



# *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire

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## **Introduction**

This article contains a book review of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published by The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc. in New York. The book is now in its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition since its first publication in 1971. It contains one hundred and ninety-three pages. It offers a new paradigm in the field of education that seeks to incorporate in its learning processes the social context. The article concludes with a brief response from the author within the Philippine context.

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is based on Freire's lived experiences of oppression and how he translated such a reality into a pedagogy that would emancipate the oppressed into becoming more aware of themselves as Persons within a particular historical context and be empowered to become agents of social change. Having himself experienced the stigma of socio-economic, political, psycho-emotional dynamics of oppression and witnessed its devastating effect in the lives of the peasants and urban laborers in Brazil, Freire believes that social awareness with critical thinking, which eventually translates itself into praxis, brings emancipation. Freire made a decision to intervene in teaching the oppressed that their hunger is socially constructed. He committed himself to work with them to help identify those responsible for this social construction, which is, in his view, a crime against humanity.

## **About the Author**

Paulo Freire is a revolutionary activist whose concrete practice is the basis of his educational philosophy. His critical praxis, according



to McLaren, demands attention. As a professor at the University of Recife in the 1960s, Freire worked with peasants in the Brazilian Northeast during the country's national literacy campaign. At this time, he evolved a theory of literacy based on his conviction that every human being is capable of critically engaging the world in a dialogical encounter with others. In 1964, he was arrested and later sent into exile after the military sized control of Brazil's government. He returned in June 1980, only after an amnesty was declared in 1979.

### **A critique of the traditional model of education**

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a critique of the dominant banking model/system of education as manifested in situations where the teacher deposits all knowledge and information into the minds of the students and withdraws them during examination with all the interests. Based on this model, students do not have the chance to actively participate in the learning process nor are they given the opportunity to express their ideas based on the subject or issues at hand. The book criticizes learning methodologies, where teachers teach assuming they know everything while the students know nothing and, therefore, are taught and/or subject to discipline. This reality leads Freire to his democratic proposals of problem-posing education where “men and women develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves and, at the same time, come to see the world not as static reality but as a reality in the process of transformation.” Hence, there are, at least three things that the book mentions that Freire opposes. First, he courageously denounces the neoliberal position that promotes the false notion of the end of history and the end of class. Freire always viewed history as possibility, “recognizing that History is time filled with the possibility and not inexorably determined - that the future is problematic and not already decided, fatalistically.” Second, he continues to reject any false claim to the end of class struggle. He contends that although one cannot reduce everything to class, class remains an important factor in our understanding of multiple forms of oppression. Third, Freire never accepts the “poststructuralism tendency to translate diverse forms of class, race, and gender-based oppression to the discursive space of

subject positions. He always appreciated the theoretical complexity of multifactor analyses underestimating the role of class. For instance, he resisted the essentialist approach of reducing all the analysis to one monolithic entity of race. In his regard, it would be a mistake to view all African Americans, for example, as one monolithic cultural group without marked differences such as economic, political and educational status of the people within a community.

### **Freire's approach to social analysis**

For Freire, it is important to approach the analysis of oppression through a convergent theoretical framework where the object of oppression is cut across by such factors as race, class, gender, culture, language, and ethnicity. He argues that whereas, "one cannot reduce the analysis of racism to social class, one cannot understand racism fully without a class analysis, for to do one at the expense of the other is to fall prey into a sectarianist position, which, according to Freire, is as despicable as the racism that we need to reject. Thus, he would reject any theoretical analysis that would collapse the multiplicity of factors into a monolithic entity, including class.

## **The problem that Freire's Pedagogy encounters**

According to the book, many liberals who have embraced Freire's ideas and educational practices often reduce his theoretical work and leading philosophical ideas to a mechanical methodology. Many pseudocritical educators, in the name of liberation pedagogy, often sloganize Freire by straitjacketing his revolutionary politics to an empty cliché of the dialogical method. They fail to understand the epistemological relationship of dialogue. According to Freire,

*“In order to understand the meaning of dialogical practice, we have to put aside the simplistic understanding of dialogue as a mere technique... Dialogue is a way of knowing and should never be viewed as a mere tactic to involve students in a particular task. We have to make this point very clear. I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing.” “Dialogue teaching, is to create a process of learning and knowing that invariably involves theorizing about the experiences shared in the dialogue process. Dialogue must require an ever-present curiosity about the object of knowledge. It is never an end in itself but a means to develop a better comprehension about the object of knowledge”*(p.17).

## **Criticism against Freire's Pedagogy and a Response**

There are two criticisms against Freire's Pedagogy that the book presents. One deals with the nature and the methodological approach to education. According to Gregory Jay and Gerald Graff, education should be non-directive and neutral. They argue that Freire's proposal in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to move students toward “a critical perception of the world” - which “implies a correct method of approaching reality” so that they can get a “comprehension of total reality” - assumes that Freire already knows the identity of the oppressed. Who the oppressors and the oppressed are, argue

Jay and Graff, is conceived not as an open question that teachers and students might disagree about, but as a given of Freirean pedagogy. The second criticism pointed out by Graff also gives Freire's Pedagogy not only false but also points to a distorted notion that there is a priori agreed-upon style of writing that is monolithic, available to all, and "free of jargon" (ex. Marxist jargon). Indeed, the problem with the teaching of the conflict, according to the book, is that the only referent for engaging authority is a methodological one. As a result, Graff demeans the ability of oppressed people to name their oppression as a pedagogical necessity and, at the same time, he dismisses the politics of pedagogy that "could empower 'minorities' and build on privileged students' minimal experience of 'otherization'" to help them imagine alternative subject positions and divergent social designs.

### **Personal Comments**

Freire's Pedagogy is a revolutionary endeavor that could turn the academic value system of the world upside down. In the Philippines, for example, where oppression and heavy militarization continue to cripple if not paralyze the potentials of the people from becoming active participants in the building of a just and progressive society, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is relevant and timely towards establishing new paradigms both in education and the educational system that would seek to incorporate new, creative, liberating and life-affirming approaches to learning processes. This means incorporating into various academic curricula relevant historical issues that affect the lives of the people as well as the socio-economic and political system and structures where such issues operate. Students should not be viewed as passive learners. Instead they ought to be treated as active participants in the whole learning process with a rich deposit of knowledge and perspectives in terms of their lived experiences. The challenge lies on the approach to education and how such an approach will be reconstructed in ways that would affirm the hopes, dreams and aspirations of students particularly the masses. I believe that Freire's pedagogy could also take form of both non-formal and informal approaches to education.

Like Freire, I believe that there is no such thing as neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to the status quo, or it becomes “the practice of freedom,” the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their society. Bringing this pedagogical process to Western context may lead to tension and conflict in society, but as Richard Shaull puts it, it could also contribute to the formation of a new person and mark the beginning of a new era in Western history.