**Book Review: Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire**

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**Introduction**

A provocative image graces the cover of my copy of Pedagogy of the Oppressed. It is of a well-used pencil held with twine to an elongated wooden triangle complete with a thin, curved, metal loop affixed at the base. This unquestionable resemblance to a trigger guard completes the image and thus renders the overall likeness to that of a gun. From this cover photograph (See Appendix for image), you feel that education is powerful, volatile; it can be construed as dangerous, and potentially even violent. This is a good stance from which to approach Paulo Freire’s seminal work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, published in English in 1970. Although, the original Spanish language cover image (See Appendix for image), from 1968, of a child looking up, wide-eyed and deeply human is an equally apt approach. The combination of these two images sets the stage for the philosophical feast and empowering practicality of the beautifully humanizing and powerful constructs that is Paulo Freire’s radical framework for education, commonly referred to as critical pedagogy.

**Summary of argument.**

This work is Freire’s call to a critical consciousness, *conscientização*, based off his observations, activities, and studies. His is a cry for awareness and change from the broken, de-humanizing nature of education methods that are currently holding people in an *object status*, to a new way of releasing one another to be increasingly human (*Subject status*) through a dialogical paradigm resulting in praxis: reflection and action. Ultimately, it is a call to view students as co-creators in the learning process.

**About the author.**

Paulo Freire was born to a middle-class family 1921 in Brazil, though due to external circumstances he struggled through famine as well as familial and educational difficulties. Successfully navigating these challenges, he grew to become the author of multiple works, including the book being examined here. Freire was a revolutionary educational theorist whose model and ideas have reached around the globe, influencing K12, community-based, and higher education, including social and political movements. His method of conscientization was developed as he worked with adult illiterates in North-East Brazil. Eventually, he was imprisoned following a coup d’état in 1964 for his method, which the right-wing dictator deemed subversive. (Featherstone, 2020). Following his release from prison, he went into exile in neighboring nations, eventually serving as a visiting professor at Harvard, followed by working for the Office of Education for the World Council of Churches in Geneva. Freire finally returned to his beloved Brazil working with adult literary under the Workers’ Party before being appointed as Sao Paulo’s Sectary of Education in 1988 when the party took national power. (Freire Institute, 2023). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was his first published book, the work experiences that seeded its ideas provoked his imprisonment, yet these same ideas have catalyzed a global examination of education practices that continue to bear influence today.

**Summary of contents.**

**In a dense four chapters, Freire takes the reader from his justification of this pedagogy of the oppressed, through an exploration of educational relationships, into a closer look at what he deems the ‘essence of education,’ which is foundationally dialogical, and finally, a contrasting view of cultural action as developed from a dialogical and anti-dialogical framework.**

**Chapter one contrasts humanization, the vocation of people to become more fully human, with the distortion of that, in which people’s humanity is stolen through dehumanizing practices. Thus, building the framework to justify this pedagogy of the oppressed which leads to life-affirming humanization for all. Freire acknowledges that both the stealer and the one stolen from suffer from the dehumanization. This means that the goal is not simply for the oppressed to triumph over the oppressor, thereby becoming oppressors themselves, “but rather restorers of the humanity of both” (p.18). This chapter investigates oppression and the relationship it has with the oppressors, including subtle manifestations of oppression through false generosity and false charity. This artificial piety keeps the subjugated in their place of need and lack of power. Freire brings us to examine the oppressed and their relationship with oppression and freedom, noting that the oppressed have long internalized the ideas and images of the oppressor and are genuinely fearful of freedom. And thus, freedom requires them to reject the safety of what they have known and grow into greater comfort with the ideas of “autonomy and responsibility” (p.21). This process is not an easy path and will not be actualized if the underlying layers of causes and constraints are ignored. “Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one” (p.23). And it requires the oppressed to first recognize that the world as they know it is not static, they can act in it and on it to bring about change. But this recognition must lead to action or only frustration will ensue. Solidarity is needed to accomplish this feat, true solidarity, which is steeped in “risk*y* acts of love” (p.24) and praxis. The aim of pedagogy of the oppressed is this call to liberation, not as a gift bestowed from one party to the other, but rather as a mutual process of transformation.**

**Chapter two, on the teacher-student relationship, announces that, “Education is suffering from narration sickness” (p.44). Here, Freire introduces the lifeless nature of the ‘banking’ concept of education in which the teacher has all the knowledge and is charged with the responsibility of ‘depositing’ or narrating that knowledge to the students. As an alternative, he declares, “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p.45). The urge to fill receptacles with information must be replaced with the impulse to engage students in critical thinking. In libertarian education, the teacher is not the opposite of the student, but rather the contradiction is removed and is replaced by a mutuality in the learning environment. Freire postulates that just like liberation cannot be a gift bestowed upon the oppressed, knowledge cannot be bestowed upon the ignorant. Problem-posing education is offered as the antidote to traditional narrative education structures. It is a way to practice fostering the core of consciousness and resisting the pull to monologuing communiqués. It invites everyone to participate in the necessary act of cognition as mutual partners in learning and disassemble the vertical nature of simple information transmission. Active engagement in this manner reminds the teacher-students, and the student-teachers that education is a practice of freedom, and therefore, “denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world” (p.54) they are learning in. This shift from narrative to problem-posing education is not an easy adjustment. Thinking critically and gaining awareness of the myths and barriers that have dehumanized us is a substantial struggle, and we each need to recognize that the battle to be human is not to be underestimated. Yet, problem-posing education is positioned to release hope into this struggle as it is rooted in the dynamic, changeable, present and leans into a revolutionary future.**

**Chapter three centers on dialogue as the encounter between teacher and student and between the teacher-student and the world and is the crux of critical education. Freire introduces six components and defining features that are necessary for dialogue to exist. *Love* is the first of these components and is considered to be concurrently the foundation and substance of dialogue. “If I do not love the world- if I do not love life- if I do not love people- I cannot enter into dialogue” (p.63). Freire’s second component is *humility*. He continues, saying that dialogue is broken when those involved are not humble. An honest and realistic posture of being a learner regardless of your assigned position is critical. “…There are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know” (p.63). Thirdly, dialogue requires *faith*, yet not naivety. “…Faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human…faith in people is *a priori* requirement for dialogue” (p.63). Upon this triune base, dialogue then grows sideways in expression of mutual *trust*. “Trust is established by dialogue,” (p.64) and should it flounder it exposes the lack in the preceding three elements. Next is *hope*. Freire roots hope “in men’s incompletion” (p.64) and subsequent communal search for wholeness. He stresses that hope is not an idle waiting, but rather the phenomenon of being “moved by hope” (p.65) Dialogue in a hopeless climate will be “empty, sterile, bureaucratic and tedious” (p.65). Lastly, *critical thinking* is presented as the capstone of true dialogue. This type of thinking braids three strands: the first, an inseparable cohesion of the world and its people, the second, the perception of reality as an ongoing process of transformation and not a static condition, and thirdly, is intrinsically united with action. Upon integration of these six components, the “fundamental objective… to fight alongside people for the recovery of *their* stolen humanity, not to ‘win *them* over to the *educator’s* side,’” (p.68) (Italics mine, adjusting for context) can be actualized. With an eye on generative themes Freire now walks the reader through the investigation process and the investigator’s role in surveying, deciphering, midwifing, and fostering what emerges through an intentional problem posing method. The compelling examples of his methods at work exemplify the essential piece here is for, “the people to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades” (p.97).**

**Chapter four demonstrates the different expressions in the cultural action points of the two theories contrasted throughout the prior chapters of the book of anti-dialogical and dialogical positions. Freire insists that dialogue is the necessary piece for the oppressed people’s awareness to lead to a revolution and not a military coup. In the same manner, the earlier the dialogue begins the truer the revolution. One of the powerful transformations that is taking place in a revolution is the internal status of people moving from being objects to being aware of their ‘object-ness,’ then growing into being ‘subjects in expectancy’ and finally affirming their own status as subjects. The theory of antidialogical action enacts oppression through four distinct characteristics: conquest, divide and rule, manipulation, and cultural invasion. The theory of dialogical action liberates through the opposite characteristics of cooperation, unity, organization, and cultural synthesis.**

**Strength.**

Of all the powerful ideas within this book, the one that will outlast social constructs, reigning ideologies, pedological fads and focus is the fundamental exploration of the nature of the teacher-student relationship. A willingness to explore this foundational structure within our social fabric and uncover assumptions that may be counterproductive to our ultimate goals will continue to speak to generations of learners and educators as has been evidenced by its continued presence today after more than 50 years. The specific outworking of what adjustments will need to be made to cast learning more into an environment that fosters human flourishing will shift depending on the barriers, oppressive strategies, and powers in each community and age. The need to critically examine, reflect, and act on the nature of this dynamic communal space will remain. The call to work for the humanization of our world is a compelling call that Freire invites us all into.

**Weakness.**

 Freire unashamedly champions a complete revolution to bring about the transformation which he identifies is essential for unfettered humanity. This unapologetically high standard can be debilitating for many, if not most, who first pick up *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Though Freire would likely deem it unnecessary, I would suggest that his book lacks the affirmation of entry level application of his principles that could potentially allow for a swifter universal relevance. As the book is, some might feel that unless one achieves social revolution, he or she has not succeeded, when in my interpretation of Freire’s work, each step towards dialogue is a step towards freedom.

**Conclusion.**

 Some educators would pass over the importance of reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* today simply because of it being published decades ago. Their assumption of it being dated and no longer applicable would be a grievous miscalculation. Freire’s radical educational ideas as well as his keen political perspectives on sectarianism are as poignant today as when they were first written. For others, Freire’s use of awkward words like *antidialogical* and *conscientization*, his choice of extreme words like *oppressed and oppressor,* or the overwhelming use of male pronouns (in early editions), could serve as a distraction from the invitation to engage in co-creating education at a groundbreaking level. The book’s longstanding and widespread influence reveals that Freire and his ideas have tapped into something beyond literacy training in impoverished nations, his words inviting education to aid us in being more fully human is desperately needed today. I would implore anyone who considers education a part of their field to read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with critical curiosity. Freire’s passion, compassion, creativity, hope, experience, wisdom, and practicality merit our attention, reflection, and action.

**References**

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**Appendix**

Image 1: Image 2:

