Assignment 1: Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed: Book Review

by
Hanna Zavrazhyna
10124868

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University of Calgary

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Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed: Book Review

The book of my choice is Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000, initially 1968). The author provided multiple insights on how to approach impoverished and therefore powerless communities and how to build their strengths. These insights are important not only for curriculum development, adult learning theory, critical pedagogy, and popular education, but also for community development that will become my profession in the nearest future. That is why I consider the book valuable reading. However, I am ambivalent in evaluation of the Freire's work. I was born in the USSR and raised in a post-Soviet society, I saw the outspoken results of communist ideas implemented in practice, and consequently, I have difficulty with many aspects of Marxist discourse.

**Community Practice**

One of the most important points of the book to me is the concept ‘duality of the oppressed’ and deep analysis of its causes and results. Freire wrote that people, who live in a situation of inferiority, powerlessness and violence are “contradictory, divided beings” (Freire, 2000, p. 55) shaped by the circumstances of their living. Duality of the oppressed means that these people are “at the same time themselves and the oppressor whose image they have internalized” (Freire, 2000, p. 61). Internalization of oppression leads to want of revenge in perception of social change and horizontal aggression expressed by the oppressed towards their peers. This is one of the multiple reasons why marginalized communities and impoverished societies almost always experience high levels of criminal and domestic violence. According to Freire, internalization of oppression causes fear of freedom among the oppressed which makes social changes not only difficult to achieve but for the large part, undesirable for those whose benefits are at stake. Social workers need to understand internalized oppression to be able to practice in such communities, advocate for their clients, and promote changes that lead to more equitable society (Wilkinson, & Pickett, 2009).

The idea of working *with* people instead of working *for* people, even when educating an
illiterate community, is not new to me. However, I know that I would have difficulties with practicing it. My hyper-responsibility and perfectionism deprive me of trust in abilities and knowledge of others. I know that I lack faith in people which Freire discussed in details:

I cannot think for others or without others, nor can others think for me. Even if the people's thinking is superstitious or naive, it is only as they rethink their assumptions in action that they can change. Producing and acting upon their own ideas—not consuming those of others—must constitute that process. (Freire, 2000, p. 108)

This discussion made me realise that my own biases and weaknesses might force me to demonstrate paternalism in community work, which in turn reinforces oppression. The Pedagogy of the Oppressed not only raised awareness around issues of trust and faith in people’s creativity and power, but also showed how exactly one should work with people instead of for people. Investigation of generative themes that were to become the basis for curriculum in a particular area is an example of what we would call participatory research process. According to Freire, from the beginning of the process curriculum developers need to collaborate with the community they are going to educate. With the help of community volunteers, they have to conduct ethnographic research to understand interests and worries of the community and offer them educational activities that would address their intimate interests and needs. On each stage of the process, community has to verify if the information of investigators and their interpretation of facts is correct. To me, it was another great example of work with the community and another reason to think of rights and responsibilities in this process that largely lies within the community. I do not expect that this reading can change me entirely, but I am sure that reflective practice can. I have to remember to listen more than talk and facilitate discussions rather that lecture even if I am certain that my ideas are the best. Nobody would behave according to my ideas unless they become their ideas.

Another important point made by Freire is the necessity to consider the society as a whole not
isolating different communities from one another. Freire argued that the issues of different communities are direct result of the systemic issues: political and economic oppression, and unequal distribution of power and resources. If people on the ground, submerged in everyday struggles, do not realise the commonalities and root causes of their deprivation they are not able to collaborate and make systemic changes. Freire stated that

The more alienated people are, the easier it is to divide them and keep them divided. These focalized forms of action, by intensifying the focalized way of life of the oppressed (especially in rural areas), hamper the oppressed from perceiving reality critically and keep them isolated from the problems of oppressed women and men in other areas. (Freire, 2000, p. 142).

The benefits of horizontal connections and multiple networks for stable development of communities within larger societal systems are discussed by many community practitioners from different perspectives. The parallels to Freire’s ideas are found in Chaos and Complexity theories. Gilchrist (2000) argued that “in complex systems such as human society, the ‘well-connected community’ can be seen as an integrating mechanism, which tolerates difference, celebrates diversity, promotes equality and acknowledges mutuality” (p. 272). Therefore, according to Gilchrist (2000), “the purpose of community development is to support and shape social networking in order to facilitate the emergence of flexible, effective and empowering forms of collective action” (p. 273).

Questions and Contradictions

The ideas discussed in the Pedagogy of the Oppressed are useful for community practitioners, but at the same time they have some limitations and internal contradictions. No matter how accurate the participatory research process was conducted and how respectful community educators were around interests and needs of the students, no matter how they value dialogical, problem-posing education – they ideologically influence the community. I do not think it is an undesirable effect of education, but is inevitable: a teacher shapes the worldview of her students.
In the second chapter Freire stated that “the teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on them” (p. 77). However, in the end of the fourth chapter, discussing the community’s expressed need of higher wages, he encouraged educators/revolution leaders to “on the one hand identify with the peoples demand for higher salaries, while on the other (…) pose the meaning of that very demand as a problem” (p. 183). The solution to the problem is revolution that will happen when people are aware of enslavement nature of paid labour and become owners of their labour. In other words, the educator/revolution leader has to push his supporters to the idea of revolution through posing problems and dialoging. Not only this idea contradicts the previous statement about impermissibility of thought imposition (revolutionary thoughts, apparently, must be imposed), but the thought itself seems to me oppressive. The history of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century proved that benefits of socialist revolution are seriously marred by its side-effects.

Who is the Oppressor?

Social conflict theory “views society as a continually contested struggle among groups with opposing views and interests” (Mullaly, 2010, p. 8). The dominant group controls the resources and exploits the oppressed majority. Marxist ideologists criticize the situation and argue for social transformations. But what are the implications of their arguments? One of them we may find in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

The oppressor elaborates his theory of action without the people, for he stands against them.

Nor can the people—as long as they are crushed and oppressed, internalizing the image of the oppressor—construct by themselves the theory of their liberating action. (Freire, 2000, p. 183)

In this passage the word ‘people’ means ‘oppressed people’. ‘Oppressor’ stands aside and is not included in the group of ‘people’. Therefore, he/she is not a person. What would happened to ‘oppressors’ when revolution – “an act of love” (Freire, 2000, p. 89) – comes? When Freire first published his book in 1968 the answers to this question were numerous.
Freire emphasised the importance of consistency between reflection and action: “Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers” (p. 87). Along these lines The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, philosophical work about liberation and humanization, is full of Lenin, Mao Zedong, and Guevara citations (I wonder why Stalin was omitted). Apparently, for the author the reflections and actions of these people were consistent.

I would be happy to say that millions of persons tortured and killed by those ‘prominent humanizers’ were oppressors. However, here is the main problem of communist ideology: it allows one to call an oppressor and thus to dehumanise and destroy – anyone. For example, in the Soviet Union peasants were sacrificed. Lenin was personally responsible for the artificial famine in Southern Ukraine in 1921-1923 when the crops were confiscated from rural Ukrainians. To fuel Soviet industrialization and suppress Ukrainian resistance, Stalin used Lenin’s example and took grain from rural Ukraine again, so in 1932-1933 at least four million Ukrainians – the exact numbers remains unknown – died of starvation while living on the most fertile soils in Europe. The third artificial famine was initiated after the Second World War when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics needed money to rebuild its industry. Up to the end of the 60s peasants were not allowed to receive passports and leave their collective farms. I believe, in other societies this would be called slavery. My great grandmother was not an oppressor, her parents were serfs in the Russian Empire. Yet she starved and worked as a slave in the country that used Marxist philosophy as a basis for its egalitarian society. The same philosophy as Freire suggested to use for liberation of the oppressed.

Freire might not know what was going on in the USSR. However, in 1968 he used the term ‘cultural revolution’. Should his readers assume that he did not know what was going on in the People’s Republic of China? Maybe. But what about ‘heroic deeds’ of Ernesto Che Guevara? Or maybe Freire, as many other people with kind hearts and good intentions, was simply not interested in actions non-
consistent with charming communist reflections?

The last chapter of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was depressing reading to me. I realised that one of the most oppressive ideologies of the 20th century, even in its extreme variant, is still very popular among educated people in the Western world. I wonder why Lenin and Mao are praised in the context of liberation from oppression, even though their crimes are well known. I wonder if I can do anything to change this perception.

Macedo (2000) admitted that readers of Freire’s works had problems with Marxist jargon. He insisted that the work is valuable specifically because of its ethics and its language. I understand that it is necessary to use certain concepts coined in Marxist tradition to analyse issues of structural inequality. I appreciate deep analysis and insights in community work, and I will certainly use them in my practice. On the other hand, I firmly believe that communist ideology as a whole should be deeply studied for the only one reason – never ever repeat their actions again.
References


