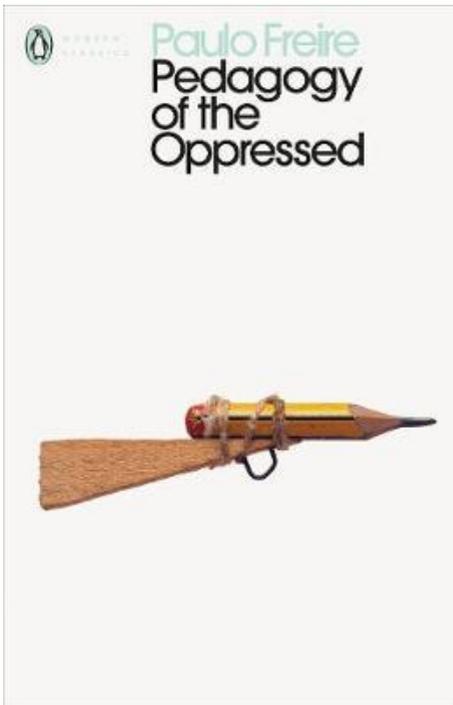


## PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED

**Stephen McCloskey**

Freire, P (1996 [1970]) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, London and New York: Penguin Books.

The fiftieth anniversary of the publication in English of Paulo Freire's seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996 [1970]), offers the opportunity for a re-appraisal in the age of climate emergency, populist nationalism and fake news.



Born in 1921 in Recife, Brazil, Freire was a philosopher, educator and activist who worked with illiterate peasants using a revolutionary methodology that elevated education beyond the classroom to wider social and economic transformation. Forced to flee his native Brazil following a military coup in 1964, Freire wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* while in exile in Chile and he remains a touchstone figure for social justice and equality activists in the global North and South.

His influence is still hotly debated in Brazil. Having been posthumously made a

Patron of Education in 2012, an ally of far-right president Bolsonaro, tried (and failed) to have the title stripped from Freire in 2018 (Lima, 2019). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was banned in apartheid South Africa, parts of Latin America and, in 2010 in Tucson, Arizona by right-wing policymakers who prohibited

texts that ‘promote the overthrow of the US government’ (Rodriquez, 2018). ‘Pedagogy’ was one of the texts used on an ethno-studies programme taught to Native Americans and Chicanos, and the books ‘were seized from classrooms right in front of students’, who learned first-hand about oppression (Bernstein, 2012). So, the book remains a hotbed of debate half a century on from its publication.

### **Culture of silence**

Freire’s direct experience of poverty in the aftermath of the 1929 global economic crisis brought with it a realisation that the ‘ignorance’ and ‘lethargy’ of the poor was in fact a ‘culture of silence’ created by their social, cultural and political domination (Freire, 1996: 12). Moreover, as Richard Schaul argues in his ‘Foreword’ to ‘Pedagogy’, ‘the whole education system was one of the major instruments for the maintenance of this culture of silence’ (Ibid). In response, Freire offered ‘something quite new and creative in educational philosophy’ to support the ‘critical intervention of the people in reality through praxis’ (35). Praxis is a central concept in Freire’s methodology and represents a combination of action and reflection to facilitate analysis of a problem and a remedial action to address it. He explains here why one without the other is an ‘inauthentic’ engagement in reality:

“When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into *verbalism*, into an alienated and alienating ‘Blah’... On the other hand, if action is emphasised exclusively to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into *activism*. The latter – action for action’s sake – negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible” (68-69).

A report published nearly a decade ago argued that ‘people in the UK understand and relate to global poverty no differently now than they did in the 1980s’ (Darnton and Kirk, 2011: 5). The report found that in regard to global poverty, ‘the public as a whole remain uninterested and ill-informed’ and pointed the finger at NGO public engagement strategies described as ‘cheap

participation’ (Ibid, 5-6). By reducing public activism to making donations to charities and ‘clicktivism’ - supporting a petition or campaign at the click of a mouse - public engagement had significantly declined. In the context of Freire’s praxis, NGOs had engaged in action without reflection, so the public lacked the knowledge and critical thinking necessary to sustain their activism. A more recent NGO-sponsored ‘UK Study of Public Attitudes to Development’ found that ‘The vast majority of UK adults don’t see global poverty as a pressing problem and want lower government spending on overseas aid’ suggesting that the sector had not altered its approach to public engagement with depressingly familiar results (BOND, 2015: 1). Perhaps the conclusion to draw from this trend is the need for more development education practice to sustain the kind of critical thinking and activism required to achieve meaningful social change.

### **Banking concept**

Another central plank of Freire’s pedagogy is the banking concept which criticised the ‘narrative’ character of education which becomes ‘an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor’ (53). The banking concept is a negation of joint enquiry involving both the teachers and student, and ‘the scope of action it allows to the students extends only as far as receiving’ (53). ‘Liberating education’, argues Freire, ‘consists in acts of cognition, not transferral of information’ (60). The roles and relationships in the liberation of praxis means that ‘The teacher is no longer the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach’ (61). The stifling and conditioning behaviour attached to the banking concept indoctrinates students to the ‘world of oppression’ (59) and regulates the way they ‘enter into’ the world (57).

One suspects that Freire would have relished the role of students in educating the world on the urgent need for climate action. The climate strikes have been a global revelation of awakening and action on the climate emergency with a record 7.6 million people taking to the streets in September 2019 in what was the biggest climate mobilisation in history (McCloskey,

2019). Freire would have admired the problem-posing approach adopted by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg and the ‘Fridays’ for Future’ climate strike movement. ‘Problem-posing education’, argued Freire, ‘bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality’ (65). A key propellant of the climate strike movement has been Thunberg’s intervention in reality through her forthright rebuking of world leaders for their lack of action to mitigate climate change. Thunberg’s speaking truth to power has highlighted the critical importance of language and communication in either immersing learners in silence or empowering them through praxis. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire reflects on ‘communiqués’ between elites and the masses, warning how:

“the dominant elites utilise the banking concept to encourage passivity in the oppressed, corresponding with the latter’s ‘submerged’ state of consciousness and take advantage of that passivity to ‘fill’ that consciousness with slogans which create even more fear of freedom” (76).

Applying this warning to the growing number of nation first populists in power across the world makes one think of slogans such as ‘Make America Great Again’, ‘Let’s Get Brexit Done’, or Nigel Farage’s anti-migrant poster, ‘Breaking Point’, used during the UK referendum debate on membership of the European Union (Stewart and Mason, 2016). They reflect the need for ‘critical consciousness’ and ‘critical reflection’ which move learners from ‘a naïve knowledge of reality to a higher level, one which enables them to perceive the *causes* of reality (112). Development education is, therefore, an antidote to ‘fake news’ and the ‘othering’ and scapegoating of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers as the cause of economic inertia.

### **Dispelling myths**

What made *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* such an incendiary text is its invocation to revolution and mapping of the role that education can play in the revolutionary process. The book was written in the first decade of the Cuban revolution and draws upon the work of many leading intellectuals from the de-

colonial movement in the global South and the left in Europe. Revolutionary praxis, argues Freire, must stand opposed to ‘manipulation, sloganizing, “despoiting” and prescription’ (107). The existing order – the dominating elites – ‘*mythicize* the world’ showing it as a ‘fixed entity’ designed to increase the ‘alienation and passivity’ of the oppressed (120). This is partly achieved through a process of ‘divide and rule’. ‘It is in the interest of the oppressor to weaken the oppressed still further to isolate them, argued Freire, to create and deepen the rift among them’ (122). This is designed to preserve the established order and is done by favouritism, clamping down on unions and organised labour, and distributing ‘benefits to some and penalties to others’ (125).

Chapter four of ‘Pedagogy’ carries a warning about the populist leader who ‘coincides causally with the emergence of the oppressed’. Freire adds that:

“The populist leader who rises from this process is an ambiguous being, an ‘amphibian’ who lives in two elements. Shuttling back and forth between the people and the dominant oligarchs, he bears the mark of both groups” (131).

Freire finally adds that ‘populist leader simply manipulates instead of fighting for authentic popular organisation’ (31). We don’t have to strain ourselves to find examples of the populist leader today using false communiqués to the masses to gain and retain their support.

### **Contemporary practice**

It would always be a challenge to apply Freire’s ‘revolutionary’ praxis in a neoliberal context given the contracting spaces to debate development issues in formal education and the reduced capacity to deliver DE in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. As Su-ming Khoo noted in 2011:

“Economic crisis and budget cuts mean that development education has moved from an expansionary to a contractionary or survivalist mode. Existing tendencies towards managerialism have intensified,

with an overwhelming emphasis on the need to demonstrate ‘impact’ and ‘value-for-money’” (2011: 2).

And, yet, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, has lost none of its power and relevance as an empowering text which has successfully attached the importance of education to the wider transformation of society. As Richard Schaul suggests, Freire’s methodology with illiterate campesinos in Brazil, is not to be imitated in our society. But he does see a parallel in the two scenarios:

“Our advanced technological society is rapidly making objects of most of us and subtly programming us into conformity to the logic of its system. To the degree that this happens, we are becoming submerged in a new ‘culture of silence’” (15).

Wherever the majority of people are disadvantaged, oppressed and submerged by an antagonistic elite, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* will be invoked as a powerful riposte for the dignity and empowerment of the masses. It is already the third most cited book in social sciences (Green, 2016) which suggests that it continues to wield enormous influence on research and educational practice across the world.

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