



**“Looking back and looking forward:
Conversations on Freire’s Influence on Global
Development Practice”**

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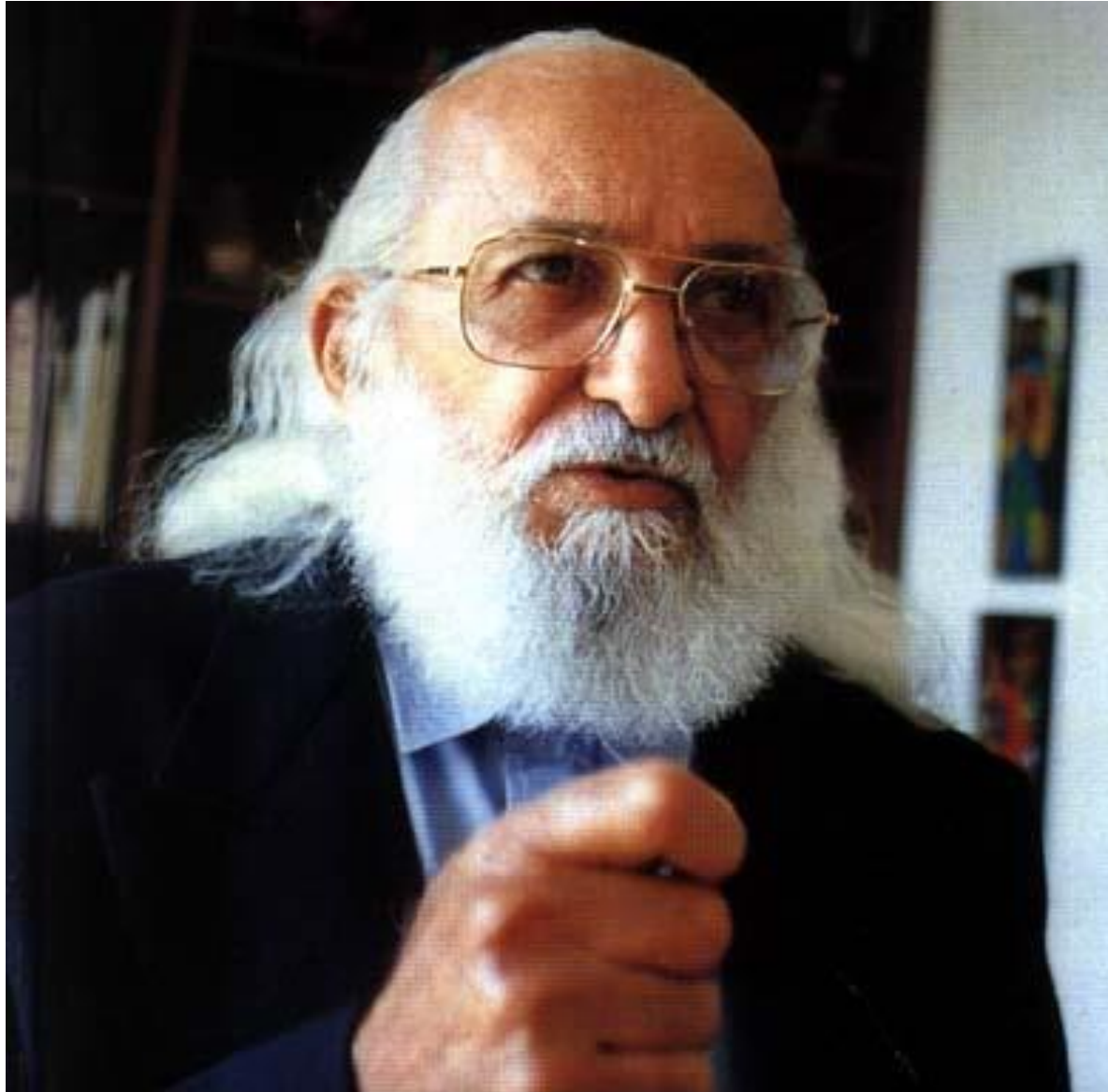
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**Looking back and looking forward: Some
Thoughts on Freire's Continuing Relevance**

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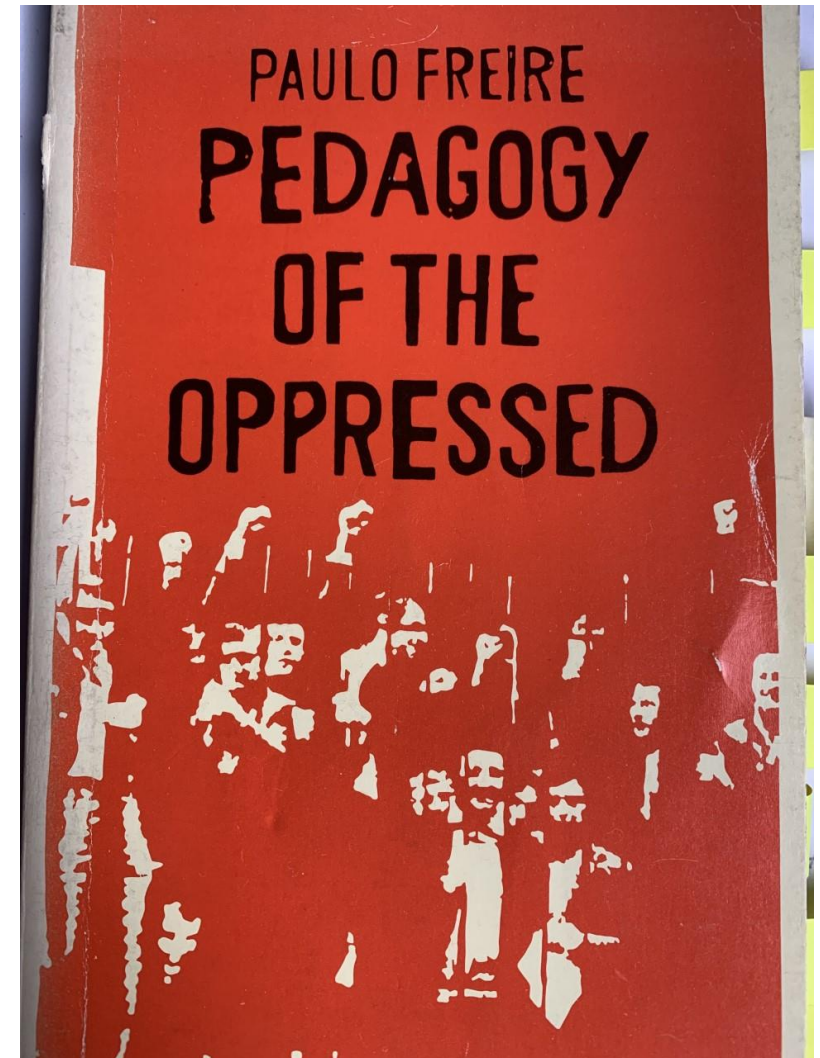


arquivos paulo freire

Paulo Freire
1921 - 1997

Paulo Freire and me . . .

I first encountered the ideas of Paulo Freire sometime around 1981, or 1982 — which indicates how long ago my recollections go back — and like many people, it was through my first reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (1972 edition).



... of a group of armed peasants in an American country who recently took over a *latifundium*. For tactical reasons, they planned to hold the landowner as a hostage. But not one peasant had the courage to guard him; his very presence was terrifying. It is also possible that the act of opposing the boss provoked guilt feelings. In truth, the boss was 'inside' them.

The oppressed must see examples of the vulnerability of the oppressor so that a contrary conviction can begin to grow within them. Until this occurs, they will continue disheartened, fearful, and beaten (see Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution*). As long as the oppressed remain unaware of the causes of their condition, they fatalistically 'accept' their exploitation. Further, they are apt to react in a passive and alienated manner when confronted with the necessity to struggle for their freedom and self-affirmation. Little by little, however, they tend to try out forms of rebellious action. In working towards liberation, one must neither lose sight of this passivity nor overlook the moment of awakening.

Within their unauthentic view of the world and of themselves, the oppressed feel like 'things' owned by the oppressor. For the latter, *to be is to have*, almost always at the expense of those who have nothing. For the oppressed, at a certain point in their existential experience, *to be* is not to resemble the oppressor, but *to be under him*, to depend on him. Accordingly, the oppressed are emotionally dependent.

The peasant is a dependant. He can't say what he wants. Before he discovers his dependence, he suffers. He lets off steam at home, where he shouts at his children, beats them and despairs. He complains about his wife and thinks everything is dreadful. He doesn't let off steam with the boss because he thinks the boss is a superior being. Lots of times, the peasant gives vent to his sorrows by drinking.¹⁶

This total emotional dependence can lead the oppressed to what Fromm calls necrophilic behaviour: the destruction of life – their own or that of their oppressed fellows.

It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe...

be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be a praxis.

Critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever stage their struggle for liberation has reached.¹⁷ The content of that dialogue can and should vary in accordance with historical conditions and the level at which the oppressed perceive reality. But to substitute monologue, slogans and communiqués for dialogue is to try to liberate the oppressed with the instruments of domestication. Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated.

At all stages of their liberation, the oppressed must see themselves as men engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human. Reflection and action become imperative when one does not erroneously attempt to create a dichotomy between the content of humanity and its historical forms.

The insistence that the oppressed engage in reflection on their concrete situation is not a call to armchair revolution. On the contrary, reflection – true reflection – leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection. In this sense, the praxis is the new *raison d'être* of the oppressed; and the revolution, which inaugurates the historical moment of this *raison d'être*, is not viable apart from their concomitant conscious involvement. Otherwise, action is pure activism.

To achieve this praxis, however, it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason. Whoever lacks this trust will fail to bring about (or will abandon) dialogue, reflection and communication, and will fall into using slogans, communiqués, monologues and instructions. Superficial conversions to the cause of liberation carry this danger.

17. Not in the open, of course; that would only provoke the fury of the

Freire's core principles about education:

it's not neutral,
it should be transformative,
dialogical,
relevant,
questioning, and
enable reflection and action

Looking Back . . .

Before we begin this reflection on Freire's influence on our activities, I wondered how can I guard against inaccurate recollection of events, not least given the passage of time? There is a danger that if we sincerely believe that this is what took place, we can inadvertently, but falsely claim it as true. In order to keep my recollections honest, I take inspiration from Rutger Bregman's book *Humankind*, in which he cited Bertrand Russell's remarks in a BBC interview in 1959:

Never let yourself be diverted either by what **you wish to believe** or by **what you think** would have beneficial social effects **if it were believed**, but look only and solely at **what are the facts**.

(Bregman, 2020: 253-254).

Believing is Seeing?



Seeing What We Want To See?

The story of a young archer, and a Zen Master.....

The challenge I set myself, is to avoid seeing the ‘ghost of Freire’ in every corner of our experience – putting something ‘dead centre’ in the middle of an event, but that I only imagined was there.

Looking at Key Principles

The principles I decided to focus on for this presentation are:

Dialogue

Critical Thinking

and the focus on Humanity

Looking at Key Principles

Dialogue:

Throughout my years –
in Kimmage, and to
date, in Maynooth . . .
an ever present ‘shot
on target’



Looking at Key Principles

Critical thinking:

The simple act of asking 'Why?'

Easier for some,
than others...?



Looking at Key Principles

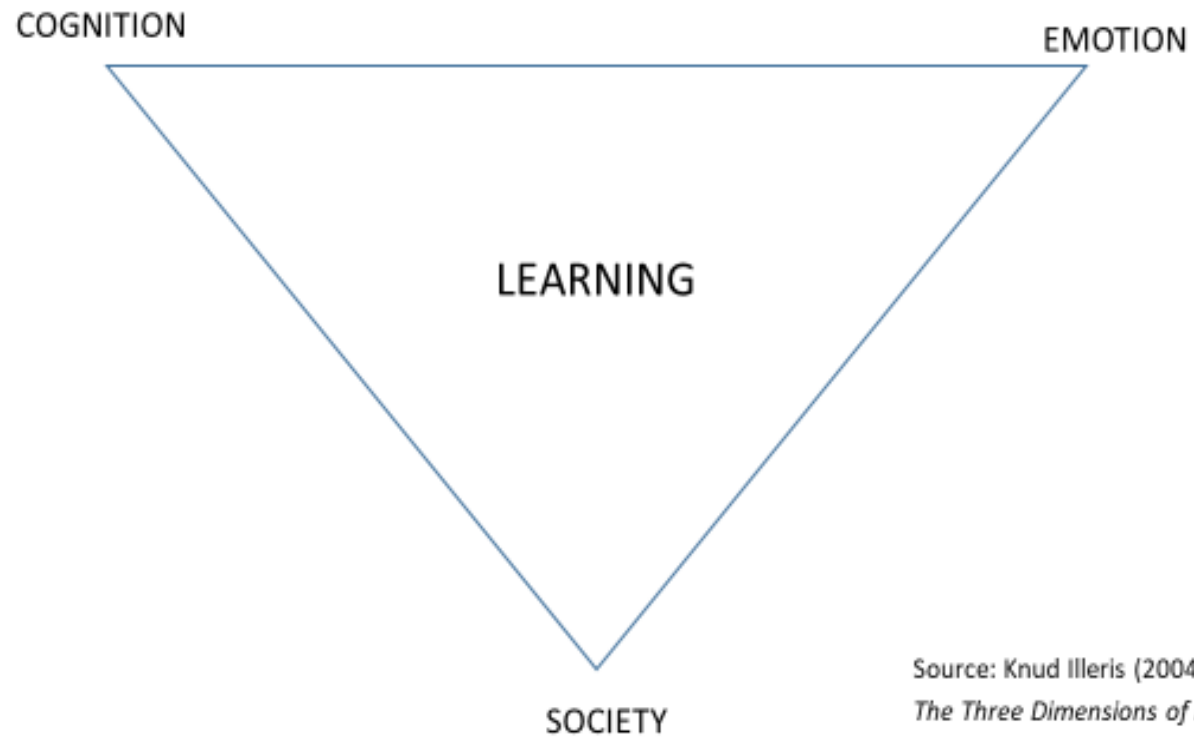
Humanity:

Integrating the
mind, body and
spirit. . .

[bell hooks, 1994]



The Dimensions of Learning



Source: Knud Illeris (2004)
The Three Dimensions of Learning



Education is Not Sufficient

As part of a Critical Reflection on our educational efforts we conclude that education, by itself, **cannot remake society**. However, according to Freire and Shor (1987: 133) :

... It can evolve **curiosity**. It can develop the commitment of the teacher and some students to the goal of transformation. But, the movements outside are where more people who dream of social change are gathering.

And Tom Inglis maintains,

Individual transformation is **a necessary but not a sufficient base** for emancipatory education. ... however there is a clear role for the educator in facilitating a progression from individual transformative learning to emancipatory education. (1992: 15)

Looking forward Freire's continuing relevance?

We celebrate the fact of numerous programmes and organisations following/ adopting / adapting the Freirean method, principles and ideals:

Training for Transformation – Africa, Europe, Asia – and Partners Training for Transformation (Ireland) (trainingfortransformation.ie)

CAN – Community Action Network (Ireland) - <https://www.canaction.ie/>

AONTAS – National Adult Education Association, Ireland [Ireland's National Adult Learning Organisation \(aontas.com\)](http://Ireland's National Adult Learning Organisation (aontas.com))

Reflect – (via Action Aid) – 100 countries worldwide www.ReflectionAction.org

Countless development programmes and projects who follow the people-centred, participatory approaches inspired by Freire: PRA, PLA, PAR, <https://www.participatorymethods.org/>

A Culture of Silence

Another concept popularized by Freire, is the ‘**culture of silence**’. Richard Shaul, in the Foreword to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, explains

His early sharing of the life of the poor also led him to the discovery of what he describes as the ‘culture of silence’ of the dispossessed. He came to realise that their ignorance and lethargy were **the direct product of the whole situation of economic, social, and political domination** – and of paternalism – of which they were victims. Rather than being encouraged and equipped to know and respond to the concrete realities of their world, they were **kept ‘submerged’ in a situation** in which such critical awareness and response were practically impossible. And it all became clear to him that the whole educational system was one of the major instruments for the maintenance of this culture of silence. (1972: 10)

A Culture of Silence

Multiples of examples of a culture of silence are apparent in a book by Derek Scally, *The Best Catholics in the World* (2021) from his vantage point as an Irish journalist living in Germany, observes some contrasting ways in which responses – private and public –in the face of atrocity were experienced within these two countries. Just to select a couple of key points, to illustrate how this contemporary experience of oppression may fit Freire’s analysis. A culture of silence within Ireland – not just at the time of various abuse scandals, but years afterwards – is described by **Patrick Bolger** (a photographer and himself a clerical abuse survivor).

Going public with his clerical abuse story has prompted every kind of response, he says, from those who mutter ‘**it was a different time**’ to others who flag the **power disparity** between priest and parishioners. No reaction, he says, can justify passivity and its consequences. (2021: 189)

A Culture of Silence

This is powerfully depicted in the following poem by Patrick Bolger:

Silence is not not knowing

Silence is a deliberate action

Silence is a decision to say nothing

Silence is a decision to do nothing

There is power in silence

And human agency.

(Scally 2021: 190)



A Culture of Silence

Scally critically reflects on some of the key issues, around ‘guilt’ and ‘shame’ and how different people have tried to get beyond a culture of silence.

I was a teenager when the last laundry closed and, like many others, **carry no sense of guilt** for what happened then. But living in Germany has been **an education in concepts such as moral responsibility**. Even if today’s Germans have no guilt for Nazi crimes, decades of post-war self-examination have created **a consensus that everyone in their society should feel a responsibility** – with no expiry date – to inform themselves about what made the unthinkable possible. Keeping that knowledge alive is their responsibility to the memory of the millions of victims. (2021: 119-120)



A Culture of Silence

Scally reflects further,

Many years of life in Germany have taught me to separate things: the laundries are not my responsibility. But **understanding what made these institutions possible**, and the consequences of such systemic oppression in the past, consequences that are still palpable now, **is my responsibility – and the responsibility of every Irish citizen.** (2021: 137)



A Culture of Silence: Responses

Among Scally's conclusions to the various responses is the view that 'Modern German thinkers like Theodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas have built on [the ideas of] Walter Benjamin [German philosopher], insisting that owning our past and how we embrace it is a prerequisite for meaningful engagement with past wrongs, and that **critical reflection** on a nation's past is **the normative basis for a healthy democracy**'. (2021: 287)

Then he pinpoints the need for **dialogue**: . . . some survivors, artists and campaigners are seeking out gaps in our emotional defences, finding gentle ways to slip past pat explanations of our past to encourage **two kinds of dialogue: with oneself and with others**. In many ways they are nudging us towards the work recommended by Israeli psychologist Dan Bar-On, who pioneered new methods for approaching old conflicts, from the Holocaust to the Arab-Israeli conflict. (2021: 298)

Looking forward with Hope:

Freire remains a figure of hope. One of his last published works before his death, was *Pedagogy of Hope* – subtitled *Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

One of the tasks of the progressive educator, through a serious, correct political analysis, is to **unveil opportunities for hope**, no matter what the obstacles may be. After all, **without hope there is little we can do**. (1998: 9-10)

And in another of his final texts, *Pedagogy of the Heart*, (2003) – published posthumously it is imperative that **we maintain hope even when the harshness of reality** may suggest the opposite. On this level, the struggle for hope means the denunciation, in no uncertain terms, of all abuses, schemes and omissions. As we denounce them, we **awaken in others and ourselves the need**, and also the taste, **for hope**. (2003: 106)

Conclusions



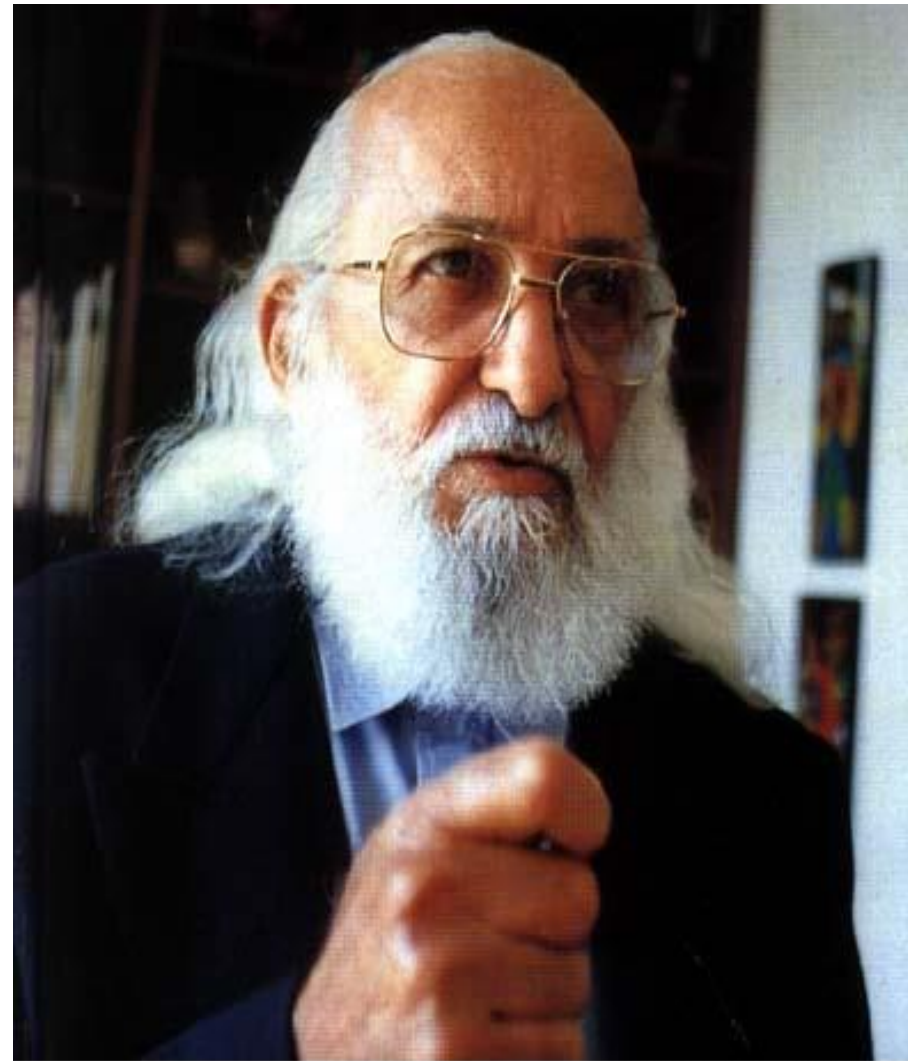
This presentation set out to explore the question of the continuing relevance of Freire in our work today. There is no doubt, Freire's ideas and arguments continue to challenge and inspire us. Moreover, while seeing the possible pitfalls of imagining the 'ghost of Freire' in much of our work, it is clear in terms of the pedagogy and basic human kindness he espoused, Freirean principles continue to infiltrate and characterize our practice. Arguably, his ideas are now needed more than ever in public discourse.

I readily agree with the sentiments of Moacir Gadotti and Carlos Alberto Torres, when they offered the following tribute, following the death of Freire:

*Years ago, one of us said that in
the confusion of today's world,*

***“educators can be with Freire or
against Freire, but not without
Freire.”***

(Gadotti and Torres, no date)



arquivos paulo freire

Paulo Freire 1921 - 1997

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