

Dialogic Praxis: Radical Pedagogy for a Runaway American Dream

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Abstract

In his 1968 classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazil's heroic social reformer and educational theorist Paulo Freire argues that man's ontological vocation is to create a world that is just for all. Such transformation begins with the individual, who must first create an awakening within himself – *conscientização* – and then, upon careful reflection, take action. This thinking and action, which Freire calls *praxis*, can only occur through *dialogics*, an authentic dialogue between teacher and learners. Bruce Springsteen has conceptualized his career as an ongoing conversation with his audience (*Rolling Stone*, November 1, 2007), and I argue that Springsteen's dialogue with his fans fosters a pedagogy similar to Freire's. Both thinkers provide unique models of dialogic praxis designed for different purposes. Freire offers a direct, boots-on-the-ground, mission-oriented approach he established via "cultural circles" to help Brazilians self-actualize and become *empowered citizens*. Springsteen offers an indirect, visionary approach mediated through songwriting, concert performances, and public statements to help Americans transform themselves into *empathetic citizens*. I argue here that both models of dialogic praxis, visionary and missionary, are necessary to help citizens in the American democratic republic reclaim a shared sense of values that enable them to see each other not as enemies but as neighbors. Freire called dialogic praxis a "radical pedagogy" that I contend is needed to address the root causes of American political violence.

Introduction

Fifty years ago, when Bruce Springsteen famously wrote about a "runaway American dream," he spoke not only to the obvious economic

inequality he observed in American society, but also to the helpless feeling Americans experienced after a decade and a half of government actions that invited mass protest and disillusionment. America was still relatively “young” – merely on the cusp of its Bicentennial in 1975 when Springsteen’s *Born to Run* album garnered national attention – and it had yet to live up to its promise, with full enfranchisement of its citizens seen only since the 1965 Voting Rights Act and extreme economic disparities worsening.¹ Political assassinations, racial unrest and rioting, protests against the Vietnam War, Watergate, the fall of Saigon, and the specter of nuclear annihilation threatened the very fabric of a nation formerly recognized as a stable steward of democracy. To a young Springsteen the American Dream was off the rails like a runaway train.

That the American “experiment” could come unraveled has occupied the consciousness of Americans since the nation’s founding.² In 1787, upon the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention, socialite Elizabeth Willing Powel asked Benjamin Franklin, “Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?” Franklin said, “A republic, if you can keep it.”³ Powel’s question is keenly relevant in the wake of the political

¹ Joshua Zeitz, J. “How Bruce Springsteen’s ‘Born to Run’ Captured the Decline of the American Dream.” *The Atlantic*, August 26, 2015.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/08/born-to-run-at-40/402137/>

² Nelson, J. *Will the Great American Experiment succeed?* National Center for Constitutional Studies, September 17, 1987. <https://nccs.net/blogs/our-ageless-constitution/will-the-great-american-experiment-succeed>

³ Julie Miller. “‘A Republic if You Can Keep It’: Elizabeth Willing Powel, Benjamin Franklin, and the James McHenry Journal | Unfolding History.” The Library of Congress. January 6, 2022. <https://blogs.loc.gov/manuscripts/2022/01/a-republic-if-you-can-keep-it-elizabeth-willing-powel-benjamin-franklin-and-the-james-mchenry-journal/>.

vitriol and violence Americans have been witnessing in recent months and years, and the 2024 election of Donald Trump has additionally invited widespread fear among half of the electorate that sees Trump as an authoritarian threat to the constitutional order.⁴ A few months earlier, Americans were horrified when a young man shot and attempted to kill Trump, prompting some in the Republican party to point to extreme political rhetoric characterizing modern American politics as evidence of how irresponsible the other side was, that Democrats' words *caused the shooting*.⁵ Thankfully this reaction was less common than pronouncements made by leaders on both sides of the political spectrum to "turn down the temperature" of the heated rhetoric.⁶

Although these latter gestures towards calm were welcome and the nation avoided devolving into all-out violence or civil war, experts do not see the attempt on Trump's life or even the sickening examples of recent political violence – such as the January 6th insurrection, the attack on Speaker Pelosi's husband, or the shootings of Representatives Steven Scalise or Gabby Giffords – as the culmination of such violence. To the contrary, "It is reasonable to worry that the attempt on Trump's life represents not an ending to this cycle of violence, but an escalation," said Adrienne LaFrance, Executive Editor of *The Atlantic*.⁷

⁴ Lerer, L. "Trump asked for power. Voters said yes." *The New York Times*, November 6, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/06/us/politics/trump-election-analysis.html>

⁵ Beauchamp, Zack. "This Is How You Get Escalation." *Vox*, July 15, 2024.

<https://www.vox.com/politics/360557/trump-assassination-attempt-republican-response-political-violence-irresponsible>.

⁶ "After the Assassination Attempt Against Trump, Anger and Anxiety Loom Over the Republican Convention." PBS News. July 15, 2024.

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/after-the-assassination-attempt-against-trump-anger-and-anxiety-loom-over-the-republican-convention>.

⁷ LaFrance, Adrienne. "How Cycles of Political Violence End." *The Atlantic*, July 24, 2024.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/09/trump-butler-assassination-attempt-pa-rally/679153/>.

Historians have noted that the sort of endemic political violence akin to the kind seen today in America typically has only ended when a significantly horrifying act, such as the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, repulses further politically-motivated violence by providing a strange form of “catharsis.”⁸ LaFrance points out it is possible to avoid such a cataclysm only if Americans commit to choosing leaders at every level of society who reject violence, and if these leaders come to recognize that authentic civic engagement is urgently needed – not the pseudo-engagement familiar to so many Americans who believe that merely sounding off in various online forums represents political action. LaFrance further contends that avoiding violent cataclysm “require(s) articulating American values worth preserving and building consensus toward reaching them.”⁹ Contemplating such an undertaking – articulation of a nation’s values and building consensus towards reaching them – invites reflection on reformers who have achieved such transformation, those who have inspired citizens in democratic nations to learn more about their personal agency and political values that sustain their power.

Brazilian social justice reformer and education theorist Paulo Freire is such a person. Freire’s pedagogy educated his nation and, in doing so, helped sustain its democratic reforms. Freire published his foundational text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in 1968 after a brutal dictatorial regime exiled him from his home country.¹⁰ Initially banned in Brazil, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* became popular when the government revitalized democracy

⁸ LaFrance, “Political Violence.”

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “Paulo Freire | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.” n.d.
<https://iep.utm.edu/freire/#H6>.

efforts in Brazil during the 1980s and has since become a classic text not only in the field of American education, but also for scholars in the fields of political science, psychology, sociology, and art.¹¹ The text has become essential reading to those who seek to understand the essence of personal and societal change and how the personal interacts with the societal. Donaldo Macedo, a contemporary scholar and close colleague of Freire's, warns that the "dire consequences (i.e., denial of climate change, obscene economic inequality, potential nuclear catastrophe) of the far-right power hegemony...may potentially result in the end of humanity as we know it."¹² What is needed, Macedo argues, is "the development of people's critical awareness of how they are in the world and with the world – a posture that Freire insisted upon."¹³ I contend that the sort of awareness and civic engagement that Freire developed and Macedo emphasizes is sorely missing in American culture, and Americans will regard their political opponents as, perhaps, wrongheaded neighbors rather than as bitter enemies only after American leaders create shared and intentional opportunities to develop such awareness and engagement within the nation's citizenry.

If LaFrance is correct, and the only way the U.S. can stave off cataclysmic political violence is through deeper civic engagement, it will require an all-hands-on-deck approach. An impactful level of civic discourse around topics related to American values – such as the proper role of government and a well-understood notion of "protection for the people from the excesses of government"¹⁴ – will require participation at all levels of society, including from public intellectuals and academics who

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Donaldo Macedo, Introduction in Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 1.

¹³ Macedo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1.

¹⁴ Nelson, J. *Will the Great American Experiment succeed?*

have attempted to bring about the sort of political consciousness-raising Freire espoused. It will also need to come from less conventional sources, as some of the most compelling and authentic attempts to achieve democratic consciousness-raising have taken place in popular music, concert halls, arenas, and even amid an artist's spoken interactions with his audience.

Such is the case with Bruce Springsteen, who has engaged his audience in a compelling moral, if not political, dialogue for more than 40 years.¹⁵ In *Long Walk Home*, a book that explores the ways in which writers have been "moved, shaped, and challenged" by Springsteen's music,¹⁶ Jefferson Cowie and Joel Dinerstein assert that "A Springsteen concert is a forum for epiphanies: his objective is to have each person walk out of the show asking, wanting, and expecting more of him or herself—as well as society. He wants you to leave with a self-in-transition."¹⁷ To prove their point, they quote Springsteen, who argues there are "powers that your [must] find within yourself to keep going and change things. To try to make some place for yourself in the world."¹⁸ Springsteen's emphasis that change can only truly happen when it comes from within is analogous to Freire's *conscientização*, and I contend that helping Americans find such power within themselves, to channel it towards a shared sense of American values, is the nation's best hope of avoiding cataclysmic political violence.

¹⁵ Roxanne Harde. "'Living in Your American Skin': Bruce Springsteen and the Possibility of Politics." *ResearchGate*, January 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1353/crv>.

¹⁶ Jonathan Cohen and June Skinner Sawyers, *Long Walk Home: Reflections on Bruce Springsteen* (Rutgers University Press, 2019).

¹⁷ Jefferson Cowie and Joel Dinerstein, "The Role of the Popular Artist in a Democratic Society," in *Long Walk Home*, 49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

In this study, I explore the role of the artist in the life of a society and specifically the ways in which Springsteen has engaged with his fans via a form of visionary dialogic praxis on a political level unique from that of other popular artists. In Springsteen's dialogic model, he challenges his audience to be reflective to the point of self-transformation, so that they can be their best versions of themselves and become motivated into action. Just as Freire challenged his students with *conscientização*—consciousness-raising to stimulate positive action—Springsteen challenges his fans to take steps in their lives and in their communities to bring about a measure of liberty and equality for all. Whereas Freire engaged his students directly, in a mission-focused, or “missionary” model of *dialogics*, Springsteen has famously and repeatedly asserted that his career has been an ongoing conversation with his audience,¹⁹ often challenging fans with ideas they did not necessarily agree with,²⁰ a practice like that of Freire's praxis. I contend Springsteen's ongoing conversation with his audience is just as vital a practice in promoting democratic citizenship as was Freire's radical pedagogy in changing the aspirations and outcomes of the people of Brazil—actions free societies embrace to guarantee their own liberty.

Context and Composition of Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Freire's family experienced hunger and extreme poverty so painfully amid Brazil's economic crisis in the 1930s he called it a violence of hunger.²¹ In this context Freire “angrily and compassionately wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,”²² while exiled from the country he loved. The dictatorial regime

¹⁹ Joe Levy. “Bruce Springsteen: The Rolling Stone Interview.” *Rolling Stone*, November 1, 2007. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bruce-springsteen-the-rolling-stone-interview-238478/>.

²⁰ Gary Susman, “Bruce Springsteen Defends the Dixie Chicks.” *EW.Com*, April 23, 2003. <https://ew.com/article/2003/04/23/bruce-springsteen-defends-dixie-chicks/>.

²¹ Macedo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 13.

²² Ibid.

that seized power in Brazil in 1964 demanded learning structures in which students were asked to accept, comply with, and memorize “facts” without questioning authors. Literacy was required for Brazilians to vote, so Freire’s education efforts were a means to democratic participation and liberation from oppressive poverty. Grounded in authentic learning contexts, Freire’s work was alternately condemned as subversive by the military dictatorship that ruled from 1964-1985 and hailed as an important pro-democracy tool in the late 1980s when Freire returned to the country as Brazil reformed its democracy. Freire’s approach posits that learning and social change cannot occur when students and citizens receive information passively, via what Freire called the *banking concept* of teaching and learning in which students receive teachers’ *deposits* of knowledge.

In contrast, Freire’s *problem-posing education*, a *dialogic pedagogy*, helps students become critically aware of oppressive social conditions that work upon them via *conscientização*, a process in which a student’s conscience is awakened via open dialogue. To Freire, a teacher’s dialogue with students must be action-oriented – a *praxis* – that insists that students and teachers *act upon their environments* to produce new understandings of their personal and social reality. In this way, reality itself can be transformed by pursuing personal and collective action and *reflection* upon one’s thinking and action.²³

Drawing on central features of Freire’s *problem-posing education* – including *radicalism* in contrast to *sectarianism*; *praxis*; *dialogics*; *conscientização*; and authentic curricula (which Freire calls *concrete curricula*) – I show below how these features have analogs in Springsteen’s

²³ “Paulo Freire | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.”

“pedagogy.” In contrast to Freire’s pedagogy, however, which relied on the clear “mission” of a highly organized effort via *cultural circles*²⁴ designed to attack illiteracy and then empower oppressed Brazilians, I contend that Springsteen achieves dialogic praxis with his audience in a less direct, “visionary” pedagogy he brings to life via songwriting, performance, and speaking. I show how these sites invite fans to be reflective and subsequently empathetic, spurring them to take civically engaged actions, such as voting or contributing to social causes. The overarching claim I make is that dialogic praxis is the radical pedagogy Americans need now, including the sort of civic engagement that materializes in both missionary and visionary formats. I argue here that dialogic praxis is radical pedagogy that can establish shared American values currently eluding partisans on both ends of the nation’s political spectrum.

Radical vs. Sectarian Transformation

The centrality of the notion of “radical” in opposition to “sectarian” is perhaps the most important feature of Freire’s pedagogical philosophy for social change. “Radicalism” has been associated in modern American parlance with that of extremism, but in Freire’s work, it is the “sectarian” who sees his point of view as the sole arbiter of reality, a fixed understanding of the world that cannot be altered by counterfactual information, consensus, or compromise. Freire says that a sectarian on the left or on the right “feels threatened if (his) truth is questioned,” and, citing a contemporary journalist of his, “suffer(s) from an absence of doubt.”²⁵ Given such absolute beliefs, regardless of one’s position on the political right or left, a sectarian, not a radical, is one who would work potentially

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 39.

violently to uphold his worldview.²⁶ Conversely, Freire maintains that a “radical...commit(s) himself or herself, within history, to fight” at the side of the oppressed, nonviolently.²⁷ The radical is *not* the extremist, but one who confronts, listens to, and tries to truly understand the world. Freire’s insistence in the moral value of a radical’s peaceful commitment to confrontation, consciousness-raising, and subsequent transformation is at the core of his work, and it undergirded his massive literacy effort in Brazil.

In similar ways, it is Springsteen’s commitment to speaking authentically that has enabled him to connect deeply with his audience, which views his songwriting, performances, and other exhortations as compelling, moral, and real—in doing so, his “pedagogy” invites transformation. Springsteen’s life has been an example of the ways in which art makes it possible for personal transformation. In one of his earliest interviews after achieving national attention following his release of *Born to Run*, Springsteen admitted, “Rock and roll has been everything to me. The first day I can remember looking in a mirror and being able to stand what I was seeing was the day I had a guitar in my hand.”²⁸

About ten years later, Springsteen had ascended to popular music’s highest echelons, when he famously sung “We learned more from a three-minute record, baby, than we ever learned in school.”²⁹ He would go on, although perhaps not realizing it, to educate countless fans with his own three-minute records, by posing problems—i.e., giving his fans much to think about – via his own form of visionary dialogic praxis. Springsteen has often contemplated how art can powerfully impact society, including once

²⁶ Ibid, 38.

²⁷ Ibid, 39.

²⁸ Dave Marsh. *Born to Run: The Bruce Springsteen Story* (Dell, 1981), 16.

²⁹ Bruce Springsteen, “No Surrender,” *Born in the USA*, Columbia, 1984, Track 7.

discussing the impact John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* had on him or the ways in which his own mother's spirit was uplifted each morning while listening to a small, portable AM radio in the kitchen. In many interviews and perhaps most famously at the 2012 South-by-Southwest conference in Austin, Springsteen has extolled the power of music to move people:

In the beginning, every musician has their genesis moment...It's whatever initially inspires you to action. Mine was 1956, Elvis on the Ed Sullivan Show. It was the evening I realized a white man could make magic, that you did not have to be constrained by your upbringing, by the way you looked, or by the social context that oppressed you. You could call upon your own powers of imagination, and you could create a transformative self. A certain type of transformative self, that perhaps at any other moment in American History, might have seemed difficult, if not impossible.³⁰

There is perhaps no clearer thread between Springsteen and Freire than what is illustrated in the recollection above. As a boy transfixed watching Elvis perform on the Ed Sullivan Show, Springsteen experienced his own sort of *conscientização*, followed, essentially, by his own praxis. Springsteen emphasizes the urgency of identifying what inspires us into action and that we can transform ourselves if we choose to do so.

Praxis, Dialogue, and Problem-Posing Education

How do radicals—teachers who ally themselves with students in service of *conscientização*—transform their world so that oppression can be overcome? Freire writes that only when they stop “regarding the oppressed as an abstract category” and regard them as “persons who have been

³⁰ Rolling Stone. Exclusive: The Complete Text of Bruce Springsteen's SXSW Keynote Address." *Rolling Stone*, June 25, 2018. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/exclusive-the-complete-text-of-bruce-springsteens-sxsw-keynote-address-86379/>.

unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor.”³¹ Only then can a person begin to transform social reality. A newly awakened oppressor’s awareness must be paired with radical reflection and action—praxis—the means by which oppressors can join in solidarity with the oppressed to help transform reality. Freire lays out a dialectic strategy that helps oppressed people push back against oppressors and oppression, in the form of praxis, which is deep reflexive thinking about forces of subjectivity and objectivity that must be paired with action to effectuate change in these conditions. Freire conceptualizes radical pedagogy as being necessarily grounded in the back and forth of respectful and open-minded dialogue. He writes, “...dialogue cannot occur...between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them.”³² Freire leans on the writing of Che Guevara when he asserts that, perhaps even more than respect, authentic dialogue “cannot exist...in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people...Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself.”³³ Without dialogue, students, and all citizens by extension, are merely controlled as passive objects of the oppressors’ intentions.

Springsteen’s pedagogy is also a back-and-forth dialogue based on love, and it is through this dialogue that he achieves a response that could be understood as dialogic praxis. Springsteen’s depictions of authentic people who voice authentic concerns in authentic situations is how he enacts an indirect, but visionary dialogue with his audience. His connection to and understanding of people has been so authentic and compelling that

³¹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 50

³² Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 88.

³³ *Ibid.*, 89.

some have described it as being not so much that of a songwriter or rock star, but that of a “cultural worker” or “social artist.”³⁴ As a social artist, Springsteen upholds a set of moral values – respect for all people, taking care of the less fortunate, showing empathy for those who are dealing with adversity – that serve as a unifying force for collective good. Examples of this include Springsteen’s portrayal of migrants and their communities struggling for survival at America’s southern border; or of an unemployed, under-skilled worker who tries to convince himself and his family that “we’ll be alright,” presumably in the midst of the Prime Mortgage Crisis of 2008;³⁵ and, famously, his rendering of nonfictional or historical characters, including an internal monologue that America’s first television-famous killing-spree murderer, Charles Starkweather, might have experienced in the late 1950s.³⁶ All of these lovingly, visionary creations provoke a response, a kind of dialogue, that forces listeners to be reflective about social issues.

While some of Freire’s text is dedicated to specific curricular considerations and teaching methodology, the overarching foundational strategy for education for social change is his idea of “problem-posing education,” which stands in opposition to the “banking concept” of education, in which students receive teachers’ “deposits” of disconnected, uninspiring recitation of facts that have little relevance to their lived experiences. To achieve critical consciousness, oppressed students must be given the opportunity to address authentic problems in their lives and then use a dialogic process to collaborate in solving these problems. Freire asserts, “The starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation.”³⁷

³⁴ Jefferson Cowie and Joel Dinerstein, in *Long Walk Home*, 55.

³⁵ Bruce Springsteen, “Jack of All Trades,” *Wrecking Ball*, Columbia, 2012, Track 4.

³⁶ Bruce Springsteen, “Nebraska,” *Nebraska*, Columbia, 1982, Track 1.

³⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 95-96

Concrete problems in daily life were thus posed to the peasants in Brazil at the time, as they learned literacy via cultural circles.

Springsteen too lays authentic problems at the feet of his listeners, grappling with the same confounding issues they experience on a daily basis, including the very real outcomes of socially constructed and embedded racism. Film and culture critic A.O. Scott documented a compelling example of Springsteen's problem-posing pedagogy, in which audience members protested Springsteen's performance of "American Skin," Springsteen's protest song against the tragic killing of Amadou Diallo.³⁸ Here, Scott describes an unusual phenomenon he observed as a "symbol of civic promise."³⁹ Scott depicts in vivid detail the way in which some audience members had booed the song in previous concerts, but here, in front of Scott, were two men, "closer to forty than thirty"⁴⁰ years old, enjoying the concert like everyone else in the packed arena. As soon as the song began, the two men "turned their backs to the stage, clasped their hands in front of them and bowed their heads"; they did not cause a ruckus, but "stood silently, registering their protest at the Boss's protest."⁴¹

As soon as the song concluded, the two men turned around again and, without missing a beat, joined in with the rest of the crowd singing along with their hero. Scott goes on to write that "Of course (Springsteen) didn't have the power to fix racism, to resolve the contradictions of class and ideology, to move the world toward justice,"⁴² and although he would

³⁸ Bruce Springsteen, "American Skin (41 Shots)," Live in New York City, Columbia, 2001, Disc 2, Track 4.

³⁹ A.O. Scott, "The Ties That Bind," in *Long Walk Home*, 76.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

disagree with their reasons for protesting the song, “(Springsteen) understood them. And their understanding of *him* was what authorized their protest.”⁴³ Springsteen’s ability to use problem-posing pedagogy with his audience, to engage with them around a difficult topic (racism), and to use dialogic praxis while also creating a “civic space in which two antithetical sentiments could coexist and communicate with each other”⁴⁴ underscores the uniqueness of his political and pedagogical gifts. Scott, perhaps unbeknownst to himself, was describing dialogic praxis, in which a level of understanding could be achieved through dialogue, even if a problem could not be solved at that particular moment. It will require more artists, teachers, and political leaders to engage American audiences thusly, via problem-posing education, if we are to restore a sense of shared American values separate and apart from the vitriolic partisanship we see today.

The Role of the Artist in Society

In his own book about radical pedagogy, civil rights activist Myles Horton engages in a Socratic discussion with Freire on a range of topics, including the ways in which art itself is a sort of liberating pedagogy: “The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can...shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves”⁴⁵ In his most specific pronouncement about an artist’s role in society, Springsteen penned an op-ed for the New York Times in August 2004, during the summer political season that would eventually see disinformation cripple John Kerry’s presidential candidacy.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Myles Horton, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (Temple University Press, 1990), 181.

In *Chords of Change*, Springsteen chose for the first time to overtly leverage his credibility as an artist to attempt to make a difference in electoral politics. In the piece he writes, “A nation's artists and musicians have a particular place in its social and political life.... Through my work, I've always tried to ask hard questions. Why is it that the wealthiest nation in the world finds it so hard to keep its promise and faith with its weakest citizens?”⁴⁶ Rooted in love and grounded by questions that stir discussion and engagement, Springsteen's op-ed was a serious piece that prompted a serious response from its readers – a sort of Freirean problem-posing lesson activity for his readers. The piece's very essence relies upon questions posed that do not have singular answers, but require awareness, reflection, and subsequent actions (voting, civic engagement, etc.) that can lead to collective transformation.

Dialogic Praxis in Springsteen's Songwriting

When asked why, as a very wealthy artist, he feels the need to keep writing songs, Springsteen says, “It's how I find out who you are, and who I am, and then who we are. I'm interested in that. I'm interested in what it means to be an American.”⁴⁷ Such sentiment virtually depicts a dialogic praxis defining the term “American” and Springsteen's need to define himself within the larger context of American-ness. Springsteen achieves dialogic praxis in his songwriting by providing specific information and dramatic narratives that provoke emotional responses, invite discussion, and offer a site for contemplation and subsequent action. While

⁴⁶ Bruce Springsteen, “Opinion | Chords for Change.” *The New York Times*, August 5, 2004. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/05/opinion/chords-for-change.html>.

⁴⁷ “Springsteen: Silence Is Unpatriotic.” *CBS News*, July 28, 2008. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/springsteen-silence-is-unpatriotic/>.

Springsteen's dialogue with his audience may not be the direct back-and-forth, Socratic style discussion Freire used with adult participants in cultural circles in his dialogics, it is informed by similar human-to-human interactions that find their way into Springsteen's meticulously detailed, authentic rendering of characters, oftentimes based in imagined scenarios depicting ongoing or recent social/historical events.

Although many examples could be provided here, one especially abundant site for Springsteen's provocative conversation with his audience via songwriting takes place on *The Ghost of Tom Joad* album, a work that raises consciousness about the plight of migrants and itinerant workers struggling to survive, in which a speaker sings that only "the highway is alive."⁴⁸ One song on the album that invites dialogic praxis and which could easily have fit into an updated soundtrack of Ford's filmic version of *The Grapes of Wrath* is "Across the Border." In it the narrator sings to his companion about a future in which they will leave behind the "pain and sadness we found here," a place in which "pain and misery have been stilled" and where they will "drink from God's blessed waters," across the (heavenly) border. It is a wistful song made to feel optimistic compared to the darker, preceding track, "The New Timer," on the same disc. Inspired by Michael Williams and Dale Maharidge's collaboration *Journey to Nowhere: The Saga of the New Underclass*, the speaker in "The New Timer" is an itinerant worker who will pick peaches in Marysville but at night is bunked in a barn: "just like animals—me and a hundred others just like me."

Both songs bring the listener up close to the pain and degradation of dehumanizing, exploitative work that forces listeners to ask this problem-

⁴⁸ Bruce Springsteen, "The Ghost of Tom Joad," *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, Columbia, 1995, Track 1.

posing question, as the song's speaker plaintively does in "Across the Border": "For what are we, without hope in our hearts?"⁴⁹ At the end of "The New Timer" the narrator has lost all hope and does not look for God's grace, only a rifle and the name of someone to kill in revenge for the death of his former travelling companion. *Who are we to treat people inhumanely? What are we if we have no hope?* – these are the kinds of problem-posing questions Springsteen's lyrics ask of his audience, and they demand a response, even in the form of the listener's non-verbalized thoughts.

Dialogic Praxis in Springsteen's Performances.

Comparing Springsteen's concert performances to other artists who might want to provide a "simplistic political consciousness," Cowie and Dinerstein point out that Springsteen has never called for "punk resistance or gratuitous rebellion."⁵⁰ Instead, they write, he is "working for *your* personal independence of mind and soul...he presents an audience with political possibilities but is not an overt dissident."⁵¹ In contrast to punk performers who invite participatory engagement around rejection of culturally established systems of belief, Springsteen's art affirms mainstream American values, such as patriotism, freedom, rule of law, compassionate citizenship, community – but it also, in contrast to country music, resists "uncritical patriotism."⁵² In holding up American values while resisting the extremes of nihilism or jingoism, Springsteen's concert performances are a unique brand of political performance.

⁴⁹ Bruce Springsteen, "Across the Border," *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, Columbia, 1995, Track 10.

⁵⁰ Jefferson Cowie and Joel Dinerstein, in *Long Walk Home*, 54.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 49.

The radical pedagogy found in Springsteen's performances is a visionary one, in which he does not wish merely to entertain; instead, he "demands things of his audience."⁵³ That is, he lays out themes, asks questions, confronts his listeners in ways that invite imagination of other worlds. While this can manifest itself in different ways – including fans' participation in call-and-response rituals, choral singing in complete unity, laughter, booing, protest, and crying – his work "lasts in the soul, as (Springsteen's) fans will tell you."⁵⁴ None of this is accidental, as Springsteen's problem-posing pedagogy provides dialogue that, even after the show, invites praxis. While preparing for his world tour celebrating the release of his 2012 *Wrecking Ball* album, *The New Yorker's* David Remnick observed that "Springsteen rehearses deliberately, working out all the spontaneous-seeming moves and postures: the solemn lowered head and raised fist, the hoisted talismanic Fender."⁵⁵ He then quotes Springsteen: "It's theatre, you know...I'm a theatrical performer. I'm whispering in your ear, and you're dreaming my dreams, and then I'm getting a feeling for you. I've been doing that for forty years."⁵⁶ In this we see the visionary, two-way dialogue between artist and audience.

Springsteen has built his career on similar dialogue in his concerts, whether he provokes discussion from hard truths he feels compelled to share, such as the "public service announcement" he shared with audiences during the aftermath of the Iraq War, regarding civil liberties being rolled back⁵⁷; or the protestations and lamentations following the 2008 Prime

⁵³ Jefferson Cowie and Joel Dinerstein, "The Role of the Popular Artist," 51.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 52

⁵⁵ Remnick, David. 2012. "We Are Alive." *The New Yorker*, July 23, 2012.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/07/30/bruce-springsteen-profile-we-are-alive>

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Cherry, Kevin. "Taking Springsteen Seriously." *National Review*, June 16, 2010.

<https://www.nationalreview.com/2003/07/taking-springsteen-seriously-kevin-cherry/>.

Mortgage Crisis; and especially when he feels like sharing his own emotional response to current events that bother him, such as his sorrowful statement to open his show after John Lennon's murder, or in his angry response to Ronald Reagan's re-election campaign in 1984, when the President had talked about Springsteen only a few days prior to serve his own interests: "There's something really dangerous happening to us out there now. We're slowly getting split up into two different Americas. Things are being taken away from the people that need them and given to the people that don't. There's a promise getting broken."⁵⁸ Similarly, he has shared his vulnerability, anger and sadness in response to the 1992 LA Riots⁵⁹ and the September 11th terror attacks, and especially to the disinformation surrounding weapons of mass destruction that were never found, and which was offered as justification for a military invasion of Iraq.

In concert, Springsteen has also spoken angrily to his fans, such as demanding their quiet, as he notably did during his Ghost of Tom Joad tour, aka the "Shut the Fuck Up Tour."⁶⁰ He has cursed out fans for setting off firecrackers during his shows and corrected the audience as needed when their response to his performances manifested itself in unexpected ways. For example, he once gently admonished the audience that applauded him when he spoke about avoiding the draft and, almost twenty years later,

⁵⁸ Geoffrey Himes. "The Bruce Springsteen Concert That Sparked a Political Firestorm in Reagan's America," *Salon*. July 22, 2017. <https://www.salon.com/2017/07/22/the-bruce-springsteen-concert-that-sparked-a-political-firestorm-in-reagans-america/>.

⁵⁹ "Story 1992-06-05 Hollywood Center Studios, Los Angeles, CA - Brucebase Wiki." June 5, 1992. <http://brucebase.wikidot.com/rehearsal:1992-06-05-hollywood-center-studios-los-angeles-ca>

⁶⁰ Quietus. 2021. "Reveling in Failure: Bruce Springsteen's Shut the Fuck up Tour." *The Quietus*. March 29, 2021. <https://thequietus.com/opinion-and-essays/anniversary/bruce-springsteen-shut-the-fuck-up-brixton/>.

when fans were responding overexuberantly to the sentiment he expressed in the lyric "I want an eye for an eye," from "Empty Sky,"⁶¹ Springsteen told them these lyrics were "never written to be a....call for blind revenge or bloodlust...I realize that it could've been a well-meaning few or perhaps some borderline psychotics out there who may have misunderstood."⁶² Even as Springsteen told his audience these words, a fan can be heard calling out in the midst of it, "Shut up and play."⁶³ These examples reinforce the way Springsteen poses problems via dialogic praxis. He is not merely entertaining. He is also open to different reactions. Springsteen's dialogue with his audience is sometimes seen in their responses to his words during concerts, such as those noted above, but also in the way some fans register their reactions to Springsteen's words or messaging is by leaving their seats to buy concessions during certain songs.⁶⁴

One of the strongest examples of Springsteen's dialogic praxis seen during concert performances occurred in front of East Germans in 1988, when he pulled the rug out from under the propagandists trying desperately to hold onto power in the former Soviet Bloc country, saying, "I'm not here for any government. I've come to play rock'n'roll for you in the hope that one day all the barriers will be torn down."⁶⁵ Books have been

⁶¹ Bruce Springsteen, "Empty Sky," *The Rising*, Columbia, 2002, Track 6.

⁶² "Story 2003-03-07 Boardwalk Hall, Atlantic City, NJ - Brucebase Wiki." 2003. March 7, 2003. <http://brucebase.wikidot.com/story:story-2003-03-07-boardwalk-hall-atlantic-city-nj>.

⁶³ Ken Rosen. "Roll of the Dice: Empty Sky | E Street Shuffle." E Street Shuffle. January 4, 2024. <https://estreetshuffle.com/index.php/2022/09/12/roll-of-the-dice-empty-sky/>.

⁶⁴ David Masciotra. "Bruce Springsteen's 'The Ghost of Tom Joad' Then and Now," *Salon*. September 16, 2017. <https://www.salon.com/2017/09/16/bruce-springsteens-the-ghost-of-tom-joad-then-and-now/>.

⁶⁵ Connolly, Kate. "The Night Bruce Springsteen Played East Berlin – and the Wall Cracked." *The Guardian*, December 1, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/jul/05/bruce-springsteen-east-germany-berlin-wall>.

written that studied the impact of this concert, some arguing that it accelerated the destruction of the Iron Curtain and the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union. While this is debatable, it has been documented that Springsteen's words and performance were a "...topic of discussion for quite some time afterwards" and "It made people ... more eager for more and more change ... Springsteen aroused a greater interest in the west. It showed people how locked up they really were."⁶⁶ Here, again, Springsteen identifies a problem to solve (freedom) and initiates a dialogic praxis with his audience.

Dialogic Praxis in Springsteen's Public Statements.

While his songwriting and concert performances enable Springsteen to communicate messages that invite visionary dialogic praxis, it is when he makes public statements, including speeches, interviews, or in his (non-song) writing that Springsteen is able to achieve dialogic praxis somewhat more directly. One such example occurred in the late 1990s, when Springsteen participated in African American Read-Ins at the Count Basie Learning Center in Red Bank, New Jersey, during Black History Month. Here, reading from Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, Springsteen told school-aged children that the book talks about how people are ignored. He told the students, in typical problem-posing fashion, "I struggled with the pain of being unrecognized when I was young...I was looking for a place to voice my anger, my joy, and happiness. I didn't get into music to be famous or make money. I did it to find a purpose and meaning in life."⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Beard, Sonya. "Read-in Celebrates the Power, Rewards of Literacy." *Asbury Park Press*, February 7, 1999, AA2

He went on to add, "...the work (you students) do (at the Count Basie Learning Center) ...provides you with the tools you need to...develop your own voice to make yourself visible.⁶⁸ Here, Springsteen makes public remarks in a manner similar to what he does in his songwriting and in his performances; namely, he holds up a candle to those who came before him as a way of reinforcing American cultural values. Like Ellison, Springsteen can be considered an "innovating traditionalist" who "learn(s) the best of the past and add(s) to it his personal vision."⁶⁹ As an innovating traditionalist, Springsteen employs dialogic praxis to reinforce American cultural values by honoring the tradition of protest he learned from those who came before him.

Speaking out about politics was not something Springsteen did naturally in his early career, and he only really began to do so when he achieved a mass audience.⁷⁰ Still, as a fan of Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger, Springsteen understood the value of a popular artist's words. During the early 1980s, while giving interviews about his *Born in the USA* tour, Springsteen would frequently invoke concerns about how political leaders preyed upon citizens' need to have pride in their country, but that the policies proposed, and the rhetoric used were created to serve only some at the expense of others. Regarding Vietnam, Watergate, and the Iran Hostage Crisis, Springsteen said, "We were beaten, we were hustled, and then we were humiliated."⁷¹ In his 1988 press announcement at the Amnesty International Human Rights Now! tour, Springsteen spoke about

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Jefferson Cowie and Joel Dinerstein, "The Role of the Popular Artist in a Democratic Society," in *Long Walk Home*, 54.

⁷⁰ Roxanne Harde. "'Living in Your American Skin': Bruce Springsteen and the Possibility of Politics."

⁷¹ Kurt Loder, "The Rolling Stone Interview: Bruce Springsteen," *Rolling Stone*, December 6, 1984, 21.

being in Africa for the first time, acknowledging the “systematic apartheid of South Africa and the economic apartheid of (his) own country.”⁷² Such discourse echoes Freire’s insistence that radicals must be “in it” with the oppressed, and Springsteen did not hold back when being either critical or supportive of government interventions that felt necessary, including the bombardment of caves that sheltered enemies of the U.S. in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks.⁷³

Like Freire, Springsteen is also a radical educator in that he “commit(s) himself...within history, to fight” at the side of the oppressed.⁷⁴ Springsteen is not an extremist, but one who confronts, listens to, and tries to truly understand the world. For example, although he was incorrect when speaking about Trump’s prospects in September of 2016, Springsteen was correct in identifying the danger in Trump’s calling elections “rigged” and the violence that could follow an election he loses.⁷⁵ When Trump won in 2016, Springsteen proclaimed membership in the “new American resistance,”⁷⁶ and then not only allowed his music to be used in the subsequent Democratic National Convention in 2020, but also felt compelled to speak out when the Trump administration separated children

⁷² John J. O’Connor, “TV WEEKEND; ‘HUMAN RIGHTS NOW TOUR,’ ON HBO.” *The New York Times*, December 23, 1988. <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/12/23/movies/tv-weekend-human-rights-now-tour-on-hbo.html>.

⁷³ IrishExaminer.com. 2020. “Springsteen Praises Bush Over War on Terror.” *Irish Examiner*, May 22, 2020. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/arid-30061762.html>.

⁷⁴ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 39.

⁷⁵ Channel 4 News. 2016. “Bruce Springsteen on Donald Trump, and His Own Depression.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_UoZ8wP6zg.

⁷⁶ Lustig, Jay, 2017. “Springsteen Says He’s Part of ‘the New American Resistance.’” *NJArts.Net* (blog). January 22, 2017. <https://www.njarts.net/springsteen-says-hes-part-new-resistance/>.

from migrant families upon arrival to the U.S. border. Fittingly, only two weeks after the violent insurrection at the US Capitol that saw 140 police officers assaulted⁷⁷ and several others dead in its aftermath, on the evening of the Biden/Harris inauguration, Springsteen offered a “little prayer for our country,” singing a mournful and plaintive “Land of Hope in Dreams” in the darkness outside the Lincoln Memorial.

Springsteen is also “not afraid to meet the people or enter into dialogue with them.”⁷⁸ When he speaks out Springsteen risks audience backlash, loss of sales, potential boycotts of his art, etc. In essence, he enters into dialogue even with those with whom he disagrees. For example, he has financially supported striking workers and canceled a performance in North Carolina to protest its state law that prohibited trans persons from using the restroom that correlated with their gender.⁷⁹ Recently, he acknowledged how the political left has not done enough to speak to the concerns of working people who have been sold a cynical message. Yet, he shows empathy and understanding towards these working-class citizens and disdain for politicians who create divisiveness and invite hatred against vulnerable citizens to convince enough voters that they have their interests in mind.

When Springsteen commented publicly on the 2008 mortgage crisis, that he personally knew people who lost their homes and their retirement savings, and that he was angry about the lawlessness and manipulation of vulnerable citizens that led to the situation, he perfectly fit Freire’s definition of the radical who does not regard “the oppressed as an abstract

⁷⁷ “Three Years Since the Jan. 6 Attack on the Capitol.” January 5, 2024.

<https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/36-months-jan-6-attack-capitol-0>.

⁷⁸ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 39.

⁷⁹ McCormick, J. P., “Bruce Springsteen dumps North Carolina over bigoted anti-LGBT law.” Pink News, April 8, 2016. <https://www.thepinknews.com/2016/04/08/bruce-springsteen-dumps-north-carolina-over-bigoted-anti-lgbt-law/>.

category” but as “persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor.”⁸⁰ Yet, Springsteen’s dialogic praxis is not the same as Freire’s. Although Springsteen can be seen as a Freirean radical who uses problem-posing education in dialogue to bring about conscientization and praxis, the notion of “oppressed” is worth parsing here. Freire’s goal is to help his citizens self-actualize, to change their beliefs in themselves so that they can participate in their own economic survival. Springsteen’s fans, at least those who have leisure time and money to attend his concerts, are not learning how to transform themselves *for economic viability*. They are there to enjoy music and *to be inspired to be their best versions of themselves*, perhaps even to help those who are less fortunate than they are.

A Runaway American Dream?

Freire’s missionary model of dialogic praxis reminds us that the radical educator is the person who truly listens to her students (although Freire would call teachers “coordinators” of “cultural circles” and students “participants,” as the idea that an adult would need to go to school to learn to read was a major stigma in Freire’s time⁸¹) and then, in a loving manner, works with them to reflect upon problem-posing questions before proposing positive actions to take in response to those problems. Springsteen offers a visionary dialogic model to educators, including those who wish to participate in re-igniting civic engagement for American values, by posing problematic questions throughout his catalog, and perhaps most obviously in *Nebraska*, *Devils & Dust*, and *Wrecking Ball*.

⁸⁰ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 50

⁸¹ “Paulo Freire | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.”

Respectively, these albums ask listeners to contemplate the fate of those who become disconnected from society; the loss that occurs when we “kill the things (we) love”⁸²; and the fear, restlessness, and anxiety that grows out of the frayed social relations stemming from economic injustice. In contrast to Freire’s direct problem-posing education, Springsteen’s indirect, visionary form of dialogic praxis offers songs that urge his listeners to empathize, to see humanity in others who may have lived quite different lives from their own. In this way they achieve *conscientização* which then allows them to be reflexive and take further action, *praxis*. In other words, Springsteen’s dialogic praxis, like Freire’s, offers a radical pedagogy that can civically-engage and strengthen society.

Although the goals and means to attain them are different for Freire, who died in 1997,⁸³ and Springsteen, both men exhort their followers’ personal transformation to bring about positive cultural and political change via civic engagement in their respective contexts. Both efforts begin with individuals involved in dialogue with other individuals, and in doing so personal and social consciousness are altered for awareness and well-being. Both pedagogues, in this way, are not “sectarians” who believe in their own absolute truths about history and human relations. And while Freire’s students were economically oppressed, some in Springsteen’s audience may inadvertently contribute to oppression; raising his audience’s awareness about social and economic justice enables Springsteen to invite self-reflection about choices his fans can make to support those who are more profoundly oppressed.

Despite his intense engagement with his audience, it is fair to question whether Springsteen truly achieves praxis within a critical mass

⁸² Bruce Springsteen, “Devils & Dust,” *Devils & Dust*, Columbia, 2005, Track 1.

⁸³ Donaldo Macedo, Introduction in Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

that has made a historical difference. While he may or may not have caused the cultural tipping point that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall,⁸⁴ Springsteen's involvement in projects such as Artists Against Apartheid, USA for Africa, and the Amnesty International's Human Rights Now tour raised consciousness and encouraged engagement with the world to make it a better place; his work for Vietnam Veterans in the early 1980s likely saved the Vietnam Veterans' movement;⁸⁵ and Springsteen's was an important voice raised against the invasion of Iraq as well as to so many other challenging American moments since then. Whether Springsteen—or anybody—can truly achieve praxis for a democratic nation today is debatable, given that the country may not necessarily have a shared moral conscience. It may be that the best Springsteen and other "cultural workers" can do is to "keep the congregation together."⁸⁶

Relatedly, some have argued that it is not healthy for democracy to rely on popular artists like Springsteen to influence the political life of a nation. Music writer Jack Hamilton cautions against the possibility of "nefarious uses" of mass culture "in the political realm,"⁸⁷ and he makes a good point, especially considering President Trump's ascendancy as a byproduct of celebrity. However, Hamilton's core argument in telling the

⁸⁴ Erik Kirschbaum. *Rocking the Wall: The Berlin Concert That Changed the World*. (Berlinica Publishing LLC, 2013).

⁸⁵ Marc Leepson, "How Bruce Springsteen Rescued Vietnam Veterans of America – and the Vietnam Veterans Movement," *The VVA Veteran*, a Publication of Vietnam Veterans of America. March/April 2016: https://vvaveteran.org/36-2/36-2_springsteen.html.

⁸⁶ Jefferson Cowie and Joel Dinerstein, "The Role of the Popular Artist in a Democratic Society," in *Long Walk Home*, 57.

⁸⁷ Jack Hamilton. "Democrats, Break up With Bruce Springsteen." 2021. POLITICO. March 7, 2021. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/03/07/barack-obama-bruce-springsteen-podcast-democrats-pop-culture-473383>.

Democratic party to “break up with Bruce Springsteen” is that, instead of relying on people like Springsteen to promote political ideas, we ought to “have a clearer sense of our politicians’ persons and policies.”⁸⁸ Springsteen himself does not necessarily agree that his vast body of work is necessarily political or contains necessarily political outcomes:

When I started, I self-consciously saw myself as an American artist and as an average American. I figured I had a talent that allowed me to create a language in which I could speak about the things that concern me and that I felt were of concern to the place that I lived — to my neighbors and the people that I’d grown up with. I don’t know if I would call it a political point of view, but I had a point of view when I was very young, and I always viewed popular music as a movement towards greater freedom. Great music brings greater freedom ...⁸⁹

Yes, it would absolutely be far better for the nation if its elected officials successfully engaged in discourse and policymaking in ways that spur active, moral citizenship. However, many of the nation’s elected officials are the ones currently fanning the flames of hatred and political violence. As LaFrance points out, we need to articulate “American values worth preserving and building consensus toward reaching them.”⁹⁰ Limiting this work solely to politicians might not be enough.

Economic catastrophe and weak political leadership brought about the military coup d’état in 1960s and 1970s Brazil, before democratic efforts took hold, bolstered by the foundation of Freire’s radical pedagogy that was

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Brooks, D. “Bruce Springsteen’s Playlist for the Trump Era,” 2020, June 23, 2020. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/bruce-springsteens-playlist/613378/>

⁹⁰ LaFrance, “Political Violence.”

reintegrated into his home country. Cultural workers in Freire's day needed to participate in democracy revitalization efforts to bring about a freer Brazilian society. Although these efforts helped citizens develop their own agency, and Brazil's rates of literacy have also vastly improved, Brazil has its own issues to contend with regarding the health of its democracy.⁹¹ In 2024, "to keep the republic," Springsteen and other contemporary American artists, filmmakers, writers, teachers, and local and national public figures must use their voice and their influence to condemn violence and re-teach and reinforce American values regarding personal freedom, economic equality, and environmental sustainability. The potential for violence and further erosion of democratic values beyond the 2024 election is not only possible, but sadly likely if a re-invigorated movement for national civic engagement does not come to pass.

Radical Pedagogies for "American Values"

Adrienne LaFrance and the historians she interviewed have made the clarion call for political leaders to reject violence and model moderation in their words and actions. A robust American civic engagement effort is sorely needed. Fortunately, there are highly effective radical pedagogies practiced in schools across America that can complement such an effort, thanks to leaders in the field of education who have embraced constructivism, upon which Freire's dialogic praxis relies. An increasing number of schools are embracing pedagogies that rely on assets students with different languages, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds bring

⁹¹ Nicas, Jack. 2024. "Two Capitol Riots. Two Very Different Results." *The New York Times*, January 8, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/08/world/americas/brazil-us-capitol-riots.html>.

to the classroom. Approaches such as Culturally and Linguistically Responsive (CLR) pedagogy and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) are designed to help teachers learn how to recognize and respond to students and their own cultural backgrounds so that they can foster a strong ethic of care in a space with students whose backgrounds may be different from their own. Such asset-based approaches are only just now coming into the mainstream.

Unfortunately, many of today's school leaders are not yet prepared to promote asset-based pedagogies, and some do not have the support of district leadership or boards of education to promote equity in schools.⁹² Support for equity initiatives in schools can be changed if a national dialogue around citizenship is created and sustained around the missionary and visionary models offered by Freire and Springsteen. There are also encouraging trends for K-12 civics education, including recent legislation⁹³ in states like New Jersey that require civics instruction at the middle school level in addition to existing civics education requirements in grades 9-12. Adult Learning Theory also foregrounds a student-centered approach, while Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)⁹⁴ literally uses problem-posing principles and data gathering to help students develop their own agency, very similar to the work Freire's cultural circle coordinators used for literacy education in Brazil.

⁹² Daniel C. Loughran, "Equity Work Takes Courage: A Case Study of an Elementary Principal's Praxis," Ed.D. diss., (Rutgers University, 2021).

⁹³ "New law requires middle school students to take civics course." | *New Jersey School Boards Association*. (n.d.). <https://www.njsba.org/school-board-notes/new-law-requires-middle-school-students-to-take-civics-course/>

⁹⁴ KnowledgeWorks. *Youth Participatory Action Research: A Guidebook and curriculum* – KnowledgeWorks, April 17, 2024. <https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/ypar-youth-participatory-action-research-guidebook-curriculum/>