

Freire's Educational Solution to the Problem of Oppression

In *The True Believer*, Eric Hoffer posed a serious problem that has haunted mankind since its origins. His intense quandary highlighted the fact that mass movements have been the major transforming force in society. He continued with the observation that mass movements never end, they simply change form from one movement to the next. Hoffer admits that some mass movements may be beneficial, but maintains that while mass movements are always present, the possibility of corruption will be forever present. Hoffer's hypothesis is proven accurate constantly; moreover, even when oppressed societies usurp power from their oppressors, they too fall into the trap of oppressing with their new found power. This deadly cycle seems to be perpetuating itself and Hoffer claims there is no likely end in sight.

As eloquently as Hoffer expressed his dilemma, Paulo Freire provides an equally eloquent solution, from the opposite end of the earth. Freire proposes that both the oppressors, who as Hoffer explains seek to hold on to the present, and the oppressed, the viable mass movement material, should join in the effort to perform their "historical and ontological vocation" of becoming more fully human. If this were to occur, in a sense, everyone would be in a mass movement, and consequently, no one would be in a mass movement. This seemingly paradoxical statement is true because with everyone united there would be no mass to objectify; and furthermore, if everyone is in motion towards a common goal, there would be no frame of reference left from which to detect the movement. In other words, in this universal mass movement there would no longer be anyone oppressively holding on to the present; everyone would be progressively moving towards the future. Essentially, Freire's solution eliminates

both aspects of a mass movement, the “mass” and the “movement.” In this essay I will explicate various aspects of Freire’s solution in order to provide a better understanding of them as a whole.

Before one can ever attempt to provide a solution it is necessary to completely identify the problem. Freire completes this task using several aspects of interpersonal theory. First, Freire states that oppressive societies, both the oppressors and the oppressed, are continually projecting “I-It” relationships, which treat people as objects, as opposed to the “I-thou” relationships, wherein people are treated as human beings, that Martin Buber exclaims are extremely important to dialogue. Freire portrays society’s skewed view of relationships with, “For the oppressors, ‘human beings’ refers only to themselves; other people are ‘things.’”(57)ⁱ As most of us know, this skewed perception of relationships presents an enormous obstacle for healthy dialogue. Freire poses the question, “How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own? How can I dialogue if I regard myself as a case apart from others—mere ‘its’ in whom I cannot recognize other ‘I’s?’”(90)

Secondly, another obstacle that presents itself in oppressive societies is the oppressed’s fervent reflected self-deprivation which continuously affirms they are less than human. Freire identifies the source of this constant self-depreciation: “So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy and unproductive—that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness.”(63) The peasant’s complete ignorance of his/her dependency is so absolute that “he [always] goes along with the boss and says ‘What can I do? I’m only a peasant.’”(61)

Third, social comparison acts to perpetuate oppression. In other words, oppression is the only thing people know; thus, it will be the only thing they will continue to do. Oppressors will always judge themselves superior to the oppressed, and consequently, the oppressed will always aspire to become the oppressors purely to be on the more comfortable end of the spectrum. Freire acknowledges this by

explaining, "The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors."(45)

To continue, this "schema theory" mode of viewing the world is unanimously accepted in oppressive societies. The state of the world is rigid, constant, and never changing; and the oppressors' ideals are the only ones that matter: "Money is the measure of all things, and profit the primary goal. For the oppressors, what is worthwhile is to have more even at the cost of the oppressed having less or having nothing."(58)

It seems that oppressive societies take on a theme of transformation that is vividly played out in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*ⁱⁱ. To the oppressed human, existence is not being, it is *being under the oppressor*. Likewise, to the oppressors, being becomes *having*, and "*having more*" is solely their inalienable right. Freire explains that people entirely stop being people and become mere phases of oppression. This precisely parallels Gregor's transformation into an insect.

With the problem, as diverse and complex as it is, identified we can now look at Freire's solution, but before I can begin it is important to remember that the goal is not to merely allow the oppressed to overthrow the oppressors. The objective must be the complete obliteration of the oppressive cycle, and this involves liberating both the oppressed and their oppressors on a path towards becoming more fully human. Again, this process of liberation must not involve propaganda, management, and manipulation (these are each key to Hoffer's mass movements) all of which Freire describes as "arms of domination which cannot be the instruments of rehumanization."(68) This liberation must be done *dialogically* through *education* that is provided by *true generosity* with the intent of *freedom*. Throughout his book Freire stresses the importance of words and their meaning. In

honor of that and in the name of having a more clear discussion I will define each of the key aspects of Freire's goal (using his words of course) before I examine the nature of his procedure.

Dialogue- "an epistemological relationship [that] must require an ever-present curiosity about the object of knowledge. Thus, dialogue is never an end in itself but a means to develop a better comprehension about the object of knowledge."(18)

Education- "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 world."(34)

True Generosity- "consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity... True generosity lies in striving so that hands—whether of individuals or entire peoples—need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world."(45)

Freedom- "the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion... acquired by conquest not by gift... pursued constantly and responsibly."(47)

A requirement for liberation that was not defined above is love. A dialogical love that can manifest itself in an oppressor respecting the oppressed as an individual, or conversely, in the oppressed taking away the oppressor's power to dominate in their own fight to become more fully human. Freire is not the first to touch on the importance of love. In *Unto This Last*, John Ruskin refers to love as affection. He explains that all men possess the capacity for it, and only when this capacity is exercised are greatest results achieved. His inclination is more economically referenced, as is the nature of his entire essay, yet the idea remains the same. Ruskin explains that if "the universal law of the matter is that, assuming any given quantity of energy and sense in master and servant, the greatest material result obtainable by them will be not through antagonism to each other, but through affection for each

other.”ⁱⁱⁱ In essence love is the catalyst for greatness. In Freire’s case greatness is the universal realization of the ontological goal of becoming more human, and love is the means by which to achieve it.

With all of the prior ingredients in place, one can begin to examine Freire’s procedure for establishing his vital pedagogy. Freire’s first and most important rule for developing a pedagogy is the acknowledgement that “the oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption.”(54) With this rule in mind Freire defines two distinct phases for any liberation. First, the pedagogy must “unveil the world of oppression” around the oppressed and through “praxis” allow them to commit themselves to transforming it.(54) The second stage, Freire explains, occurs after the oppression has been transformed and changes from a pedagogy of the oppressed to a “pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation.”(54) In this process people cease being objects and develop “*consciousness as consciousness of consciousness.*”(79) Freire states that this miracle cannot be “packaged and sold,” rather it must be achieved through “reflection and action.”(67) We know that apart from this inquiry and this praxis humans cannot be humans; they can only be mere tools of an oppressive, banking society. However, with reflection and action the oppressed are allowed to perceive reality as a process that is not set in stone and only through communication can reality truly hold meaning.

This is where Freire’s non-banking approach to communication becomes so important. The teacher must step down to a “teacher-student” and the students must be promoted to “student-teachers.”(80) Only with this cast of characters can true problem posing education take root and allow people to become aware of their incompleteness, thus inspiring them to accept the challenge of becoming more fully human. They find with this knowledge (and the literacy that comes along with it) that to become more human means to name the world. From here it is only a short step to Freire’s essential

awareness of dialogue as “the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world.”(88) Once this realization has been achieved the oppressed find themselves able to respect themselves as worthy of their existence. They recognize that to progress does not mean to listen to an oppressor or banking teacher, rather it means they must critically think about the situation they are in and take the necessary steps to alter it in accordance to their desires.

Although I have praised Freire for his genius thus far, I must admit that his ideals may not be applicable universally. I believe that every field of knowledge should take Freire’s theories to heart; however, several fields at the college level, including mathematics and science, will never do so. This is not because Freire’s ideas are not useful, rather it is due to the fact that often the instructor’s love is not for his/her students. Instructors often will chiefly be concerned with their research and teaching will solely be a requirement. When teaching becomes a requirement, the banking method is always applied. This happens not because of evil tendencies, but because of a lack of desire and an attraction to the easiest way of doing things. Because of this reason, the few teachers who are able to balance research and teaching should be more aptly praised and more duly rewarded.

ⁱ All of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed page numbers come from the 30th Anniversary Edition published in 2000.

ⁱⁱ Kafka, Franz; *The Metamorphosis* (1992)

ⁱⁱⁱ Ruskin, John; *Unto This Last* (1860)

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