, and sometimes remains confined to the latter.

Regarding the word, that is, the "true word" as praxis and therefore as relationship, by "worldword", we would understand the reading of the world itself through and by the word, which, although it could precede the reading of the word, could not be done without representation through speech (Freire, 1989, p. 11). Or yet, by "wordation", the relationship between "language-thought" and the world, where the "act of knowledge" would lead to the commitment to transform reality (Freire, 1981, p. 40). The word as an act, then, would translate no more than the *cogito*, the donation of meaning by consciousness, a gesture of signification, or an act of knowledge, even when externalized in the form of dialogue.

This apparent separation between the material and spiritual spheres may perhaps hark back to representationalism, that is, to Cartesian dualism, and with it, resurrect the specters of a pre-Hegelian idealism. In the case of the relationship between the people and authentic praxis, such separation would lead to a series of problems. In this sense, presupposing that a people could exist prior to the sharing of a language and a name, through which its members could mutually understand each other and be named in common, by a common signifier, when thinking of it as a demographic demarcation or delineation, as an object, wouldn't this already deprive this people of its condition as "subject to itself"? On the other hand, presupposing that this common signifier existed prior to the people it signifies, wouldn't it be attributing to the power of their very representations the capacity to make separated individuals into a common subjectivity, independent of their own acts and gestures, almost as if a people purely emerged from the conversion of its members?

Of course, this would bring us back to the initial question: what makes from a people, a people? And, considering the problematized unity of praxis, the understanding of the selfmaking of a people could lead us to the question: even if marked by repetition, the becoming of a people, as subject for itself, shouldn't it be understood from *an* incessantly reiterated founding act that is both significant and material, that is, from *a* foundation by the word, from *a* self-declaration, from a *performativity*?

Praxis, performativity and agency

For a comprehension of the word that does not reduce it to a "act of knowledge", where its meaning does not solely come from the spiritual sphere of thought, it would be necessary to start from a conception of language in which words do not merely end in their meanings, in the naming of things or objects. Understanding this would mean that even an action like naming or "representing" things with words would be nothing more than a move in a game, reiterated within in the very context of the forms of life we adopt or try out. By this approach, we could reframe the issue of conceiving the word as praxis, because by freeing it from the exclusive sphere of representation, from its referential function, we would enable ourselves to think of it based on the effects it produces in social reality, to think of it as gesture, as act.

Such an approach would require understanding how words, as acts – beyond "acts of knowledge" – could produce objective, material effects on human reality, that is, from the perspective of authentic praxis; to think of them already as means of objectifying subjectivity (Sánchez Vázquez, 2007, p. 125). After all, wouldn't it be through them that, for Freire, men would make themselves present as social beings in a socially constituted world, that is, in the very condition of a necessity from which they could not escape, they would produce themselves as subjects and make themselves human? Therefore, if there were a relationship between words and oppression, it would be precisely because they, by the force of their use in the context of an "inauthentic praxis", would do more than give meaning to the social world: language acts and can act against us; through it, we humanize ourselves, and through it, we also subject ourselves.

Perhaps, in this way, we could also give another meaning to what Freire (1983), in *Extension or Communication?*, when problematizing the real effects that would accompany the connotations of the term "extension", called the "operational force of concepts":

> It is this operational force of concepts that can explain why some extensionists, even when defining extension as an educational decision [quefazer], do not find themselves in contradiction when stating: 'to persuade rural populations to accept our propaganda' (Freire, 1983, p. 13).

It would not only be about what he would be led to do or to legitimize by a certain way of thinking, but the effect *produced* in the very field of relations that, through the repetition of the gesture of "cultural invasion", would performatively reiterate the positions between "extensionist" and "peasants" and hinder "communication".

So, by performativity, we understand that inherent property of verbal utterances, whereby, at the very moment and as a result of their enactment, something could be made to happen or some phenomenon to exist. In other words, according to the theory of John L. Austin, the utterance, as an act, comprises three distinct aspects: as a locu-

tionary act, it produces meaning, an "act of knowledge"; as an illocutionary act, it can bring about or bring into existence that which is then uttered – such as a promise through the act of promising, the status of innocence through the pronouncement of a judge, or even a war through the declaration of a nation's president –; and as a perlocutionary act, it brings about a set of effects as a consequence of the utterance's realization (Austin, 1990, p. 103). It is important to note that the latter, by relations of causation a series of heterogeneous events to the fact of the utterance, would also be linked to the conditions of the utterance's occurrence: who utters it, where, when, according to what procedure, with whom or for whom, etc. From these circumstances, which are linked to social rituals and conventions permeating the social fabric, would arise the very force of these acts (Austin, 1990, p. 99).

The theory of performativity, or speech acts, which originated within the theoretical framework of Ludwig Wittgenstein's conception of language games, has undergone various revisions and alterations over the years, influenced by thinkers such as John Searle, Pierre Bourdieu, Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, among others. What interests us is the understanding derived from the quality of language to be, in the very singularity of its use, both meaningful and practical, that is, the understanding of the power that the word itself would have to initiate new situations, to set in motion a set of effects, or even to transform that which would fall into its meaningful network.

Civil registry or baptism, as well as the act of "calling" names, inflicting harm with words, the gesture of humiliating, subjugating, diminishing, racializing through utterances, or even "vandalizing" or "denigrating", as significant acts that would produce real effects, for example, could be understood from the notion of performativity. From this perspective, subjects would be formed performatively through a series of socially sedimented practices. We would understand not only the effects of the process of interpellation of bodies by proper names, nationality, gender, etc. – which would inscribe them into the social order, under normativities dictating their behaviors and governing their gestures – but also the vulnerability itself to the force of utterances of insult, offense, or social disqualification. In other words, we could unveil "how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc." (Butler, 1997, p. 79).

Similarly, however, how such a notion may offer us a way to understand the process of subject production by itself - the basis of understanding the human being as a being of praxis - it could also lead us to revive a certain fantasy of sovereignty linked to the very notion of speech act, perhaps related to the way we would have learned to conceive the relationship between agency and the subject of power. This, of course, would raise a series of problems: could words affect us, reach us, hurt us, or subject us, or even by them - if not even by

their apparent loss - could we be oppressed or dehumanized, if we ourselves were not, in a certain way, linguistic beings, that is, beings who would require language in order to *be*? Wouldn't our vulnerability to language then be a condition of being constituted on its terms? And yet, wouldn't this precisely mean being a being of praxis, a being by essence "ontocreative"? If, however, we were formed in language, wouldn't this formative power precede and condition any decision we could make regarding it itself, that is, wouldn't our hesitation, our suspicion, our criticism, or our resistance to our own entanglement in its web already be crossed by its predicament? Wouldn't we already, in our acts and choices, as subjects, always be captured by the very network of language that would *produce* us as such? On the other hand, wouldn't we once again revive the ghost of idealism by assuming as absolute the power of subjectivation or subjection proper to the word? Even if the power of words to subject preceded those who would reproduce it, wouldn't it still be proper to the notion of subject that they appear as the holders par excellence of that same power? If gender, "race", or even oppression were ritualistically repeated - a re-iteration from which their own illocutionary force would arise and the sedimentation of their performative effects - wouldn't this repetition itself entail the risk of error, deviation, the unpredictable, or the un-foreseen (Butler, 1997, p. 49)? And wouldn't it be through this very re-iteration of the *production* of subjects by words that praxis, through the very contingency of its missteps, that is, errors, deviations, the unpredictable, or the unforeseen, giving rise to the negative, would require the invention7 of ourselves by ourselves as subjects and as a people to, in the very misencounter of the web of words, give rise to the possibility of encounter and dialogue? Furthermore, wouldn't this risk itself mark the quality of the negativity proper to the uninterrupt-ed movement of matter for dialectical thought, from which the very possibility of the new would arise?

> Only a conception of matter that discovers negativity within matter itself, and therefore, the capacity to produce new quali-ties and higher degrees of evolution, provides the possibility of explaining materialistically the new as a quality of the material world (Kosik, 1995, p. 35).

People and performativity

"Boss. Yes, boss. What can I do if I'm a peasant? Speak, and we'll follow. If the boss said it, it's true. Do you know who you're talking to?" (Freire, 1981, p. 20). By mentioning such expressions, Freire aimed at problematizing the generative word "asentamiento", worked on in the Culture Circles he organized in the 1960s in Chile during his work with peasant communities, during his time coordinating the ex-tension project of the Instituto de Capacitación e Investigación para la Reforma Agraria (Incira). It was a period of strong political tensions due to the recently promulgated agrarian reform under the govern-ment of Eduardo Frei Montalva. Understanding the exemplified ex-pressions, as they reveal situations of resignation, silencing, moral

prostration, already would require, of course, thinking of them in terms of the notion of praxis, from an understanding of the social rituals in which *manners* of speaking and acting would be expressed - even more so, of the *manners* in which speaking would already be performatively the very act of doing. The words in the example, Freire continues, would be "[...] incompatible with the structure of 'asentamiento,' as this is a structure that democratizes itself" (Freire, 1981, p. 20).

For Freire, therefore, the "asentamiento" reflected a reality different from that of the "latifundio", still deeply ingrained in the minds of peasants. It would thus require a serious effort towards the development of the expressiveness of peasants who would be critically inserting themselves into this new reality. An effort of "[...] critical insertion through which they would more rapidly gain a clear understanding that the new structure of 'asentamiento' corresponds to a new thought-language" (Freire, 1981, p. 25). Hence, his emphasis on the incompatibility of expressions.

It was a reform and, likewise, part of the movement toward the opening of a society in transition. Like a "crack", it would be a rupture with the "structure of the latifundio", that is still an echo of the colonial slave system, an echo of the forms of life born from a "peopleless society." To think that "transformative action" could only come from the law, for Freire, would be to reduce it to a mechanical act through which the echoes of the colony, without resistance - resistance, sometimes expressed by the peasants themselves8 - would cease and give way to the forms of life of the "asentamiento", "as when someone mechanically replaces one chair with another, or moves it from one place to another" (Freire, 1981, p. 26). In other words, it would be like creating a free people, "subject for itself", solely by the force of a decree.

However, could a free people still be born solely by the force of a law?

Having already in mind the concept of "open societies", we could anticipate the inherent reversibility in the question: could a law have force without the signature of a people? In the case of declarations of independence and constitutional laws9, that is, laws that would constitute a nation and, through it, a *people* - even if this unity resulted from the violent erasure or decimation of a multiplicity of peoples - this possibility of reversal alone would place us in the undecidable situation where the same constituting *people* would, by their gesture, constitute themselves. From a performative standpoint, it would be the undecidability between a locutionary act - the "act of knowledge" of a people "subject for itself" as a necessary condition - and an illocutionary act - performativity whose force would enable the very existence of this people (Derrida, 2007, p. 81). Performative acts of a people, whose existence would only be possible through the act of that same people: the problem of precedence between the constituting people and the constituted people, between the signature

and the signatory. In this sense, Jacques Derrida (2007, p. 81) observed:

> But this people does not exist. It does not exist as an 'entity', it does not exist before this declaration, not as such. It gives birth to itself, as free and independent, with possible signatories, this can only be ensured in the act of signing. The signature invents the signatory. This signatory can only authorize their signature, he or she, once they have reached the end, if one can say that of their own signature, in a kind of fabulous retroactivity. That first signature authorizes he or she to sign. This happens every day. But that is extraordinary (fabulous).

If, in the light of praxis, a free people, "subject for itself", would precisely be one whose very being would depend on mediation through transformative word, shouldn't they be capable of anticipating their own existence in order to guarantee it? An inventive retroactivity that, along with the people, would also invent its past, its memory, and its utopias; and, in each of us, the sharing, belonging, and identity. And wouldn't Western democratic constitutions, since then, conjure the echoes, that is, the ghosts of these self-declaration gestures, the reiteration of the same gesture of a people that would constitute itself by declaring its own law to give itself materiality and legal existence? A gesture itself violent and "extraordinary (fabulous)." And for Freire, in the case of a society in transition, of a society born of colonial violence, wouldn't its very process of opening carry the mark of this gesture in the progressive recognition of a people as a political subjectivity?

In this disharmony between law and people, attention is drawn here to the paradox evoked by Freire of a "peopleless society." For him, only decolonization, through conscientization, would be capable of founding a "society subject for itself" (Freire, 1967, p. 35). On one hand, the almost pleonastic and therefore excessive addition of "for itself" to characterize the "subject society" – pleonasm insofar as he would think of the subject from the theoretical framework of phenomenology, according to which self-awareness would be the very expression of subjectivity – perhaps indicated that Freire was not oblivious to the ambiguity of the word "subject." Thus, virtually, a "subject society" could refer both to the idea of community, of a shared common world constituted intersubjectively as a place of dialogue and encounter between subjects; as well as it could refer to the idea of a subjected, "closed" society, whose foundation would occur through inaugural violence, through the subjugation and domestication of its components. On the other hand, by presenting, as a condition of the birth of Brazilian society, the paradox of a peopleless society, he would thus suggest that Brazil - and perhaps also Chile - despite Independence or the Proclamation of the Republic, as underdeveloped countries, had never really ceased to be a colony - which would give the Brazilian social reality the very mark of oppression.

Indeed, this would lead us to the (already seen) inherent ambiguity of the word "people." If the excluded part, the marginality, did

not arise from a choice on the part of humans, it would only be by the force of expulsion: because, through the repeated self-declaration movement of a *people* or their representatives, that is, through the very process of gathering differences around one or more common signifiers, given the nonconformity with hegemonic or dominant norms, differences exceeding all kinds - of "race", gender, sexuality, origin, economic situation, etc. - the so-called marginalized would have been and continue to be expelled from this very totality, in the very repetition of the act of forming this *people*. And, through this violence, they would not find themselves "outside", but within their social reality, as surplus parts, as dominated groups or classes, in a relationship of dependency with a dominant class (Freire, 1981, p. 39).

In this sense, the *people* could be thought of not as an object, not as a given population or its "outside" cut, but as a demarcation established implicitly or explicitly from "within." When an orchestrated collective, therefore, called itself a "people", it could only do so through a discourse that started from presumptions about who belonged to it or could be included in it and who should be excluded. It would, therefore, be an act that would always hesitate between constatation – *constative* or "act of knowledge" that would "unveil" the reality of that collective as preceding the act, whose mutual recognition would require the assumption of inclusion criteria from which, nevertheless, the effects of exclusion would arise – and performativity – *illocution*, attestation, or declaration that would invent the very *people* that one would aim to recognize. Because it is an act of demarcation coming from a collective aiming to recognizing itself as a common subjectivity, as an "us", the question would also appear as a problem: who would be responsible for retroactively attesting, on behalf of the *people* to which they belonged, its very existence as a *people* or even signing the declaration that would institute it or the law that would emancipate it? A problem of uncertainty and hesitation between each implicated "I" and the "we" formed by them. The uncertainty also of the illocutionary force of the act that would determine this demarcation: the attestation that would invent a people would be nothing but a wager (Butler, 2015, p. 23), hence the character of commitment, that is, of promise, to which Freire often associated it. Such hesitations, that is, the undecidability between the constative and the performative structure, between the "I" and the "we", it is important to note, would not really be just obscurity or difficulty of interpretation, or even any problem in need of a "(re)solution", but a necessity inherent to the act, a requirement to enable the production of its effects (Derrida, 2007, p. 81).

Therefore, the term "oppressed" could not correspond to an essence, to a pre-constituted sociological reality, or to a set of objectively ascertainable characteristics in the bodies or behavior of those who could gather around that signifier. It would itself be fixed as a demarcation that, retroactively, would have the power to bring together, by virtue of the recognition of oppression, in society its excluded part. And, since it is a term that would constatively express the very process

of dehumanization that would permeate the social order, as would occur with the term "proletariat" in Marx's philosophy, the "oppressed" would carry the mark of the dissolution of that very order and the phantasmatic promise of absolute inclusion, of full unity inherent in the idea of the people as "subject for itself." Hence its liberating role: "[...] only the oppressed, freeing themselves, can free the oppressors" (Freire, 2011, p. 60). Hence also, the need for thinking education as a permanent revolution, as an infinite task. Thus, marked by the hesitation between the constative and the performative, between the "I" and the "we", the act that would attest and demarcate the "oppressed" could not be just any performativity, but an act that would only produce its effects through the conscientization of the "oppressed"; or it would be the very linguistic realization of this consciousness (Butler, 2015, p. 23), bringing into the world a "new man" born from the "birth" of liberation: "[...] no longer oppressor; no longer oppressed, but man freeing himself" (Freire, 2011, p. 48).

Final considerations

In considering the word as praxis, Paulo Freire not only would have opened up an entire field of possibilities for thinking about the relationship between dialogue and the world, education and reality, as well as between man, being of praxis, and the potential for transformation through the word; but also made apparent a whole series of problems and aporias arising from this connection between the concepts in question. In treating the word as the unit of reflection and action, he would have started from a conception of language that still seemed to bear the mark of pre-Hegelian, modern representationalism, thereby creating a caesura that would enclose the word as an "act of knowledge" in the spiritual sphere of representation.

An understanding of the word, therefore, that did not reduce it to an act of knowledge, restricted to the spiritual realm of thought alone, required a conception of language according to which words were not merely used for naming things or objects, or expressing concepts and tasks. It would be necessary to understand the word without separating it from the inherent effects of its utterance. Therefore, to enable its understanding already liberated from this exclusive sphere of representation, beyond its referential function, allowing us to think of it from the effects it produces in social reality, we approach its understanding akin to the notion of performativity. It was, therefore, a matter of understanding the word, as praxis, from this quality inherent in language to be, in the very singularity of the gesture through which it materializes, both meaningful and practical. It was, therefore, about shedding light on the power that the word itself would have to initiate new situations, that is, to transform that which would fall within its meaningful network.

Nevertheless, despite the tension and displacement made possible by the introduction of the notion of performativity into the theoretical framework of Freirean thought, given the significant distance

between the philosophical traditions that gave rise to them, we hope to have facilitated the repositioning of issues dear to it and shed light on some of the aporias underlying the very relationship between the word and the transformation of reality itself, especially concerning the relationship between a people and the word through which it express itself and make itself, in the context of a society in transition.

Notes

1 This article is a cutting out/exploration/continuation of the preceding thesis (Silva, 2023).

2 The texts studied, including "Extension or Communication?" (1983), were produced based on experiences of adult literacy, lived in contexts of significant social and political transformations, whether in Angicos, Rio Grande do Norte, still in 1963, by the University of Recife, or later, in Chile, by the Institute of Training and Research for Agrarian Reform (Icira), initially based on his own doctoral thesis, but later deepened, rethought, and rewritten, resulting in the seminal work Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Kohan, 2021, p. 28).

3 It is important to highlight here that, notwithstanding the separation between theory and praxis, when considering praxis in light of the movement that characterizes it, Aristotle would argue, in the Metaphysics (Metaphysics, 9, 6, 1048 b, 20-25), that thinking, as well as seeing, hearing, and living, because they contain their own end within themselves, are perfect actions: "For example, at the same time someone sees and has seen, knows and has known, thinks and has thought, while he cannot be learning and have learned, nor be healing and have healed. Someone lives well when he has already lived well, is happy when he has already been happy. If it were not so, there would have to be a final term, as happens when someone loses weight" (Aristotle, 2005, p. 411).

4 In order to avoid any comprehension difficulties for English-speaking readers of the work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, we have decided to maintain the translation choice of its translator, Myra Bergman Ramos, for the term "quefazer" (a neologism coined by Freire).

5 People: in Italian, "popolo"; in French, "peuple"; in English, "people"; all derived from the late Latin term "populus".

6 Like Freire, inspired by Immanuel Kant, Karl Popper had in mind the transitional state of Western societies towards full emancipation, as well as the constant risk of regression and the need for vigilance and criticism to prevent it. Perhaps, more significantly, what led Freire to adopt the distinction between closed and open societies was the apparent opposition between, on one hand, slave societies – a strong trait of colonial Brazil – and, on the other hand, democratic societies. However, in thinking about "closed societies", Popper resurrected Auguste Comte's metaphor of the "infancy of humanity," hence also calling them "tribal societies" or even "primitive societies." For the Austro-British philosopher, however, "[...] [a] closed society resembled a horde or tribe because it was a semi-organic unit whose members are held together by semi-organic bonds - kinship, cohabitation, participation in common efforts, in common joys and sorrows" (Popper, 1987, p. 189). Open societies, on the other hand, due to their "abstract and depersonalized" character, would have in a "new individualism" and in freedom of competition their fundamental elements (Popper, 1987, p. 190). However, it would be in the risk of regression itself that the problematic contradiction between Popper and Freire would become more

apparent. For Popper, one of the great threats that, in our days, would lead to the return and closure of societies, giving rise to totalitarianism, would be what he called the "doctrine of the chosen people" - a thought disseminated by the "historicist attitude" (Popper, 1987, p. 23), which, of course, he identified with Marxism and the idea that the proletariat would bear the destiny of all humanity. Wouldn't this also be, for Freire, the role of the oppressed in relation to the oppressive reality, that is, to liberate oppressors and the oppressed? (Freire, 2011, p. 73).

[7] "An invention always presupposes some illegality, the breaking of an implicit contract; it inserts a disorder into the peaceful ordering of things, it disregards the proprieties. [...] it goes and frustrates expectations". (Derrida, 2007, p. 1). From Latin, *in venire*, that is, that which comes to meet, the future whose coming remains always unforeseen, unanticipated for us, the invention of a people and of ourselves would be, in itself, the unforeseen encounter *of* the other, which would only be possible, *with* the other.

[8] "This same resistance to accepting reality – a form of defense – I have also encountered among peasant workers and urban workers in Latin America. In Chile, it has not been uncommon for some, alongside the many who are deciphering their reality in critical terms, to express, in the debate surrounding their new experience in the 'asentamiento', a certain nostalgia for the old boss" (Freire, 1981, p. 19).

[9] In the case, for example, of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, approved in 1789 by the National Constituent Assembly during the course of the French Revolution, instead of its signature, the Declaration is dedicated to its own signatories, to the "representatives of the French people", from whom would arise the "general will" of which the law itself would be an expression and the people an effect. Or, in the case of the constitutional charter of the United States of America, approved by the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, whose text began with the words "We the people of the United States [...] do ordain and establish this Constitution".

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