Arthur Coelho Bezerra
From critical information literacy to a critical theory of information

Abstract:

In addition to proposing a reflective and revisionist analysis of information literacy conventions and institutional norms, critical information literacy studies assume a practical commitment to engage in the struggle against the power structures that support the dominant production and dissemination of information, creating obstacles to autonomy and social emancipation. This commitment is based on Paulo Freire's pedagogical perspective of praxis, which has in its (often overlooked) roots the critical fortune of Marxist historical materialism – which, in turn, also underpins the critical theory of the Frankfurt School philosophers. With this epistemological recognition in mind, this article presents a proposal for a critical theory of information conceived from a mediation between critical information literacy studies, critical pedagogy and critical theory, in an attempt to strengthen the theoretical-methodological perspective that guides the pedagogical praxis of such studies in the field of Library and Information Science.

Keywords: Critical Information Literacy, Critical Information Theory, Critical Theory, Critical Theory of Information, Critical Pedagogy

Agenda:

Author:

Prof. Dr. Arthur Coelho Bezerra

- Instituto Brasileiro de Informação em Ciência e Tecnologia, Rua Lauro Müller, 455, 4o andar, Botafogo, 22290-160, Rio de Janeiro – RJ, Brasil.
- ✉ arthurbezerra@ibict.br, 💻 escritos.ibict.br

The weapon of criticism certainly cannot replace criticism of weapons;
material force must be overthrown by material force;
but theory, too, becomes a material force once it seizes the masses.
Theory is capable of seizing the masses once it demonstrates ad hominem,
and it demonstrates ad hominem once it becomes radical.
To be radical is to grasp the matter at the root.
But for man the root is man himself.
Karl Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: An Introduction

1. Introduction

Critical information literacy studies often approach this concept through two theoretical keys: one of them is based on a reflective and revisionist analysis of information literacy conventions and institutional norms, while the other considers information's political nature and, by doing so, encourages the practical commitment of engagement in the struggle against the power structures that support the dominant production and dissemination of information, creating obstacles to autonomy and social emancipation. In the work of critical information literacy theorists Michelle Simmons (2005), John J. Doherty and Kevin Ketchner (2005), James Elmborg (2006, 2012), Heidi Jacobs (2008) and Eamon Tewell (2015), this commitment is based on Brazilian thinker and educator Paulo Freire's pedagogical perspective of *praxis*, which he sums up as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 2005, 51).

Although these authors, largely under the influence of Freire, understand that critical information literacy involves stimulating social consciousness and exercising theoretically informed praxis, the critical fortune present in the thoughts of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, György Lukács, Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci and other Marxist thinkers, such as the Frankfurtian philosophers that developed a critical theory with its grassroots in Marx and Engels' historical materialism, seems to go unnoticed, or to only appear in the theoretical foundation of critical information literacy through Freirian echoes.

Admitting that the creators of historical materialism, as well as many of their followers, have properly addressed themes such as critical consciousness, praxis, ideology, reification and class struggle, which served as a direct inspiration for Freire's debate, it becomes clear that the approximation of critical information literacy with critical theory is capable of giving depth to understandings about the perspectives of praxis and critical consciousness that are embedded in the concept. With this epistemological approach in mind, this article presents a proposal for a critical theory of information conceived from a mediation between critical information literacy studies, critical pedagogy and critical theory, in an attempt to strengthen the theoretical-methodological perspective that guides the pedagogical praxis of such studies in the field of Library and Information Science.

2. Getting to know critical information literacy

Just like Claude Shannon's mathematical theory of communication and Alan Turing's theoretical computer science, the concept of information literacy traces back to war. It is war and the need for an industrial apparatus to support it that creates an environment in which the management of information resources becomes pivotal. It is not for any other reason that the term *information literacy* appears first in a government report, rather than in an academic paper.

As well as Shannon and Turing during World War II, Paul Zurkowski worked for the US government (in his case, during the cold war) and stood out for his contribution to the country's industrial sovereignty. In the famous document in which information literacy is presented, published in 1974 by the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (of which Zurkowski was president), he strives to identify private sector information resources while searches for examples of changes in the traditional role of libraries, and wraps it up by suggesting the implementation of a national program of information literacy "to facilitate the recognition and maintenance of the mutually supportive roles of industry and libraries" (Zurkowski, 1974, 2).

Zurkowski's pretensions to disseminate information literacy, however, would only take shape in the late 1980s, when the American Library Association (ALA), fed by the perspectives of *lifelong learning* for individuals in the so-called information age, publishes the report that would become the basis of the dissemination of information literacy as a worldwide movement (Dudziak, 2016, 39), bringing the term closer to a more post-modern, post-structural and - what it turned out to be - a quite neoliberal frame (Seale, 2013). Brought to the public in the same year that the cold war starts to cool down, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the final report of ALA's Presidential Committee on Information Literacy proposes a definition for the term, related to the skills necessary "to find, evaluate, and use information effectively", and advises schools and colleges to integrate the concept of information literacy into their learning programs "to take advantage of the opportunities inherent within the information society" (ALA, 1989). Such concept involves the efficient use of information for problem solving, decision making, maximizing productivity and insertion in the labor market, with a proposal of lifelong learning for eternal competitiveness of the workforce, all values linked to what might be called "ALA ideology":

> Out of the super-abundance of available information, people need to be able to obtain specific information to meet a wide range of personal and business needs. These needs are largely driven either by the desire for personal growth and advancement or by the rapidly changing social, political, and economic environments of American society. What is true today is often outdated tomorrow. A good job today may be obsolete next year. To promote economic independence and quality of existence, there is a lifelong need for being informed and up-to-date (ALA, 1989)

Over the past thirty years, critiques of the neoliberal outlines of ALA's document have been made in the academic field of Library and Information Science, but only in this millennium those critiques gathered forces around the concept of *critical information literacy*, through the work of some of its pioneering authors such as Simmons (2005), Doherty and Ketchner (2005), Elmborg (2006, 2012) and Jacobs (2008). All of these authors are harshly critical of the concept of information literacy adopted by ALA - which also includes the *Information Literacy Competency Standards* published in 2000 by the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL, a division of ALA). Simmons (2005, 299) criticizes the reduction of information literacy to a set of skills presented as neutral or merely functional, noting that ACRL approach to information literacy "seems based on a positivist epistemology in which seekers can discover a unified 'Truth'". For Elmborg (2012, 87), "much of the rhetoric surrounding information literacy resonates with the language of productivity, and the Information Literacy Competency Standards have been rightly called to task for turning the research process into a formulaic and production-oriented concept". Taking into account the fact that information literacy "operates within a sociopolitical context and is thus politically charged", Jacobs (2008, 258) argues that "when we limit its potentials to outcomes and standards, we run the risk of minimizing the complex situatedness of information literacy and diminishing – if not negating – its inherent political nature". According to Eamon Tewell (2015, 25), such critiques provide the context necessary for introducing critical information literacy, once "the literature of critical information literacy questions many widely held assumptions about IL and the very nature of education in library settings, broaching such topics as the impossibility of pedagogical neutrality and the incompatibility of skills-based instruction with student engagement in the learning process".

What all the authors mentioned above have in common is the influence of the work of Paulo Freire, the most famous Brazilian educator, internationally recognized as the father of critical pedagogy. In his most famous book, Freire analyses and criticizes what he sees as a model of "banking" education, "in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" (Freire, 2005, 72).

> In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the teacher's existence – but, unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher (Freire, 2005, 72)

With ALA definition of information literacy in mind, Elmborg (2006, 193) believes that, "perhaps not accidentally, Freire equates the common library functions of receiving, filing, collecting, and cataloguing with the banking concept". Years later, he insists that, "in focusing on information as a tangible "thing," and information literacy as the set of skills for acquiring that 'thing', we (perhaps unconsciously) have focused on teaching students to more efficiently 'bank' knowledge" (Elmborg, 2012, 88). For Freire, Elmborg says, developing reading and writing skills doesn't solve the central problems of literacy: "in order to learn to read and write, these learners needed to develop a consciousness, a literate awareness of the power of having a mind, of having thoughts of one's own. They needed to move beyond thinking of the world as existing in a reified reality that they could experience but not change" (Elmborg, 2012, 90). Paraphrasing Marx's well-known (and poorly understood) analogy between opium and religion, he says:

> For Freire, consciousness is central to literacy. In articulating a concept like the "banking concept," Freire wants to challenge the idea that we can deposit knowledge in people's minds while leaving them relatively unchanged in terms of how they see themselves in the world. For Freire, this "depositing" represents the ultimate fraud, a sort of parlor trick that separates real human growth from the accumulation of knowledge as thing. This trick is necessary to keep learners from asking fundamental questions about where they stand in this world and how it might be different. Viewed this way, "banking education" (rather than religion) is the opiate of the people (Elmborg, 2012, 90)

Doherty and Ketchner argue that "Paulo Freire would probably reply that information is at the core of education, and that it has a democratic, liberatory power that will give all members of society the equality of access to society's power" (2005, 1); on the other hand, dialectically, "Freire argues that education can also be used to foster critical reflection and action", portraying the banking concept of education "as one that seeks to maintain the status quo" (2005, 3). The authors thus conclude that "Freire's critical form of educational theory suggests that educators (and we include librarians here) need to first engage their students in the contexts of the students' experiences" (2005, 1).

Elmborg agrees that, instead of focusing on knowledge acquisition, students should identify and engage to significant problems in the world. "By developing critical consciousness", he says, "students learn to take control of their lives and their own learning to become active agents, asking and answering questions that matter to them and to the world around them" (Elmborg, 2006, 193). In this sense, "the real task for libraries in treating information literacy seriously lies not in defining it or describing it, but in developing a critical practice of librarianship – a theoretically informed praxis" (Elmborg, 2006, 198). On the same note, Jacobs (2008, 2) reiterate "Elmborg's insistence for developing a critical practice of librarianship and a theoretically informed praxis". These arguments are in line with the perspective of a critical information literacy that not only points out the problems regarding the concept of information literacy, but also "considers in what ways librarians may encourage students to engage with and act upon the power structures underpinning information's production and dissemination" (Tewell, 2015, 25).

Nevertheless, if the authors listed here agree with the methodology of proposing a critical diagnosis of the real oppression of individuals (in Freire's case, focusing on the educational field), and if they also agree with the need to develop a critical consciousness to guide praxis towards the emancipation of this oppression, it's weird, to say the least, that none of them mention the works of Marx, Engels or of Frankfurt philosophers like Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, who, in the 20th century, developed a critical theory of society based on Marxist historical materialism (Honneth, 1999). On the contrary, the name of Marx seems to have the ability to scare even the American readers of Paulo Freire, as suggested by the introduction of Donaldo Macedo for the edition, in English, of the 30th anniversary of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

> When I was working with Freire on the book *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, I asked a colleague whom I considered to be politically aggressive and to have a keen understanding of Freire's work to read the manuscript. Yet, during a discussion we had about this, she asked me, a bit irritably, "Why do you and Paulo insist on using Marxist jargon? Many readers who may enjoy reading Paulo may be put off by the jargon" (Donaldo Macedo *apud* Freire, 2005, 20).

Macedo believes that one of the strong reasons for what he sees as a "misinterpretation of Freire's philosophical and revolutionary pedagogical proposals" lies in the "disarticulation of Freire's thinking from his enormous debt to a philosophical tradition that included Marx, Gramsci, Hegel, and Sartre among others" (Donaldo Macedo *apud* Freire, 2005, 25). In agreement with this statement, it is possible to argue that the theoretical and methodological fortune of Marx and Engels, as well as that of the philosophers who structured a critical theory on Marxist ground, allows us not only to develop the notions of critical consciousness, praxis and emancipation that underlie Freire's work, but also to envision a proposal for a *critical theory of information* (Bezerra, 2019, 14) that relies on critical theory as its compass rose, while the concept of critical information literacy becomes one of its cardinal points – the one that points to praxis.

3. Getting along with Marx's influence on Freire

A review of the Brazilian academic literature on critical information literacy (Bezerra & Beloni, 2019) shows that the first scientific work dedicated to the theme in Freire's country dates back to 2015. Since then, the affinities between the theoretical and methodological perspectives of Freire and Marx and the indirect contribution of Frankfurtian critical theory to the outlines of the concept are already highlighted (Bezerra, 2015). Later publications in the Brazilian area of Library and Information Science will point to critical pedagogy and critical theory as the pillars of critical information literacy (see, for instance, Bezerra, Schneider & Brisola, 2017).

In North American publications of the field, however, it is possible to identify approaches to critical information literacy with critical theory, but without mentioning the names of Marxist philosophers who established critical theory as a school of thought. Elmborg (2006) and Tewell (2015) use expressions like "critical literacy theory" or "critical theory to libraries", while Doherty and Ketchner describe critical theory as "a sociological view that looks at the world through a lens that embodies issues of power and privilege in social relationships" (which is accurate anyway). The approximation of Marx and Freire's thought is mentioned *en passant* by Elmborg (2012, 89), when stating that "Freire's pedagogy also derives from his Christian perspective, which drove his concern for the poor and which he coupled with a Marxist philosophy of class and power".

The erasure of the epistemological matrices of critical theory in American scientific literature is in many ways related to a series of social and political transformations around the world. It starts at the end of the 19th century, with the formation of large workers' unions, and reaches its greatest expression in the Marxist inspired revolutions of the 20th century: first, with the Russian Revolution of Vladimir Lenin in the Soviet Union, in 1917, and later with the Chinese revolution of Mao Tsé-Tung, in 1949, and the Cuban revolution of Fidel Castro, Ernesto "Che" Guevara and others, in 1959. In that period of cold war, the dispute between the capitalist bloc and the socialist bloc gives rise to an intense ideological campaign, in which the US government tries to suppress what they called the communist threat (including Marxist governments and Marxist thinkers). This is the scenario that the Frankfurtian philosophers encounter when they arrive in the United States during World War II, as refugees from the German Nazi regime. It is on American soil that Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse develop their critical theory, whose starting point is the work of Marx (Honneth, 1999; Fuchs, 2015).

> Critical theory was used as a camouflage term when the Frankfurt theorists were in exile from the Nazis in the United States, where they were concerned about being exposed as communist and Marxian thinkers and therefore took care in the categories they employed. Some definitions of critical theory couple the usage of this term exclusively to the Frankfurt School or the Habermasian Frankfurt School (Fuchs, 2015, 1)

So, although one of the main reasons for the erasure of Marx's contributions to both critical theory and Paulo Freire's thought can be understood in the light of the historical context, this in no way justifies that scientists, theorists and researchers, once aware of that context, carry on with such a practice. On the contrary, there are strong reasons to believe that the study of Marxist conceptions of terms used by Freire (and appropriated by the exponents of critical information literacy), such as praxis and critical consciousness, can contribute to the deepening and density of these terms.

As seen before, Elmborg and Jacobs are in sync with defending the need to develop a "theoretically informed praxis". Elmborg (2012, 89) writes that "Heidi Jacobs has perceptively argued that information literacy instruction needs to develop a critical praxis precisely to reposition the student in relation to what Freire calls 'critical consciousness'". He calls this theoretically informed praxis a "philosophical evolution", with which "libraries can no longer be seen as value-neutral cultural space, and librarians cannot be defined as value-neutral information providers"; instead, he continues, "librarians will be involved with the daily struggle of translation between the organized conceptions of knowledge and the efforts of all students to engage that knowledge" (Elmborg, 2006, 198). On the same page, Jacobs (2008, 261) argues that "in terms of information literacy pedagogy, one of the best ways for us to encourage students to be engaged learners is for us to become engaged learners, delve deeply into our own problem posing, and embody the kind of engagement we want to see in our students". For her, "praxis – the interplay of theory and practice – is vital to information literacy since it simultaneously strives to ground theoretical ideas into practicable activities and use experiential knowledge to rethink and re-envision theoretical concepts" (2008, 15). According to Tewell (2015, 33), "significant overlap exists in the critical information literacy literature in regards to theory and practice, and appropriately so, as critical pedagogy calls for the continual reciprocity of both theory and practice to form praxis".

The conceptual framework on which the idea of praxis is built in Paulo Freire's work is the same that serves as the ground for the philosophical building of critical theory: the historical and dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels. The concept of praxis is of fundamental importance for the construction of the Marxist philosophical system, whose formulation refers to the writings of his youth. Since the *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, when Marx is still in his 20s, he already understands that, differently from the animal that "is immediately one with its life activity", the human being "makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life activity" (Marx, 1959). In a general sense, praxis represents the interaction between conscience and activity, configuring a theoretical-practical cycle in which theory is constantly put to the test in practice, and the reflection upon the contradictions between theory and practice stimulates new theories to be put in practice, making this dialectical movement the engine of history itself (Bezerra, 2019, 51).

With this understanding, Marx is able to preserve Hegel's historical and dialectical point of view, that sees reality as a historical product of contradictions, conflicts and resolutions. However, instead of following the idealistic vision that seek for values, morals and the Truth in a metaphysical plan, he observes that it is from material reality that individuals create their institutions and their gods, and that morals, law, politics and economics are forged by men and women in real circumstances. As he writes in one of his last publications in life, "men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living" (Marx, 1937).

In short, Marxist historical materialism sees that it is the social being that determines consciousness, and not the other way around, as German philosophers such as Hegel and Kant supposed. The distance from Marx to those who preceded him is clear in his eleven *Theses on Feuerbach*, written in 1845. On the eighth thesis, he affirms that "social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory astray into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice" (Marx, 1976). On the second thesis, Marx is even more emphatic:

> The question whether objective [*gegenständliche*] truth can be attained by human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. It is in practice that man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness [*Diesseitigkeit*] of his thinking. The dispute over the reality or unreality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question (MARX, 1976, 62).

Any Freire's reader can see how the ideas present in Marx's theses influenced not only the notion of praxis of the Brazilian thinker, but also his own inclination to make his activity, both as a theorist and as an educator, an instrument of engagement in the struggle against oppression. The critical pedagogy developed by Freire not only offers a diagnosis of the Brazilian educational system, pointing out the obstacles that the project of the

"banking" education imposes for social emancipation of individuals, but also proposes a model of literacy centered on the reality of the students, constantly put to the test in practice. According to Freire, "if humankind produce social reality (which in the "inversion of the praxis" turns back upon them and conditions them), then transforming that reality is an historical task, a task for humanity" (Freire, 2005, 51).

> Reality which becomes oppressive results in the contradistinction of men as oppressors and oppressed. The latter, whose task it is to struggle for their liberation together with those who show true solidarity, must acquire a critical awareness of oppression through the praxis of this struggle.
> One of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human being's consciousness. Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. (FREIRE, 2005, 51).

Although the arguments presented above are enough to identify Freire's theoretical affiliation with historical materialism, it is valid to close this section citing Marx's third thesis, which criticizes the absence of praxis in what he calls Feuerbach's "contemplative materialism": "The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that men themselves change circumstances and that the educator himself must be educated". He finishes the thesis by saying that "the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionizing practice*" (MARX, 1976), something that is of great inspiration for the Freirian pedagogical proposal: "the praxis is the new *raison d'etre* of the oppressed; and the revolution, which inaugurates the historical moment of this *raison d'etre*, is not viable apart from their concomitant conscious involvement" (Freire, 2005, 66).

4. Getting ready for a critical theory of information

Just like Claude Shannon's mathematical theory of communication, Alan Turing's theoretical computer science and Paul Zurkowski's concept of information literacy, Horkheimer's and Adorno's critical theory traces back to war – but in a different way. Unlike the prestigious American scientists, the aforementioned Frankfurtian philosophers did not work for the government of their country during the Second World War; instead, since Hitler came to power in 1933, they were persecuted in Germany (both for their Jewish ancestry and for their theoretical affiliations to Marxism), taking refuge first in Geneva and, in 1937, in New York, welcomed by Columbia University.

It is already on American soil that Horkheimer, then director of the Institute for Social Research (*Institut für Sozialforschung*, founded at the University of Frankfurt in 1923 and known to the world academic community as the Frankfurt School), publishes "Traditional theory and critical theory", which becomes a kind of inaugural document of critical theory (Honneth, 1999). In the article, Horkheimer argues that the mainstream of modern Western thought sees scientific knowledge as a way of understanding reality to predict events and, based on this prophetic character, to guide action. That is the positivist perspective of what the author calls "traditional theory", characteristic of a form of scientism rooted in Descartes' thought that spans the entire period of modernity and which is characterized by conceiving reality based on dualities between subject and object, theory and practice, individual and society.

> The inability to grasp in thought the unity of theory and practice and the limitation of the concept of necessity to inevitable events are both due, from the viewpoint of theory of knowledge, to the Cartesian dualism of thought and being. That dualism is congenial both to nature and to bourgeois society in so far as the latter resembles a natural mechanism. The idea of a theory which becomes a genuine force, consisting in the self-awareness of the subjects of a great historical revolution, is beyond the grasp of a mentality typified by such a dualism (Horkheimer, 1975, 231).

Critical thinking, on the other hand, "is the function neither of the isolated individual nor of a sum-total of individuals", says Horkheimer; "Its subject is rather a definite individual in his real relation to other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class, and, finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature" (Horkheimer, 1975, 210-211). Instead of being numbed by the "alienation, which finds expression in philosophical terminology as the separation of value and research, knowledge and action, and other polarities [that] protects the savant from the tensions we have indicated and provides an assured framework for his activity", critical thinking is motivated "by the effort really to transcend the tension and to abolish the opposition between the individual's purposefulness, spontaneity, and rationality, and those work-process relationships on which society is built" (Horkheimer, 1975, 208-210).

In his attempt to reflect on how the notion of critical theory could be applied to information studies, Christian Fuchs (2009) brings out the dividing line established by Horkheimer between traditional theory and critical theory, the first being occupied with "administrative research" to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of actions and processes (as seen in the notion of information literacy). A critical theory of information, he says, "must study not just the role of information and information concepts in society, academia, nature, culture, etc, but how it is related to processes of oppression, exploitation, and domination, which implies a normative judgment in solidarity with the dominated and for the abolishment of domination" (Fuchs, 2009, 245). In this sense, as Horkheimer (1975, 281) points out, "the Marxist categories of class, exploitation, surplus value, profit, pauperization, and breakdown are elements in a conceptual whole, and the meaning of this whole is to be sought not in the preservation of contemporary society but in its transformation into the right kind of society". It is this Marxist grammar that allows Fuchs to define a critical theory of information in the following terms:

> Critical information theory is an endeavour that focuses ontologically on the analysis of information in the context of domination, asymmetrical power relations, exploitation, oppression, and control by employing epistemologically all theoretical and/or empirical means necessary for doing so in order to contribute at the praxeological level to the establishment of a participatory, co-operative society. (...) Critical information theory needs to be aware of economic, political, and cultural demands that it needs to make in struggles for ending domination and oppression, and of the unifying role that the economy and class play in these demands and struggles (Fuchs, 2009, 243).

We can conclude that critical information literacy, Freire's critical pedagogy, Marx's philosophy, Horkheimer's critical theory and Fuchs' proposal of a critical information theory have two main things in common: not only they are interested in analyzing the dominance relations that arise from the contradiction between the oppressors and the oppressed, as Freire says, but they also have a normative dimension that pushes theory into practice, whether we are talking about Marx's notion of praxis, Freire's pedagogical praxis or Elmborg's theoretically informed praxis - which turn out to be basically the same thing. For such a movement to happen, it is important that a critical theory of information (such as the one presented here) takes on the methodological challenge of proposing interdisciplinary diagnoses that focus on the informational environment and the perspectives of production, circulation, mediation, organization, recovery and accessibility of information (Bezerra, 2019, 28), identifying not only the potentialities in the information environment for human emancipation, but also, and above all, the obstacles to such emancipation (Bezerra & Almeida, 2020, 10).

5. A dangerous conclusion

We have seen that the concept of critical information literacy aims to "encourage students to engage with and act upon the power structures underpinning information's production and dissemination" (Tewell, 2015, 25). Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, as himself points out, is a "humanist and libertarian pedagogy" that seeks to help "the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation" (Freire, 2005, 54). This can be summed up by Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, carved into his grave as an epitaph: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it". The idea of praxis presented by both thinkers, therefore, can show the path that leads critical information literacy to a proposal for a critical theory of information (Bezerra, 2019).

If we admit that the notion of critical information literacy points to perspectives of an emancipatory praxis at the heart of the informational ecosystem, we can assume that a critical theory of information, harvested in the fields of Frankfurtian critical theory and Freirian critical pedagogy, can be forged through a theoretical-methodological program that finds in critical information literacy a reinforcement for the perspectives of social transformation and the fight against oppression in the dominant regimes of information. In this sense, parodying Marx and Engels, we can say that a specter is haunting the concept of critical information literacy — the specter of critical theory of information.

Imagining a "spectrum" is something that brings a sense of fear and apprehension (especially among Catholics), and the German authors were certainly aware of this when using that metaphor in opening their *Communist Manifesto*. Like the ghost of communism, the idea of critical consciousness sounds dangerous in the ear of modern capitalist societies. It is not by chance that Freire, already in the preface to his *magnum opus*, comments that, "not infrequently, training course participants call attention to "the danger of *conscientização*" in a way that reveals their own fear of freedom. Critical consciousness, they say, is anarchic. Others add that critical consciousness may lead to disorder" (Freire, 2005, 35).

The term *conscientização*, as explained on the footnote by the translator, "refers to learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Myra Bergman Ramos *apud* Freire, 2005, 35). This detailed explanation of Freire's understanding of critical consciousness shows why societies built on class, gender and ethnic oppression fear its spectrum and, even worse, its consequences. Nevertheless, Freire (2005, 35) also mentions that, in those same training courses, which analyse the role of *conscientização* "in actual experimentation with a truly liberating education", there are some participants who decide to raise their voice and confess: "Why deny it? I was afraid of freedom. I am no longer afraid!". One could say that these people probably inferred Marx and Engels' argument that proletarians (and, we could say, oppressed groups in general) have nothing to lose but their chains.

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