

**Philosophical Teaching in a Neoliberal Context: An Ethical Analysis of
Brazil's Educational Shifts**

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Writing Sample

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This writing sample is taken from the introduction to my master's degree thesis entitled "Philosophical Teaching in a Neoliberal Context: An Ethical Analysis of Brazil's Educational Shifts." This research aims to understand the challenges posed by creating and applying the Brazilian law regulating the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC). The BNCC is a normative document defining the essential learning set all students must develop in Basic Education in Brazil.¹ That document brings a set of challenges to the teaching of humanities in Brazil, especially philosophy. This extract was originally written in Portuguese in the Brazilian standard academic writing format ABNT.²

Philosophy is often referred to as the "mother of all sciences" because it was the first discipline that sought to understand reality in its entirety from the beginning. It is a basis and theoretical support for the other disciplines but also promotes a critical reflection on its foundations and methods. Since the Greeks, such as Plato and Aristotle, philosophers have dedicated themselves to investigating fundamental questions about existence, knowledge, truth, and morality, which later gave rise to areas of knowledge that were consolidated over time in school subjects such as physics, biology, mathematics, linguistics, arts, and others. That is in addition to philosophy, which has become a curricular component of primary education schools in Brazil and worldwide.

Philosophy and the humanities serve as the foundations of democracy. Educating students in technical disciplines while also shaping them into responsible global citizens is essential. The ability to think critically and empathize with others is vital. As Peter Singer says, "Philosophy is the study of general and fundamental questions about existence, knowledge,

¹Ministério da Educação, "Base Nacional Comum Curricular (BNCC)," Conselho Nacional de Educação, accessed November 11, 2024, <http://portal.mec.gov.br/conselho-nacional-de-educacao/base-nacional-comum-curricular-bncc>.

² Associação Brasileira de Normas Técnicas, NBR 6023:2018: Information and Documentation – References – Preparation (Rio de Janeiro: ABNT, 2018).

values, reason, mind, and language.”³ While democracy relies on a strong economy, that economy truly benefits its citizens only when it promotes an environment of responsibility that encourages thoughtful reflection. An economy lacking social responsibility can be harmful.

Educational institutions have marginalized the humanities, prioritizing STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects, undermining students' ability to develop critical thinking in deep societal issues. With this statement, we claim that there is no hierarchy between the disciplines but that everyone should be given a rightful place. Philosophy and other humanities subjects have a crucial role in human development. As Dr. Nussbaum states in her book:

The humanities and the arts are not just about profitability. They create a world worth living in, where people see each other as complete individuals with opinions and feelings that deserve respect and understanding. Philosophy, along with other humanities, strives to create this world.
— Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 39⁴.

The emphasis on utilitarian disciplines reflects a narrow view of education, prioritizing immediate economic return and ignoring the long-term benefits of critical and reflective education. Socrates, introduced to us by Plato, introduced the Socratic method into philosophy. A method that does not present ready-made answers but builds the content from dialogue. According to Socrates, "The unexamined life is not worth living."⁵ This approach differs significantly from the merely content-based approach. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Paulo Freire criticizes the traditional teaching model, which he calls "banking education,"

³Peter Singer, *Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1.

⁴Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 39

⁵Socrates, *Apology*, in *The Complete Works of Plato*, edited by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 36.

where students are seen as recipients to be passively filled. It proposes a dialogical and critical education in which students are encouraged to reflect on their reality and transform it.

"Because men, in this view, when they receive the world that enters them, are already passive beings, it is up to education to appease them even more and adapt them to the world. The more they are adapted to the 'banking' concept, the more 'educated' they are because they are adequate to the world. This is a conception that, implying a practice, can only interest the oppressors, who will be even more at peace the more adequate men are to the world; the more concerned men are, the more they question the world. The more the great majority adapt themselves to the ends prescribed to them by the dominating minorities, so that they lack the right to have their ends, the more these minorities can prescribe."⁶

— Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th-anniversary ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 81.

The main problem that needs to be debated and solved in this dissertation is the systematic marginalization of the humanities, especially philosophy. This marginalization happens mainly due to the advancement of neoliberal policies worldwide, especially in Brazil. For philosophy, this milestone is the publication of the BNCC in December 2017.⁷ The BNCC considers philosophy non-mandatory and, therefore, not a priority. In this document, philosophy appears as content but not as a discipline that must be taught. From this milestone, professionals teaching philosophy in high school have constantly fought to establish themselves and stimulate critical and democratic thinking among students.

Historical Overview

In Brazil, the history of the specific discipline of philosophy is marked by insertion and suppression. During the military dictatorship (1964-1985), for example, the teaching of philosophy in primary education was the target of suppression and control. The discipline, seen as potentially subversive and critical of the regime, was removed from the curriculum in 1971 by Law 5.692. As the article "The Teaching of Philosophy in the Years of post-1964

⁶ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th-anniversary ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018)

⁷ Brazil. 2017. Law No. 13,415, of February 16, 2017. "Establishes the Reform of Secondary Education and amends Law No. 9,394, of December 20, 1996, which establishes the Guidelines and Bases of National Education." *Federal Official Gazette*, February 17, 2017.

Repression"⁸ points out, "Law No. 5,692/71 removed Philosophy from the school curriculum and replaced it with Moral and Civic Education and Brazilian Social and Political Organization".⁹ In its place, subjects such as Brazilian Social and Political Organization (OSPB) and Moral and Civic Education (CME) were introduced, which aimed to indoctrinate students with the values and ideologies of the regime.¹⁰

The reintegration of philosophy into the Brazilian school curriculum reflects the political and educational transformations of the last decades. After a period of marginalization of the human sciences during the military dictatorship and the advance of neoliberalism in the 1990s, which favored technocratic disciplines, the return of philosophy to the Brazilian educational system was driven by laws that sought to reverse this utilitarian logic and highlight the importance of critical thinking.

The first significant change occurred with Law No. 11,684 of 2008, which made the inclusion of philosophy in the high school curriculum mandatory and expanded its presence in elementary school.¹¹ The law aimed to restore philosophy as an essential discipline for developing critical thinking, contrasting with the growing focus on the labor market and workforce qualification defended by the neoliberal model. The 2008 reform was a milestone; it represented a movement towards valorizing the human sciences, recognizing them as fundamental for citizenship education and not only as professional preparation (Brazil, 2008).¹²

⁸ Alves, Daniela. "The Teaching of Philosophy During the Repression Post-1964." *Philosophical Essays Review*, 2010.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Brazil. 2008. Law No. 11,684, of June 2, 2008. "Amends provisions of Law No. 9,394, of December 20, 1996, which establishes the Guidelines and Bases of National Education." Federal Official Gazette, June 3, 2008.

¹² Ibid

However, the consequences of this change were mixed. Although philosophy has been formally reintegrated into the school curriculum, its practical implementation has faced resistance due to the lack of infrastructure, teacher training, and the still predominant neoliberal vision, prioritizing areas focused on productivity. This scenario was aggravated by the 2017 high school reform, sanctioned by Law No. 13,415/2017, which reformulated Brazilian high schools, introducing a more "flexible" and "modular" curriculum.¹³ This reform allowed students to choose areas of concentration, such as languages, natural sciences, mathematics, and human sciences, but at the same time, reduced the workload of subjects such as philosophy and sociology, which made these subjects more vulnerable to exclusion from curricula, especially in education systems that prioritize a more utilitarian education (Brazil 2017).¹⁴

The reduction in the workload of philosophy and sociology generated an intense debate because by prioritizing an education centered on technical skills without ensuring adequate space for the human sciences, the reform eliminated the possibility for students to develop ethical and critical reflection skills. According to Boaventura de Souza Santos (2007), the reduction of space for the human sciences in secondary education reflects a global trend of technical education, where citizenship and critical education are replaced by training aimed at adapting to the labor market and the logic of capital.¹⁵ Santos argues that this approach impoverishes the ability of individuals to question reality and act in an emancipatory way in society.¹⁶

¹³ Brazil. 2017. Law No. 13,415, of February 16, 2017. "Establishes the Reform of Secondary Education and amends Law No. 9,394, of December 20, 1996, which establishes the Guidelines and Bases of National Education." Federal Official Gazette, February 17, 2017.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵Santos, Boaventura de Souza. 2007. *The University in the XXI Century: Towards a Democratic and Emancipatory Reform of the University*. São Paulo: Editora Cortez. 45-67.

¹⁶ Ibid

The criticism of the 2017 reform is in line with the view of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Brazilian former president and sociologist who, in his analysis of Brazilian education, states that the emphasis on technical and market areas in the educational system can result in the formation of highly qualified individuals, but with a limited view of their social and political role. Cardoso (1995) points out that an education that neglects the human sciences contributes to the formation of citizens who are technically competent but socially apathetic, incapable of engaging in debates involving ethical, political, and social issues.¹⁷ Philosophy, therefore, as an area of knowledge that promotes reflection on society, ethics, politics, and knowledge, was harmed by an educational logic focused on immediate results of productivity and employability.¹⁸

Historically, the reintegration of philosophy into the school curriculum aims to resume the tradition of education as a means for the integral formation of human beings, not just their technical capacity. When dealing with teaching philosophy, the laws of 2008 and 2017 reflect this struggle for the value of the human sciences in an increasingly technocratic and market-oriented educational context. However, as Francisco López (2019) argues, the effectiveness of these reforms remains controversial, especially in the face of pressure from a labor market that demands quick practical skills to the detriment of deep critical training. But, after the creation of the BNCC in 2017, this discipline was suddenly suppressed again.¹⁹ After the measure, philosophy teachers began to have few class times. They were often forced to teach classes in other curricular components in related areas to increase their workload and remuneration.²⁰ The

¹⁷ Cardoso, Fernando Henrique. 1995. *Education and the formation of the citizen: reflections on the directions of the school in Brazil*. São Paulo: Editora Paz e Terra.

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ López, Francisco. 2019. *Education and Market: Reflections on Education in the Neoliberal Context*. São Paulo: Editora Moderna.

²⁰ *Ibid*

teaching of philosophy has been replaced in many curricula by subjects such as "entrepreneurship" or "life project," and teachers often have to teach elective subjects created with the New High School (NEM), which in turn resulted from the BNCC Reform already alluded to above.

The changes to the BNCC were implemented during Jair Bolsonaro's government (2018-2022), a period marked by the rise of the extreme right in politics. Conservative groups advocating for agendas such as the "school without a party" viewed the subject of Philosophy as a manifestation of progressivism in education. These groups argued that discussions on intersectional issues, human rights, ethics, democracy, and citizenship, which are linked to left-wing social movements, had ideologically influenced the curricula of these subjects and should, therefore, be opposed.

In this context, there is also the perception that disciplines that do not have immediate market value in society, such as philosophy, the arts, and other human sciences, tend to be marginalized in favor of areas considered more "useful" for the economy, such as the exact and technological sciences. This situation is due to the advance of what has become known as the neoliberal system.

Countries and their education systems are recklessly discarding skills indispensable to keeping democracy alive. If this trend continues, all countries will soon produce generations of profitable machines rather than upstanding citizens who can think for themselves, critique tradition, and understand the meaning of others' sufferings and accomplishments. The future of democracy depends on this.²¹

Neoliberalism is a political and economic system with cultural repercussions derived from classical liberalism adapted to the globalized economy. Its main characteristics are the

²¹ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 4.

reduction of the role of the State in the economy, the promotion of free competition, the valorization of free enterprise, and the elimination of barriers to international trade.

It is essential to recognize that the declining role of philosophy in education is not simply a coincidence. This shift highlights a significant transformation in the foundations of education, particularly in popular education, which frequently underappreciates the importance of reflective inquiry. This trend also extends to the arts and human sciences, indicating a broader evolution within our academic landscape. By examining how this phenomenon relates to the policies enacted by leading capitalist nations, often influenced by neoliberalism, we can foster enriching discussions and deepen our understanding of education and its role in society. It is essential to recognize that the decline of philosophy in education is not just a coincidence; it reflects something deeper within our educational systems. This trend is particularly prominent in popular education, where the role of reflective inquiry is often overlooked. Reflective inquiry is crucial for fostering deep thinking and engaging with complex ideas, as Nussbaum (2010) emphasized.²²

However, this issue is not confined to philosophy alone. It also affects various fields, especially the arts and human sciences. This broader change points to a shift in our academic priorities, raising concerns about whether students receive the critical thinking and creativity training they need (Biesta, 2015).²³

To truly understand this situation, we should consider how it connects to the educational policies of leading capitalist nations. Many of these policies are tied to neoliberal ideals that emphasize economic efficiency and measurable results, often at the expense of a more rounded

²² Nussbaum, M. C. (2010). *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton University Press.

²³ Biesta, Gert. 2015. *Shaping the Future of Education: Comparative Perspectives on the Role of the Arts in Education*. New York: Routledge.

educational experience (Giroux, 2014).²⁴ By exploring these connections, we can have meaningful discussions about the challenges education faces today and appreciate its vital role in shaping individuals and society.

Neoliberalism in Brazil, as in other countries, promotes privatization, reduces the state's role in the economy, and values the free market. This environment significantly influences the organization and priorities of education. According to Dardot and Laval (2016, p. 32), "Neoliberalism seeks to transform all spheres of social life into commodities, including education." Consequently, there is an increasing emphasis on developing technical competencies and skills immediately applicable to the job market, often at the expense of the humanities and social sciences, such as philosophy.²⁵

The contemporary capitalist system places a high premium on efficiency and productivity, often leading to the perception that philosophy and humanities are less "useful" regarding their market value. This narrow focus on utility overlooks the profound contributions that philosophy can make to society. Philosophy challenges the one-dimensional and pragmatic perspectives commonly associated with neoliberal thought by not only exploring the "how" behind social and economic phenomena but also delving into the "why," thereby providing deeper insights into human existence and societal structures (Taylor 2007, 42).²⁶

In a neoliberal framework, the archetype of a desirable citizen is primarily a wealth generator. This outlook dismisses the importance of empathy, social responsibility, and the

²⁴ Giroux, H. A. (2014). *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*. Haymarket Books.

²⁵ Dardot, Pierre, & Laval, Christian. (2016). *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*. Verso.

²⁶ Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Harvard University Press.

ethical reflections that philosophy nurtures (Giroux 2014, 172).²⁷ The critical inquiry philosophy often contradicts the interests of capital, prioritizing profit over the common good. As a result, in market-oriented societies, philosophy is frequently undervalued; it is perceived as subversive because its insights do not yield immediate, quantifiable returns on investment. Furthermore, philosophical discourse can challenge dominant narratives, question existing paradigms, and advocate for alternative ways of thinking that often oppose prevailing market ideologies (Žizek 2012, 57).²⁸

Despite these challenges, philosophy holds the potential to contribute significantly to social equity and progress. It cultivates a reflective citizenry engaged in self-interest and the welfare of others, promoting social justice and inclusivity (Fraser 2013, 128).²⁹ By fostering critical thinking skills, philosophy prepares individuals to navigate complex ethical dilemmas and engage thoughtfully in political and social debates (Mills 2000, 3).³⁰ This crucial role in education underscores the necessity of philosophical reflection in an increasingly complex world.

The importance of philosophy in shaping informed, conscious citizens cannot be overstated. Theodor Adorno articulates this sentiment succinctly, stating, “Philosophy is essential for the formation of critical and conscious citizens, capable of analyzing and

²⁷ Giroux, Henry. 2014. *The Trope of the Multitude in the New World Order: The Legal and Political Status of the Migrant*. In *In the Shadow of the Net: Globalization, Export Processing Zones and the New Economy*. Edited by K. B. Kwan and J. M. Tarleton. New York: Thinking Forward Press.

²⁸ Žižek, Slavoj. 2012. *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. Verso.

²⁹ Fraser, Nancy. 2013. *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*. Verso.

³⁰ Mills, C. Wright. 2000. *The Sociological Imagination*. 40th Anniversary Edition. New York: Oxford University Press.

questioning reality” (Adorno 1995, 68).³¹ Thus, philosophy not only enhances individual understanding but also contributes meaningfully to the fabric of society by encouraging active participation in democratic processes and ethical considerations.

The intrinsic value of philosophy is unquestionable not only because of its academic relevance but also because it represents the tool that underpins social development, as it presents questions related to fundamental and existential questions. Therefore, this value cannot be called into question and relegated to a space that is not very relevant in Brazilian education. Philosophy should occupy a primordial and prominent role in school curricula.

Given the current landscape, we must ask ourselves: Is there still room for teaching philosophy in Brazil today? What role does this discipline play within the context of national primary education? Is there any space left for philosophical inquiry in a neoliberal, technocratic, and pragmatic world?

The challenging scenario may initially lead us to a rather pessimistic conclusion. However, rather than providing answers, let us focus on the right questions: What are the challenges and opportunities for philosophy in an educational and social context that increasingly prioritizes immediacy and pragmatism (Macedo, 2020)³²?

Additionally, how should teachers navigate the limited space available to them? How can this restricted environment be transformed into a platform to support philosophical ideas? Furthermore, what methodological approach should be adopted in this confined space? We

³¹ Adorno, Theodor. 1995. *The Jargon of Authenticity*. Translated by Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will. Stanford University Press.

³² Macedo, D. (2020). *The Role of Philosophy in Contemporary Education*. *Brazilian Journal of Philosophy*.

must pursue a path of resilience, a struggle rooted in foundational principles (Gadamer, 2004).³³

³³ Gadamer, H.G. (2004). Truth and Method. Continuum.

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