I dedicate this article to the hundreds of civilian victims of Gaza, caught in the midst of a bloody battle over conflicting readings of truth, history and social justice.

In the aftermath of the bloodshed, another sad example of the conflict over readings of truth, history and social justice was the recent refusal of the BBC, in the name of allegedly preserving the “neutrality of the press”, to broadcast the fund-raising appeal of the DEC (Disasters Emergency Committee) for humanitarian aid for the people of Gaza which it considered tendentious. The conflict involves one side whose “right to self defence as a nation” is unquestionably recognized. The other side, denied the right to exist as a nation, is seen as the sole initiator of the conflict; the social injustice of the violence inflicted on civilians on the latter side cannot even be denounced to International Courts of Justice as it does not exist as a nation. Where does the critical reading of the histories of both sides - used by both to justify the use of violence – begin? In whose reading of history? (Shlaim, 2009; Klug, 2009; Giroux, 2009; Levy, 2009; Haas, 2009; Shalom, 2009).

The educational space for critical literacies in such dire situations of conflict may be in promoting critical reflection on one’s own context. In situations of conflict violent confrontation could be avoided if both sides involved read their positions critically, seeking to understand their own positions and their differences. Here we remember Paulo Freire’s reflections of the relations between “word” and “world”. Freire (2005:151) spoke of the need to move away from “naive” ways of reading the world in terms of ‘common sense’, where meanings are taken to be given, apparent and uncontested (a form of knowledge described by Freire as “made from experience”), towards a more analytical (“rigorous”) form of reading the world which Freire defined as ‘learning to listen’: “one doesn’t learn to speak by speaking; it is by listening that one learns to speak” (2005, p.157).

This is part of the development of the eminently political process of critical reflection that Freire called conscientização, a politically aware understanding of the socio-historical world and its relationship to reading and knowledge-formation through an understanding of language and meaning-making (2005). For Freire, this critical awareness of the word-world relationship, different from the common-sense awareness of simply ‘being in the world’, involves the awareness of the connection and difference between being in the world and being with the world. Whereas the commonsensical awareness of being in the world leads one to believe that one learns to speak by speaking, the critical awareness of being with the world comes from a social consciousness that one is not alone in the world; one’s awareness of self or ‘I’ arises from the awareness of a collective ‘non-I’ from which the individual ‘I’ arises, distinguishes and attaches itself; this socio-historic ‘non I’ is distinct from and constitutes the ‘I’ of socialized identity (2005, p.252). An important step towards perceiving the connection between the ‘non I’ and the ‘I’ in the educational process of raising critical awareness is learning to listen; in learning to listen, one perceives that one’s world and one’s word in fact originate in the socio-historic collectivity into which one is born, and of which one becomes/is a member. It is then the task of critical literacy to develop this awareness.
This means that, rather than seeing critical literacy as a process of uncovering concealed truths in texts (truths constructed in and originating in the writer’s socio-historic contexts) and perceiving, in Freire’s terms, how texts and words are with the world, critical literacy should equally focus on how not only texts and words, but also readers are not simply in the world but - more crucially - with the world. The process of critical reading then involves Freire’s learning to listen to not only the texts and words one is reading, but again, more crucially, learning to listen to one’s own readings of texts and words; for Freire, it is this that will make one more aware of the connections between word and world.

Hoy (2005) calls this critical awareness ‘post-critique’, as distinct from critique, which he conceptualizes as a process of alleged unequivocal understanding as ‘revelation’ of concealed meanings (also contextually constructed). Post-critique feeds on the theories of Foucault and Nietzsche whereby meaning and interpretation genealogically originate and occur in specific socio-historic contexts; post-critique emphasizes the fact that both, writers and readers, texts/words/worlds and the reading of these all occur in and originate in specific socio-historic contexts.

Thus, for Hoy, not unlike Freire, post-critique-type reading requires a necessary previous process of “self-genealogy” (what Freire would call learning to listen to oneself, perceiving the connection between the social non-I and the individual I); this means understanding that one’s reading of the World (often not even perceived as a ‘reading’ or ‘interpretation’, but simply as ‘seeing what lies before one’s eyes’) is not the simple, willful, individual construction of a perceiving individual subject, but the collective construction of a long and complex socio-historic process. One’s meanings are not simply one’s own, based on what one unequivocally ‘sees’; one’s meanings are constructed in the words, accents and contexts of those that came before us, as Bakhtin would have put it.

Critical literacy promotes this perception of the “temporality” or genealogical origins of one’s language and knowledge as having arisen in the history of one’s community and affecting present perceptions. Critical literacy, raising this awareness, contributes to transforming the effects of this knowledge inherited from the past into more desirable effects for the future:

Men relate to their world in a critical way. They apprehend the objective data of their reality through reflection, not by reflex [...] in the act of critical perception, men discover their own temporality. Transcending a single dimension, they reach back to yesterday, recognize today and come upon tomorrow (Freire, 1990, p.3).

Freire’s proposal of reading the word-world as critically learning to listen and Hoy’s proposal of post-critique as critical self-genealogy both emphasize the socio-historic, locally specific construction of meaning and self on the part of both, writers and readers. This may appear as a proposal of total relativism where any reading of any text may be equally valid. However, as we have said above, reading/interpretation and meaning are not the products of voluntaristic independent individuals; they are collective socio-historic products. This also does not mean that all readers/writers who come from the same socio-historic collectivity (“genealogies”) will produce identical readings; socio-historic collectivities consist of various, diverse communities (regional, gender-based, age-based, socio-economic etc), not all of which everyone belongs to uniformly or homogeneously.
Moreover, each of the diverse communities which constitute a socio-historic collectivity is subject to change through time; it is this that generates the potential complexity and multiplicity of readings produced in any given socio-historic collectivity. However it must be remembered that this multiplicity of readings are not equally valid even within the same socio-historic collectivity: if the meanings and language of the texts written/read by a specific constitutive community are the product of the socio-historic characteristics of that community, then their validity also pertains only to that community and cannot be simply forcibly substituted by other meanings and language of other communities.

Thus, at the same time that this helps one to understand the multiplicity of potential or possible readings/texts, it makes clear that this is not the end of validity in interpretation but, on the contrary, demands validity and requires the critical perception that validity itself is the product of a particular community. Given the absence in this approach of a single stable unchanging foundation for validity, its critics - besides accusing it of proposing total relativity and “anything goes” - claim that it has no political, ethical or moral usefulness. Rorty (1996) for example, dismisses this approach as being purely subjective and voluntaristic, emphasizing “my perspective” and being only useful for one’s own “private purposes” and for fashioning oneself as distinct from others. We have seen above that both Freire and Hoy reject readings as the product of the commonsense of an individual, as both see individuals (and commonsense) as constituted by and constituting social collectivities.

The criticism of the lack of the political utility of such an approach focuses on its refusal of universally valid criteria for meaning and interpretation and its rejection of normativity in favour of contextually-dependent, local criteria. As White (2000) shows, the lack of universally valid criteria and norms (as in this approach) does not necessarily indicate the non-existence of truths and the non-existence of a framework for the fundaments on which these truths are constructed - factors necessary for political action. What the approach indeed proposes is that the frameworks which produce the fundaments on which community truths are based (and in terms of which readings and interpretations are deemed valid) need to be seen as contingent (historically variable and contextually-dependent). This perception of the contingency (and not the lack) of socio-historic frameworks of fundaments of truth and ethics and social justice requires what Hoy calls ‘critical self-reflexivity’ or more simply, the understanding that one’s truths and fundaments are the products of one’s own history and community.

If the truths and fundaments of Others are also, like one’s own, the products of the (different) history and community of those Others, how then to politically engage with such difference? The complex, humane, perhaps utopian, answer is learning to listen, in Freire’s terms, both to one’s Other and to oneself, perceiving how one’s truths and history, like those of one’s Other, are clearly existent, affirmative and valid, but each in the context of one’s own socio-historic collectivity.

An alternative to this form of post-critical critical literacy is that of the use of militaristic brute force in insisting on reading the word-world as critique and forcefully impinging on the texts of Others one’s own interpretations as the unquestionably, universally fundamented Truth. It is important to read the loss of so many innocent civilians in Gaza in the past weeks as the potential results of, and a warning against such a one-sided, forceful uncritical, un-self-reflexive posture.
References:


