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Classics Revisited Review Essay: Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 50th Anniversary Edition

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Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 50th Anniversary Edition. Paulo Freire. With a New Introduction by Donaldo Macedo and An Afterword by Ira Shor. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 291 pp., paper, \$25.95, ISBN PB: 978-1-5013-1413-1.

Some books become so embedded in one's own intellectual frameworks that it's hard to say when it actually happened. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is that kind of book for me. I was in graduate school in the late '60s - early '70s when the first English edition became available. My copy is well worn by now, as is the 20th anniversary edition (with its well-intentioned but feeble attempt at gender inclusive language). And now we have the 50th anniversary edition, with its insightful introduction by Freire's long-time colleague and friend, Donaldo Macedo, a dynamic afterword by Ira Shor, brief but significant interviews with nine contemporary scholars, and Richard Shaull's foreword to the original English edition. The interest in *Pedagogy* for today's world is well-served by this new edition.

But for those of you who have not yet encountered Freire, I would actually urge you to bypass all of those sections and start with Freire's *Pedagogy* itself. Why? Because I believe doing so will provide you with an opportunity to experience for yourself Freire's commitment to personal agency, freedom, and the people's work of liberation, while discovering what a powerful teacher-student/student teacher he is, unencumbered by the discerning reflections of those already committed to the vital work of building on and going beyond Freire. As I would label it: this is actually an invitation from Freire, one that will challenge and inspire you as you seek to advance the intellectual work and dedicated collaborative action necessary to building a more just, equal, democratic and hope-filled world. And you will benefit all the more when reading the other sections of this edition once you have encountered Freire on your own.

As I proceeded to develop my own pedagogy, especially one for seminar or discussion-based courses, I discovered Freire with his *Pedagogy*, inviting me into his world. Emerging from his observations during six years of political exile (p. 35), the book is grounded in the world of poverty and oppression of the peasants in rural Brazil, hardly the context for my teaching. But the book came at a moment in history of vibrant struggles around the world for human rights and human dignity through such struggles as the civil rights movement, women's movements, anti-war movements, and national movements of resistance to dominance. So delving into it provided me the opportunity to consider what it might say to my students in three different American institutions of higher learning, with very different student bodies.

The book is deceptively simple in format: a mere 183 pages in four chapters. That belies the depths, richness and complexity of Freire's ideas, analysis and commitments, and makes for a demanding read. I want to present just some of Freire's contributions, hoping to entice readers to delve into the book for themselves to fully appreciate the seminal work *Pedagogy* is and discover how it can contribute to their own pedagogy. Let's begin with the first chapter where Freire's lexicon is

presented, which he explicates and develops throughout the book. What does he hope to offer with this book?

This book will present some aspects of what the writer has termed the pedagogy of the oppressed, a pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity....The central problem is this: How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation? Only as they discover themselves to be ‘hosts’ of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy. As long as they live in the duality in which *to be is to be like*, and *to be like is to be like the oppressor*, this contribution is impossible. The pedagogy of the oppressed is an instrument for their critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestation of dehumanization (p. 48, italics in original).

Several of his foundational ideas are manifest in that paragraph, and/or point to the connections with other major concepts. The idea of struggle, for example, is related to one of Freire’s key concepts, praxis, appearing a few pages later. Praxis is “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.” (p. 51) The task for the oppressed, then, “is to struggle for their liberation together with those who show true solidarity,” they “must acquire a critical awareness of oppression through the praxis of this struggle” (p. 51). And that struggle has to be rooted in “dialoguing with the people about their actions” (p. 53). Part of that process raises “a particular problem,” i.e., “the duality of the oppressed: they are contradictory, divided beings, shaped by and existing in a concrete situation of oppression and violence” (p. 55).

And the pedagogy of the oppressed itself “is the pedagogy of people engaged in the fight for their own liberation” (p. 53). Yet the oppressed cannot simply turn the tables and become the new oppressors: “If the goal of the oppressed is to become fully human, they will not achieve their goal by merely reversing the terms of the contradiction, by simply changing poles” (p. 56). The duality he speaks of for the oppressed refers to this: they are “at the same time themselves and the oppressor whose image they have internalized.” (p. 61) And a sad result of this, Freire concludes: “Given the circumstances which have produced their duality, it is only natural that they distrust themselves.” (p. 63). How can they overcome that distrust? “It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves. This discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be a praxis” (p. 65). And here is where the significance of trust is pinpointed: “To achieve this praxis, however, it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason” (p. 66). Thus, any who want to be with the oppressed have a serious task: “Political action on the side of the oppressed must be pedagogical action in the authentic sense of the word, and, therefore, action *with* the oppressed” (p. 66, italics in original). And that brings us to dialogue: “The only effective instrument is a humanizing pedagogy in which the revolutionary leadership establishes a permanent relationship of dialogue with the oppressed” (p. 68) and together, oppressed and a revolutionary leadership “must accordingly practice *co-intentional* education” (p. 69, italics in original).

Concepts such as “praxis,” “oppression,” and “revolutionary leadership” can be off-putting for students not yet having been asked to stretch themselves and enter into a scholar’s attempt to understand and unpack the lived experiences of those at the bottom of stratification systems. But

thinking about their own society and their place in it can begin to open up the students to that conceptual world, to wonder about its application to their own lived experiences. A task in and of itself that has fits and starts as students grapple with Freire's contributions.

It is in Chapter 2 that I discovered how Freire was inviting me as a teacher to begin (or continue) the journey with my students. These two ideas would become, in fact, the foundation of my own pedagogy: his insights into the teacher-student relationship and his critical discussion of the "banking" concept of education and its antithesis, a "libertarian" or "problem-posing" education. Over the years, I have included a section in my syllabi called "A Model of Education," where I introduce those ideas in an abbreviated form. Then, on the second class day, students read four pages from *Pedagogy* that explicate the student-teacher relationship and the differences between the two models of education. Discussion ensues about those ideas in light of what the students have themselves experienced in their schooling. And while the term 'oppressor' doesn't roll off their tongues, many of the students start (if they have not already) to reflect on the educational systems through which they have been 'educated' thus far. And hopefully, that journey continues in the rest of my course and in other courses the students will take. On that journey, students will be given opportunities for "the practice of freedom," an idea I will return to shortly.

There are gems in the last two chapters as well. Chapter 3 is devoted to analyzing "dialogue as a human phenomenon," the "essence" of which is "*the word*." (p. 87, italics in the original) The first footnote has concerned me over the years. It indicates that action and reflection lead to "word = work = praxis," and that "sacrifice of action = verbalism," while "sacrifice of reflection = activism" (p. 87, footnote 1). The idea of activism as devoid of reflections has bothered me. Why is that so? Is it due to the translation from Portuguese? Is this a cultural difference? Or is this where I simply disagree with Freire? For me, "activism" does not connote the lack of reflection. To the contrary: I see activism as rooted in thinking about strategy, tactics, audience, communication tools, etc., and then opting for a response dedicated to advancing some goal. Be that as it may, Chapter 3 has such exquisite statements that I find myself pausing again and again to reflect on them. Examples: "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. 90); "Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence" (p. 91); "I consider the fundamental theme of our epoch to be that of *domination* --- which implies its opposite, the theme of *liberation*, as the objective to be achieved" (p. 103, italics in original).

It is in Chapter 4, the longest chapter, comprising pages 125-183, that Freire explores theories of cultural action and builds on the central ideas presented in the earlier chapters. He starts by "reaffirming that humankind, as beings of the praxis, differ from animals, which are beings of pure activity....human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it" (p. 125, italics in original). The reader will be challenged to consider such topics as "Conquest," "Divide and Rule," "Organization" and "Cultural Synthesis." For me, among the many quotable statements, this is salient: "In cultural synthesis, the actors who come from 'another world' to the world of the people do so not as invaders. They do not come to *teach* or to *transmit* or to *give* anything, but rather to learn, with the people, about the people's world" (p. 180, italics in original). That continues to inspire me whenever I am engaged in teaching or working with others for greater social justice: go to the people, be with the people, learn with the people about their world, and go from there.

As I continued to wrestle with Freire, I discovered other books that were at least in part influenced by Freire; they have augmented my own reflections. I briefly want to turn to two of those books that have helped me in both thinking about and adapting some of Freire's ideas to the settings in which I have worked. The first is bell hooks' (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. As she states: "When I discovered the work of the Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire, my first introduction to critical pedagogy, I found a mentor and a guide, someone who understood that learning could be liberatory" (p. 6). She could employ her feminist thinking as a critique of Freire's work but, at the same time, she "used his pedagogical paradigms to critique the limitations of feminist classrooms" (p. 6). Read her chapter 4 "Paulo Freire," a "playful dialogue" with her self (Gloria Watkins) and her writing voice (bell hooks) which afforded her "a way to share the sweetness, the solidarity I talk about." (p. 45)

The second book is the volume co-edited by Maurianne Adams and colleagues, *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (2007; the newest edition is 2016). The two first chapters provide the theoretical foundations (chapter 1) and the pedagogical foundations (chapter 2) for social justice education. I was immediately drawn into their developed, humble, expansive work to help students with their intellectual task to better understand the intricacies, interrelatedness and depth of factors that create and sustain injustice. Freire clearly contributed to their thinking and is cited by them. Chapters in Part II focus on specific areas such as sexism, classism, and ableism, providing exercises that teachers can utilize with their students. It is a rich feast for educators struggling to deal with pivotal issues in our society and world.

Perhaps the best way to conclude this review and its impact on me, is to wish each of you the challenge and joy I have encountered in reading and re-reading *Pedagogy*. Paulo has the last words: "From these pages I hope at least the following will endure: my trust in the people, and my faith in men and women, and in the creation of a world in which it will be easier to love" (p. 40).

References

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