

Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968)

by Paulo Freire

Paulo Freire was exiled from Chile in 1964. Freire was the first director of the University of Recife's Cultural Extension Service that provided literacy programs to thousands of peasants. Freire and his co-workers taught the peasants not only skills for reading and writing, but they also introduced participation in the political process through knowledge of reading and writing as a desirable and attainable goal for all Brazilians. He inspired the poor to hope that they could have a voice in making life decisions. The Brazilian military and landowners were threatened by the peasant's desire for reform and to have their voices heard; they considered Freire's teaching to be radical. Freire was jailed, then sent into exile for his so-called "subversive" activities.

Status, power, and domination of the oppressor are not possible without the existence of the oppressed. The oppressor is dehumanized by the act of oppression while the existential reality of oppression and the internalization of the image of the oppressor dehumanize the oppressed. Freire defines oppressors as those who deny personal autonomy of others by imposing a worldview paradigm onto the oppressed that denies them the power to direct their own lives. By convincing the oppressed that their circumstances are unalterable with the exception of intervention of the ruling classes. The oppressors smother any possibility of action by the oppressed that is in contradiction to this paradigm.

According to Freire, the pedagogy of the oppressed has two stages. In the first stage the oppressed realize the extent of their oppression and through reflection they commit themselves to the action of transforming the world. In the second stage, the oppressed are no longer oppressed and the oppressors no longer oppress. Freire argues that those who oppress others dehumanize themselves and engender the process that blinds them from seeing how their dominating, manipulative behavior is self-destructive. True freedom means ejecting the image of the oppressor and embracing autonomy and responsibility, which for the oppressed can be a frightening act in the face of reprisal from the oppressors or censure from fellow oppressed who fear reprisals. Freire identifies *horizontal violence* – when the oppressed attack their kin; the oppressor exists within and they have lashed out indirectly against him-as another aspect of behavior that stymies transformative action. The oppressed are emotionally dependent, and before they discover their dependence, they take their anger and feelings of hopelessness out at home sometimes by drinking; perhaps the only outlet to which they have access.

"It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors" (p. 56). The oppressed must claim their humanity by freeing themselves and their oppressors from the power struggle to "dehumanize" the oppressed and the oppressors. This is an extremely difficult task when the oppressors do not consider themselves to be oppressors and the oppressed do not consider themselves to be oppressed. Freire states that the act of oppression is an act of violence, so the violence of the oppressed is in reaction to the violence of the oppressors. The oppressors see this retaliatory violence or resistance as criminal behavior and force the oppressors down in the name of keeping the peace.

The oppressed cannot switch places with the oppressors to achieve their freedom. They cannot become oppressors themselves. The authentic solution of the oppressor-oppressed contradiction does not occur by reversing the positions. When the oppressed gain equal rights and an equal voice in their lives the former oppressors feel they are now the oppressed. They are familiar with oppressing others and when that act of domination is taken away, they do not feel equal, they feel they have lost their power of domination and manipulation. The former oppressors are selfish and self-centered; they seem to have an inability to see that *everyone* deserves to be treated equally.

Oppressors believe that *to be*, is *to have*; money is the measure of all things, and profit is the primary goal (p. 58). The oppressors dehumanize themselves through their egoistic pursuit to *have*; they *have* so much that they lose themselves. They feel they have a right to *have*, while others do not have this right and do not deserve to *have*. The oppressed do not have because they did not work hard enough and therefore, they do not deserve to have. This theory gives the oppressed a good reason (in their minds) to criticize, condemn, and judge the oppressed. Now the oppressed are pathetic, marginalized people who deserve to live in poverty and to be dehumanized and to be treated as *things*.

No one likes to admit they are victims, the same way people are hesitant to admit they are oppressed. Without a clear view of their oppression, many times the oppressed will attack his peer. "Because the oppressor exists within their oppressed comrades, when they attack those comrades they are indirectly attacking the oppressor as well" (p. 62). At some point, the oppressed become attracted to the oppressors and want to imitate them, to have what they have. One can observe these dynamics in advertising. People want what they associate with happiness, success, and fulfillment. The oppressed want to be like the oppressors. It may even be why the oppressors want to have all they have; they believe this will provide all the components of happiness.

The oppressed all share the characteristic trait of self-depreciation. This belief is an example of hegemony, domination without violence. Once the oppressed are forced into submission, hegemony keeps them and future generations in the position of oppression. The oppressed suffer from low self-esteem and are not aware of their full capabilities. They do not realize that without a formal education, they still "know" things. There are many essential things the oppressed know that are just as essential to life as the things the oppressors know. The oppressed must be made to understand that they are as valuable as the oppressors and they deserve to be treated humanly, with dignity and respect.

When the oppressed believe in themselves, they must reflect and act on changing their world. To have a true revolution, the leadership must practice co-intentional education. In banking education, the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the students are objects or containers that are filled by deposits of information. The more full the container, the better the teacher. Those students easiest to fill are judged the better students, and those students who resist being filled are "problem" students. Banking education isolates the learner from the content and process of education. It assumes the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing. The teacher narrates, prescribes and deposits information, which the student then must mechanically receive, memorize and repeat. This transfer of information becomes an emblem and an instrument of oppression that inhibits inquiry, creativity and dialogue. Freire makes it clear that banking education dichotomizes consciousness and the world, thereby domesticating reality. The students are integrated into the world of the oppressor, a world that is based on the dehumanization of the oppressed.

Problem-posing education poses the problems of human beings in their relations to the world. "Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transfers of information. It is a learning situation in which the cognizable object intermediates the cognitive actors-teacher on the one hand and students on the other" (p. 79). "Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the student-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-One-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (p. 80). The students are active learners, who internalize the problems and link them to existing experiences to reflect on. Through problem-posing education students are not only taught facts and information as in banking education, they learn along with the teacher how to "think", to reflect on their lives, experiences, and the activities of others around them. They are no longer passive learners, nor are they passive in their community. They now *know* and are aware of their humanity, and their voice deserves to be heard. For them to stay silent is to continue to inhibit themselves in and the oppressors from true humanization.

Freire's action plan is to form a group of investigators who will determine the area, in which they will work, then initiate the first stage of the investigation. The investigators find people who will attend an informal meeting to discuss objectives in their community. The investigators make it clear that trust is essential to the success of the project. If they agree to both the investigation and process, the investigators will ask for volunteers to be assistants. "During their visits, the investigators set their critical "aim" on the area under study, as if it were for them an enormous, unique, living "code" to be deciphered. They regard the area as a totality, and visit upon visit attempt to 'split' it by analyzing the partial dimensions, which impress them. Through this process they expand their understanding of how the various parts interact, which will help them penetrate the totality itself" (p. 111).

During this stage, the investigators record the people's vocabulary, expressions, and syntax. The investigators observe the people in all different vocations and components of their lives, at work, home, leisure time, etc. Next, the investigator writes a report to discuss with the team and assistants. This evaluation meeting is the second stage in the decoding of the unique living code. The investigators select

some contradictions found to develop the codifications to be used in the thematic investigation. "The codifications reflecting an existential situation must objectively constitute a totality. Its elements must interact in the makeup of the whole. In the process of decoding, the participants externalize their thematics and thereby make explicit their 'real consciousness' for the world. As they do this, they begin to see how they themselves acted and thus reach a 'perception of their previous perception'" (p. 115).

When the codifications have been prepared and the interdisciplinary team has studied them, the investigators can begin the third stage of the investigation. A psychologist and a sociologist note and record significant reactions of the group of the decoders. The coordinator must listen to the participants and challenge them to internalize, through dialogue, their opinions, feelings, and emotions. When the decoding is completed, the last stage of the investigation is ready to begin. The investigators pursue systematic interdisciplinary study of their research. They listen to tapes of the recording session and study the notes from the psychologists and sociologist. They list the themes agreed on during the discussions. The themes are classified according to several social sciences.

"Once the thematic demarcation is completed, each specialist presents to the interdisciplinary team a project for the 'breakdown' of his theme. In breaking down the theme, the specialist looks for the fundamental nuclei which, comprising learning units and establishing a sequence, give a general view of the theme. As each specific project is discussed, the other specialists make suggestions. These may be incorporated into the project and/or may be included in the brief essays to be written on the theme" (p. 120). The essays are valuable for training teacher-students to work in the "culture circles". Next, the channel of communications is chosen for each theme and its representation. After the thematics have been codified, the visual didactic materials are prepared.

"The first task of the basic-education teachers is to present the general program of the educational campaign. The people will find themselves in this program; it will not seem strange to them, since it originated with them. The educators will also explain the presence in the program of the hinged themes, and their significance" (p. 122). When the people discuss their world, they broaden their level of awareness and begin to think critically of everything around them. They are no longer empty vessels waiting to be filled.

Cooperation can only be achieved through communication. True revolutionary leaders must be in harmony with the people they lead. The example of Guevara's awareness that the guerrillas must integrate with the peasants and his awareness of their potential and needs was very touching. He valued the peasant's goals and needs. Many times revolutionary leaders merely replace the former leader by oppressing the peasants like their predecessor, and there is no difference between the two. When the revolutionary leader focuses on the people's needs, a true revolution may begin without the oppression. The true revolutionary leader has the power to liberate both the oppressed and the oppressors.

It is relatively simple for the elite to separate and divide the oppressed, but it is a difficult struggle for revolutionary leaders to unite them. The leaders must unite with themselves and with the people. One big obstacle for the oppressed individual to overcome is the idea that they *are* oppressed and that they *do* have hope to overcome it. Once a person becomes aware of their potential, they become a true, self-aware person. "In order for the oppressed to unite, they must first cut the umbilical cord of magic and myth which binds them to the world of oppression; the unity which links them to each other must be of a different nature" (p. 175).

Freire does a wonderful job of clarifying exactly what it means to be oppressed. He possesses wonderful insight into people's souls. He finds every human worthy of respect, dignity, and trust. It is uplifting to read and understand his empathy for others and their plight. However, it is difficult to believe that it is possible to have a classless society where no one is oppressed.

The whole process of the investigative team and the volunteers seems vague and inefficient. It seems that this would only work with a small number of people at a time and would not be possible on a large-scale. It is not a feasible action plan for an entire community or town. The whole point of the investigation is to reflect the people's voice and there really is no way for everyone to be heard. Oppression as an ongoing constant struggle; the oppressor will evolve and resurface in each generation as well as the oppressed. Freire does not give a theory of stopping this cycle from reproducing over and over again.

Moreover, it would be extremely difficult to get the investigative groups together and functioning well enough to complete the investigation and put it into practice. It is an intricate process to be developed over time and I think the groups would fall apart before the goal was accomplished. In spite of these doubts, I nonetheless credit *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with heightening awareness of the plight of the oppressed; society has benefitted greatly from its ideas.

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