

BOOK REVIEW OF PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED

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Paulo Freire. 2005. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum. 183 Pages.

This article summarises some of Paulo Freire's major arguments in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and how these connect with certain contemporary issues. The review follows the progression of the book in terms of analysing each chapter separately, and it also includes some of the questions that came up in my reading of this book. I was able to make several connections to Ambedkar's beliefs and his line of arguments as well as Gandhi's approach to address oppressive situations. The different approaches followed by both these individuals, I argue, could be explained with the help of some of Freire's theories. One can also analyse the historical struggle of the oppressed classes in India, specifically Dalits and tribal communities, with the lens Freire is providing in this book. The article also touches upon some personal and professional connections I could make as an educator.

Paulo Freire starts with defining oppression as a structure. He also elaborates on the roles played by the oppressed and the oppressor in the first chapter. He emphasises on the individual's freedom to achieve "self-affirmation" and defines oppression as any action by another individual which restricts one to do so. I feel Freire covers a wide range of factors by having the ultimate goal as "self-affirmation". This encompasses basic provisions such as access to quality food, health, education, freedom and opportunity for one to make informed decisions. Oppression in its conventional sense refers largely to the physical aspect, whereas Freire broadens the scope of this term.

Freire argues that both the oppressed and the oppressors have internalised the situation of oppression and are more or less equally the cause and effect of the oppression. He refers to this as a dehumanising structure, as it does not allow one to realise one's fullest human potential. It is a cyclical process in which both the oppressed and the oppressors, to an extent, have inherited the dehumanising structure. While cautioning a possible outcome of revolution or transformation, Freire suggests that the oppressed must not merely overthrow the oppressors from their positions and establish themselves as the new oppressors, but they must ensure that the dehumanising structure of oppression itself is destroyed by them. In this way, the oppressed would

liberate both themselves as well as the oppressors. One can connect this with the aftermath of the Russian Revolution in which the proletariat, the oppressed, overthrew the Russian bourgeoisie only to reverse the roles and continue the systematic oppression. Gandhi, too, cautions against such an approach where one does not destroy the structure that is oppressive but rather flips the roles. As Freire puts it, the oppressed have to come out of the shadow of the oppressors.

Freire lays out certain conditions and principles for the oppressed to successfully break free and liberate humankind. “False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the ‘rejects of life’, to extend their trembling hands (page 44).” One can connect this to Ambedkar’s objection to Gandhi’s efforts at supporting the uplift of the lower castes, specifically with his use of word “Harijan”. If we think from Ambedkar’s perspective, we can understand why he was critical of getting support from an upper caste—Gandhi. I could connect Freire’s argument to some educational institutions in present times that demonstrate a sense of “false charity” to support the underprivileged sections of society. To take a specific example, the principal of a private school, catering to upper-middle-class families, proudly said that the school also caters to some underprivileged students. On further inquiring, it was found that these students had been allocated three rooms in a corner of the school’s huge campus, with a different uniform and a different set of teachers. While the school sees this as charity, it is not really doing enough for these students to be independent and free, and to come at par with others. Moreover, it is keeping them at a position where they will have to continue to be dependent on the oppressors.

The graded inequality in the caste system, as Ambedkar theorises, could be connected to what Freire draws attention to—oppressors tend to become “sub-oppressors”. The caste system illustrates this well, where within the lower castes, one can observe an established hierarchy of sub-castes. Here, within the most oppressed caste, there would still be roles of the oppressors and the oppressed. The oppressors would act just as violently and in a dehumanising manner as upper-caste oppressors do. I have wondered why the oppressed-turned-oppressors do not empathise with those who are at a lower position, even as they know how it feels to be oppressed. Freire provides an answer where he argues that the oppressed idealise the oppressors. Therefore, they believe that imitating the actions of the oppressors takes them closer to that position. So given a chance to oppress, one tends to reproduce the same set of violent behaviours as he/she has suffered.

While suggesting the process of transformation, Freire makes it clear that the onus is on the oppressed to initiate and carry it out. He also restricts the support of the oppressors to only those who show true solidarity with the oppressed. I believe this demands a lot from the oppressed, particularly when one acknowledges that they have internalised the structure and their role. Moreover, he mentions that the leaders of the oppressed and his/her fellow oppressed individuals are fearful that any attempt to transform the structure would result in even more oppression. Ambedkar provides a historical reason to argue why the lower castes are so sceptical about protesting against upper castes, as any such attempt had been dealt with violent reaction by the oppressors. Freire's conditions for "true solidarity" make me question if I personally would qualify as one. I decided to work in education and specifically with those who are the oppressed in order to provide equal opportunities to them. Freire demands one to join the oppressed, to work with them and take tangible actions to realise the goals. I question whether and to what extent I have been able to materialise my values and beliefs into tangible actions.

The author presents "pedagogy of the oppressed" as a solution to liberate humankind. He suggests that this transformation is a combined result of action and reflection. A lack of either would fall short of a true transformation as they together form the necessary conviction to achieve liberation. The oppressed have to be convinced as the subjects of the change rather than things or objects. It is justified for the oppressed, after achieving liberation, to have certain restraints on the former oppressors as this does not necessarily restrict them from being fully human. It is also to ensure that a system of oppression does not come into existence again. It seems as if the author is taking a utilitarian view here, evidently when he says that it is better than a few denying the rights of the majority. Does it justify the majority denying the rights of the few? Even if it is to provide protection against an oppressive system?

The banking model presented by Freire rightly reflects the mainstream education system in present times. The success of one's education has been narrowed down to the extent to which one can reproduce the content of knowledge when demanded. The teacher's effectiveness is also correlated to this outcome. It is certainly a parochial perspective to think of the aims of education. Even with modern technology and innovative pedagogical approaches, one more or less tends to follow a similar approach of filling the deposits.

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry (p.72).

This connects to the role of teacher as a transmitter who is responsible for transmitting the information he/she has. It is a completely one-way communication in which the students are seen as passive individuals whose role is only to receive what is being transmitted. This, in turn, results in a teacher mistaking his/her professional authority as the authority of the knowledge he/she possesses. One can observe this manifesting in various forms such as lack of student voices and teachers doubting students` capabilities to make decisions. This is a top-down approach in which the oppressors decide and plan according to their worldview, completely ignoring the needs of the oppressed.

An alternative to banking education as suggested by Freire is inquiry-based education in which students and teachers are co-creators of learning. Both are simultaneously teaching each other and learning from each other. This helps in creating a relationship between the teacher and student that is based on equality. It has a significant impact on the aims of education. Rather than providing an objective picture of reality through the banking model, Freire recommends that education has to provide a critical lens to see reality in constant transformation. "The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication (p.77)." This has several implications on how one approaches the classroom teaching and learning processes. Communication is at the core of problem-solving education in which both the teachers and the students are collectively co-creating the meaning of the world around. Does it mean students decide the course of their learning entirely on their own as he mentions in chapter three? To what extent should the teacher play the role of a facilitator? Is one not influencing the students` thinking even by facilitating them? I wonder how this would look like in practice, particularly for higher grades where most of the content is alien to the context and problems of the students. Does it mean that the teacher does not include those? Does it mean only those topics should be covered which are directly related to student`s immediate context and problems?

This task implies that revolutionary leaders do not go to the people in order to bring them a message of “salvation”, but in order to come to know through dialogue with them both their objective situation and their awareness of that situation—the various levels of perception of themselves and of the world in which and with which they exist (p.95).

This raises quite a few questions for the school I am working with as its mission and vision are to support underprivileged girls. However, having read this book, I feel there is an underlying message of “salvation” as Freire puts it. The school has not had a dialogue with the students and their parents to understand their worldview and needs. The deeper question is whether the school is for students or are the students for the school. The school decides what is the best form of education for these students; it thinks and plans on their behalf in order to ensure they have a brighter future. I am sure the intentions are positive but at the cost of cultural invasion.

The author moves on to explaining the nature of dialogue required to bring about transformation. He signifies the interdependence between action and reflection. A lack of either creates an unauthentic form of existence, which further leads to an unauthentic form of thought itself. He points out love, faith, hope and critical thinking as essential elements of dialogues. He emphasises the importance of love in this process by stating, “No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation (p.61).” As this commitment is based on love, he argues, it is dialogical. He specifies that unless it leads to other acts of freedom, it is not love. Freire demands one to love the world around oneself in order to enter into a dialogue with it. Moreover, he also demands one to have faith in fellow human beings in order to initiate a dialogue. This faith is in terms of one’s capability to pursue the journey of humanisation by continuously creating and recreating. One also has to be critical during the process by using the combination of both action and reflection. Hope is an essential element for revolutionaries to believe that their efforts would bring about a transformation. For Freire, mutual trust among human beings is an outcome of dialogue.

While making a distinction between humans and animals, the author grounds this distinction on the capability or lack of capability to reflect. Animals are not capable of being detached from themselves and thus cannot objectively reflect on their actions, something which humans can. Freire categorises animals as ahistorical, which I found interesting. As animals do not have a sense of their purpose, past or present, they do not have to come across

certain “limit-situations” as humans do. Freire borrows from Vieira Pinto’s concept of “limit-acts”, which are considered as actions to overcome the limit-situations, overcoming the obstacles which hinder humans from achieving liberation. This limit-act is a continuous process in which humans critically think over the historical limit-situations and use the combination of hope and faith to attempt “limit-acts”. This will then give rise to another set of limit-situations that need to be conquered. Animals do not have such limit-situations and thus limit-acts, as they are ahistorical. “Their productive activity is subordinated to the satisfaction of a physical necessity which is simply stimulating, rather than challenging (p.100).” Furthermore, Freire argues, once the oppressed realise that limit-situations are obstacles that hinder them from being more human, they start attempting to overcome these situations by using critical thinking, hope and faith. In contrast, the oppressors see these limit-situations as the boundaries that must be protected in order to maintain the status quo. The process of investigation has to include people’s worldview or their perception of reality as well as their actions based on this reality.

Freire begins the last chapter by emphasising the active role of the oppressed masses. The leaders of revolution cannot and must not work towards transformation without accommodating the action and reflection of the masses. “Revolutionary praxis is a unity, and the leaders cannot treat the oppressed as their possession (p.126).” Freire later equalises leaders carrying out a revolution for the people with a revolution without the people as in both the process is similar to oppression, which views people as passive human beings, objects that are subject to things being done to them. Post-independence India, to an extent, fits into Freire’s argument when he says that if the oppressed are not critically aware of their role as barriers of the transformation, then it does not really lead to a successful revolution. The independence movement seemed to have given rise to certain individuals who were formerly oppressed under the British rule to establish them in a position of domination through several bureaucratic structures. The masses during that time and in present times continue to be oppressed with a mere changes in the faces of the oppressors. While the popular notion is a sense of independence, but as Freire argues, it is just an imagination of having achieved independence.

Freire considers communication between the revolutionary leaders and the oppressed as an indispensable component of transformation.

Denial of communion in the revolutionary process, avoidance of dialogue with the people under the pretext of organizing them, of strengthening revolutionary power, or of ensuring a united front, is really a fear of freedom. It is fear of or lack of faith in the people (p.129).

He argues that such a revolution is not for the people but is rather carried out by the people for the leaders. This also raises the question of how the revolutionary leaders of Cuba ruled after the revolution. Based on what I know of the leaders, namely, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, both had gone through humble, loving and courageous encounters with the people, a lack of which, Freire argues, would result in the leaders objectifying the people. Despite the encounters Castro and Guevara had with the people, they both seemed to have separated themselves from the people after the revolution. They started making decisions for the people and not with them.

I found this a thought-provoking statement, “It is when the majorities are denied their right to participate in history as Subjects that they become dominated and alienated (p.130).” Even though revolutionary leaders tend to have more knowledge of how to carry a revolution out, it is not justified for them to impose it on the people. Freire keeps emphasising the process of dialogue between the leaders and the oppressed, a dialogue based on equal grounds. He also warns of a possible distraction of the leaders from their revolutionary cause. It may so happen that the leaders sideline such dialogue by prioritising the revolution itself. They may also act similarly in the case of problem-solving and liberating education as suggested by Freire. “The educational, dia-logical quality of revolution, which makes it a 'cultural revolution` as well, must be present in all its stages (p.137).”

The author attempts to put forward his framework for a “true revolution” that would liberate the oppressed from the dehumanising acts of the oppressors. He lays out several processes, roles of the oppressed individuals and their leaders, and conditions that are critical for the revolution. As a whole, I believe, the author has been able to achieve his objectives very well. It is quite clear towards the end of the book as to what he is expecting from the revolution of his imagination. I also felt that the structure of this book was spiral in nature as he revisits certain key concepts and deals with them at greater depth. The language used by the author is complicated, specifically in parts of chapters three and four, which could also be attributed to the complexity of the concepts presented in the book. The book has pushed me into an identity crisis and forced me to question my own professional role in the field of education. There were several points at which I had to pause and

reflect whether I or the organisation I am working with are genuinely working with the oppressed. I am not sure if one could answer this in with a literal “yes” or “no”; but, the book has certainly made me rethink my teaching-learning approaches.

