

**Paulo Freire: Education as Radical Political Transformation**

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## **I. Introduction**

Brazilian educator and educational philosopher Paulo Freire (1921-1997) is known throughout much of the world as the author of “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” first published in 1970. More than a dozen books and scores of articles, presentations and interviews later, Freire’s ideas have become widely acclaimed. According to Ronald Glass, “Freire’s ideas have entered the educational discourse from the most cosmopolitan centers to the most remote corners of the earth, and not since John Dewey have the thoughts of a philosopher of education impacted such a broad sphere of public life in the U.S.” (Glass, 15). If one consults ERIC, one of the primary educational databases, the name “Paulo Freire” produces hundreds of links and references, just one more indication of the influence of the late Brazilian teacher-writer.

Most students of education, if they read Freire in the original text, usually read the second chapter of his “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” often in an introduction to education textbook or some anthology of writings on education. “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” is still by far the most popular of his books. According to publishers of the 30th anniversary edition, it had, by then, sold 750,000 copies worldwide (Freire 2002, 9). This is a remarkable number of copies for a book that is not likely to be purchased by leisure-time readers and that regularly uses a difficult vocabulary including terms such as praxis, dialogical and conscientization. Who was Freire and what was his background?

## **II. Paulo Freire: A brief biographical sketch**

Paulo Freire was born in 1921 in Recife on Brazil’s northeastern coast. His family experienced economic hardship, but despite that he obtained a law degree from the University of Recife. He gave up law to teach Portuguese, earned a doctorate from the University of Recife in 1959, and became interested in adult literacy programs, which he operated until 1964. A new Brazilian government regarded the neo-Marxian thrust of Freire’s views as subversive and imprisoned him for a short time. Upon release he chose exile. For the next 15 years he lived first in Chile, then in the United States, obtaining a post at Harvard University before moving to Geneva, Switzerland, in 1970 where he worked for the World Council of Churches. In 1980 Freire was allowed to return to Brazil where he supervised Sao Paulo’s literacy program, wrote and taught until his death in 1997 (Elias, 1-16; Taylor, 12-33).

## **III. Freire’s dissatisfaction with traditional pedagogy**

To grasp the central elements of the Freirean view of teaching, “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” is a logical place to begin because contained in that work are the main elements, sometimes not totally developed, of Freire’s conception of education and, in fact, his entire worldview.

Freire begins his critique of what he regards as the predominant model of teaching by describing it as one in which the teacher is the “subject” and the students are the “listening objects”; that is, they are doing nothing but listening to the narrative presented by the teacher. This situation produces in the students, according to Freire, lifelessness and petrification (Freire 2002, 71). It stifles their creativity (81). The teacher, using this traditional pedagogy, sets out to fill his students with content, but content that is “detached from reality” (71). Continuing that analogy, Freire says that according to traditional teaching methods the students are “receptacles”

to be filled. The more the teacher fills them, the more she will be held in high regard as a teacher. Similarly, the more the students permit themselves to be filled, the more they will be esteemed as good students (72). It is that filling image that leads Freire to refer to this kind of teaching as similar to banking transactions. Freire says, “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor .... This is the ‘banking’ concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits” (72).

The teaching method that Freire advocates is intended to be a stark contrast to “banking” instruction. Freire refers to it as “dialogical” because this approach has as a central feature the use of “dialogue” in the classroom (Freire 2002, 79-80). Dialogical education is not the mere transferal of knowledge from the teacher to the student (79). Instead the teacher poses various problems and encourages the development of a dialogue with the students from which both the students and the teacher learn (79). Freire says, “The students — no longer docile listeners — are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (81). Freire is convinced that such a method stimulates creativity and requires critical thinking (83).

Freire recognizes that such a change in teaching methods requires a radical redefinition of the relationship between the teacher and the student. Traditional education, according to Freire, perpetuates the false idea that the teacher “knows everything” and the students “know nothing,” which he calls the “teacher-student contradiction” (Freire 2002, 72). This view, which regards the teacher as superior and the sole source of knowledge and the students as devoid of knowledge, can be overcome only by a fundamental reorientation of the respective roles of the teacher and the student. The teacher must become a “partner” (75) with the student, breaking the “vertical patterns characteristic of banking education” (80). Said another way, Freire’s ideal is one where “The relationship between the teacher and students ... is horizontal rather than hierarchical” (Roberts 2000, 54). By following the Freirean method, the teacher experiences being “taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach” (Freire 2002, 80). Teachers become “teacher-students” and students become “student-teachers” (80). Their roles are substantially recast.

#### **IV. The “Latin Dewey” — Three tenets of Freire’s progressivism**

Freire’s pedagogy — that is, his ideas about how instruction should be carried on in the classroom — is clearly in the tradition of modern educational progressivism. As Freire commentator Stanley Aronowitz puts it: “There are enough resemblances ... to validate the reduction of Freire to the Latin John Dewey” (Aronowitz, 10).

##### **A. Opposition to the transmission of knowledge — The first tenet**

Start with the beginning tenet of educational progressivism that education should not consist primarily of the transmission of thought — that is, preconceived content — from one generation to the next. As Dewey says, “... [T]he curriculum is always getting loaded down with purely inherited traditional matter and with subjects which represent mainly the energy of some influential person or groups of persons on behalf of something dear to them” (Dewey 1916, 241; Edmondson, 37).

Freire adopts this first tenet of educational progressivism. He does not believe that teaching is primarily about passing on predetermined knowledge to students. As already mentioned, his displeasure is with precisely this kind of “banking” education — that is, education that treats the student as a “depository.” Freire criticizes as counterproductive the traditional teacher’s approach

to preparation in which the teacher chooses the content, prepares it, and then conveys it to the student. Freire complains that the students memorize but do not engage in an “act of cognition” with such an approach (Freire 2002, 80). The “banking educator” presents content “about which he will discourse to his students” but he merely “answers his own questions” (93). Freire confirms his earlier views in later interviews. “Knowledge is produced in a *place far from the students* who are asked to memorize what the teacher says” (Shor and Freire 1987a, 8, emphasis mine). “One of the *serious problems* we have to face is knowing how to confront a strong and *old tradition of transferring knowledge*” (Shor and Freire 1987a, 10, emphasis mine).

Freire, like Dewey, is contemptuous of the long-established Western canon of authors and ideas that have been read and digested through the ages. Many of the works in this canon are Christian or have Christian roots; others are ancient and classical, but all provide insightful and satisfying answers to the fundamental questions of human life. The lasting quality of these works has commended them to each generation of men and women. Freire eschews an education that is rooted in such proven classics. He complains that the subject matter of such traditional teaching is created “far from” the students’ own experiences in time and space. Freire’s intellectual disciples such as Ira Shor call the Western canon “mechanical,” “bookish,” “Eurocentric,” “dominated by white males” and “elitist” (Shor and Freire 1987 b, 17-18, emphasis mine).

### ***Freire’s acceptance of the first tenet of progressivism, critiqued***

By a stance against the traditional canon, Freireans are, in effect, maintaining that a student in a modern classroom in Detroit, USA, or Rio De Janeiro, Brazil, cannot be expected to connect with Cicero’s essay on “Friendship,” the book of Daniel in the Old Testament, or the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament, just to give a few examples. They refuse to acknowledge even the possibility that the Western canon might have a universal appeal that cuts across classes, races and eras.

There are at least two additional reasons why students should have repeated contact with the traditional canon during their formative years. First, not to do so consigns them to what T.S. Eliot in his essay “What is a Classic?” called “the provincialism of time.” Students know only their immediate and quite narrow experiences, whether in the shanty-towns of Brazil or the suburbs of American cities, and are not given the means to expand their contact with the rich and vast world of faith, practice and thought that has preceded them. Students to whom “knowledge is not transferred” (Freire’s preference) experience a kind of poverty of the mind and spirit produced because they do not possess the “shared knowledge,” the “cultural literacy” of their predecessors and therefore cannot stand on their intellectual shoulders (Hirsch, 2-5). Secondly, such a vacuum of learning makes the young and ignorant easy prey for those who propose interpretations of the world that are shallow and illusory — false ideologies. Because the educational method that Freire proposes will leave his students bereft of fundamental learning, they will not be able to raise intelligent objections to the latest hawkers of poorly formulated ideas. They have no “pantry of the mind” from which to withdraw inconvenient facts that do not align themselves with the “medicine show” explanations of reality that offer a cure-all for every social ill. Thus they are easily led, or rather misled, to embrace the latest political nostrum.

But why are Freire and his adherents so impatient with time spent on traditional content? Because they are anxious to get to what they regard as education’s most important task. That task is forming students into modern revolution-minded citizens “challenging inequality and dominant myths rather than socializing into the status quo” (Shor and Freire 1987b, 15). As Freirean Ira Shor puts it: “Desocialization itself” ought to be “a curricular goal” that builds on “a

dissenting terrain” (15). Of course, producing the new radical student will be made much more difficult if students are steeped in the works of the traditional Western canon that offers other solutions to social problems than revolution.

Additional discussion of Freire on revolution will be included below.

### **B. The second tenet of progressivism and Freire**

The second tenet of pedagogical progressivism is that the classroom should provide an environment of freedom in which the students’ expressed interests and impulses give direction to the classroom activities. Drawing a parallel from the Copernican revolution, Dewey, the chief of progressives, says, “... the child becomes the sun about which the appliances of education revolve; he is the center about which they are organized” (Dworkin, 52-53). According to Dewey, such an environment of freedom and non-prescription — one which focuses on the students’ experiences — is one to which pupils will respond with creative, curious interest that will reduce the need for artificial rewards and grades (Dewey 1962, 297-298; Edmondson, 24). Traditional methods breed “the mental truancy of mind wandering” because what is taught has little connection with the students’ reality” (Dewey 1938, 46).

Freire endorses this second tenet of progressivism as well. Traditional education “anesthetizes and inhibits creative power” (Freire 2002, 81). The dialogical method, which he advocates, “is constituted and organized by the students’ view of the world where *their own generative themes are found*” (109, emphasis mine). Freire regards real life experiences and struggles of the students as the “stuff” out of which the subject matter of the classroom is made. These student experiences, problems and adversities, no matter how incomplete and limited, should be the focus of education — not external pre-cast materials imported by the teacher. The teacher should “situate learning in the students’ culture — their literacy, their themes, their present cognitive and affective levels, their aspirations, their daily lives” (Shor 1987, 24).

#### ***Freire’s endorsement of the second tenet of progressivism, critiqued***

By taking this stance, Freire and his followers adopt a view of students that is loathe to inhibit students’ interests and inclinations by the application of traditional educational methods, content and conventions. Starting with student-generated experiences, Freireans believe that they can coax out of each student, rudimentary, albeit often inelegant, knowledge that then can be shaped and polished into usable insights. The fact that these “experiences” come from the young, ignorant and even illiterate is not a matter of concern for Freire.

Freire’s romantic, populist-like view of the nature of the student strongly contrasts with the view held by many traditional non-progressive educators. For these teachers, the student, though a divine creation and image-bearer, is fallen, sinful and frail (Wolsterstoff 1980, 7-15). These instructors may not use precise theological language to articulate their view, but they have accepted certain corollaries derived from what is essentially a Christian view of the student. Specifically, they realize that the student’s potential is hidden, latent and muted and must be cultivated artificially. They know that the student does not necessarily seek to diligently accomplish difficult tasks nor does the student naturally seek to do what is required to increase his knowledge. Said another way, the student’s nature is neither better nor worse than the human nature of adults. The student, as a component of his ordinary make-up, is not immediately interested in all the concepts, procedures, facts and analyses that it is in his or her best interest to embrace. The student’s impulses are often misdirected, short-sighted, unfocused, peripatetic — in other words, “childish.” He or she is a neophyte in certain disciplines and is in need of

direction, molding and correction; that is, instruction. Traditional educators discern that the student's limited, often naïve experiences are not necessarily the best material for instruction, as is maintained by Freire. Student experiences of the world and the conclusions drawn from them, regardless of whether they are labeled "authentic" or not, are often false generalizations based on scant and faulty evidence. Traditional teachers do not regard it as a criticism of the student to say that on many subjects he or she is simply ignorant and that schooling's primary purpose is "to remove ignorance" (Barzun, 1). Educators in the tradition of Dewey or Freire may be scandalized by such a description of the nature of the student. However, this description is not intended to be a derogatory view of the pupil, but a realistic and challenging one for the instructor.

One more point of criticism must be made about the open, student-centered progressivism that is characteristic of Freire. As enticing as the Freirean classroom may seem, such student-centered instruction has repeatedly been shown to be detrimental to students of lower socioeconomic status. Harvard's late Jean Chall, in "The Academic Achievement Challenge," concludes that "... the evidence on the superiority of structured, teacher-centered methods for low-socioeconomic-status children is so consistent over the years that it would be difficult to reject it" (135-152). That, however, is what the Freirean progressives have done. Another educator who raised, somewhat reluctantly, questions about progressive education's prescription for black youth in urban areas is Lisa Delpit. In her "Harvard Educational Review" articles in the late 1980s, she complained that her teacher preparation, which emphasized progressive tenets, did not produce the results she expected in the inner-city classroom. She concluded that black children need direct instruction and the development of skills that the open or child-centered classroom does not provide. She writes, poignantly, "Each year my teaching moved farther away from what I had learned [in graduate school] even though in many ways I still identified myself as an open-classroom teacher. As my classroom became more 'traditional' however, it seemed that my black students steadily improved in their reading and writing" (Delpit, 381). Finally, in a book about an experiment in the open classroom, which is simply one of the iterations of Deweyan progressivism, Roland Barth explains and then critiques the assumptions and practice of this kind of education in two city schools. His conclusion is that the experiment essentially ended in failure (Barth, 137-156). All three educators argue that weaker students respond best to structure, order and guidance through well-ordered material.

Freirean pedagogy may actually produce meager learning results that will tend to keep disadvantaged students exactly where they are; that is, in the grasp of ignorance, low productivity and poverty. The irony is that the Freireans are dedicated to helping the poor and disadvantaged, and sincerely so. However, well-meaning and good intentions are not enough. The methods must produce real learning; when they do not, one must not be afraid to return to greater structure, the directness of carefully organized instruction with traditional content and methods.

### **C. Freire and the diminished role of the teacher — The third tenet**

The third tenet of educational progressivism is that the traditional teacher's role of guidance, control and direction should be reduced so as to be almost nonexistent (Edmondson, 50; Dewey 1938, 71). Progressives view the traditional authority of the teacher as a kind of barrier. Dewey labels it "autocratic" and characterized by "harshness" as contrasted with the kind of education he prefers, because it tends to interfere with the students' energy and motivation (Dewey 1938, 34). Dewey calls the elements of the traditional classroom organization "straitjacket and chain

gang procedures” (61). In like manner the Freirean role for the teacher is at best one of being a “partner” (Freire 2002, 75), breaking the traditional “vertical patterns” characteristic of banking education (80). As mentioned already, Freire says the teacher will be taught by the students (80). He is equally hard on traditional education, calling it an “exercise in domination” (78), and referring to teachers as “bank clerk teachers” who are “prescribers” and “domesticators” (75).

### *Freire on teacher authority, critiqued*

It should not come as a surprise that the Freirean view of the student as a natural but untapped resource and the teacher as no longer being a transmitter of superior knowledge changes the role of and undermines the authority of the teacher. On one hand, Freireans do not want the teacher to be authoritarian and directive. Freire takes great pains to point out that the revolutionary leader-teachers he envisions should not be “paternal” (Shor and Freire 1987a, 173) because that would be imposing their vision of “salvation” (Freire’s term) from oppression (Freire 2002, 95) upon the recipients rather than the recipients themselves discovering the way of liberation (133). It is this aspect of Freire’s teaching on which U.S. educators have most often focused and even taken to the extreme. For example, Heather McDonald describes what is purported to be a Freirean classroom at Brooklyn’s El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice. At El Puente, a public high school, a course called Hip Hop 101 included “instruction” in graffiti production. McDonald found the instructor invoking Paulo Freire and claiming, “Following Freire, I don’t have the power to tell a young person what to do and not to do ... they find the path” (McDonald, 114).

In an attempt to respond to cases like El Puente, Freire himself tried to correct what he regarded as a misuse of his pedagogy. When asked about changing the teacher into a “resource person” who can intervene only when called upon by a student, Freire offered this corrective: “For me, education is always directive, always. The question is to know towards what and with whom is it directive ....” Elsewhere Freire has said, “I do not think that there is real education without direction. ... There is no educational practice that does not point to an objective ...” (Freire and Macedo 1995, 2). So, is the Freirean method directive after all? James Paul Gee says “yes.” He maintains that Freire’s literacy materials call for the student to “think correctly,” which is supposedly characteristic of “the new man and the new woman” that Freirean instruction should produce (Gee, 207-208). Students were not really liberating themselves. In fact, they were actually expected to mimic their instructors or replicate only a leftist view of reality. However, Freire, caught in a contradiction, attempts to explain: “Education always has a directive nature we can’t deny. But there is the directive *liberating* educator on the one hand, and the directive *domesticating* educator on the other” (Shor and Freire 1987a, 109, 172). Freire purports to show a difference. The “liberating” educator does not paternalistically bestow a particular view upon the student as the “domesticating” educator does. Instead, the liberating educator only really “gives” the student something when she receives something from the student in a dialectical non-manipulative exchange (Shor and Freire 1987a, 173). Is Freire offering a distinction without a real difference? It seems obvious that such is the case. Freire labels the teacher who supports the existing social and economic structures of society — private property, capitalistic markets and the rule of law — as an “authoritarian” who is trying to impose his or her view on the students. Such a teacher is a “domesticator,” by which Freire and his followers mean a teacher whose teaching supports the status quo and who tames the students into domesticated submission. On the other hand, if a teacher directs the students in his or her class toward socialism or revolution by engendering discontent with the current society, then this type of teaching is labeled by Freire as “liberatory,” not authoritarian. Of course, it is obvious that the so-called “liberatory educator”

is moving students toward a particular view of society just as much as his or her “domesticating” counterpart.

### ***Teacher authority — necessary and beneficial***

In contrast, traditional educators have a different view of the role of the teacher. The teacher is a properly and duly constituted authority. He or she has authority that is derived from the recognition of educational need. The teacher is over the students because they need boundaries and limits within which to exercise their exuberance and energy. The teacher’s authority is derived from the parents of the children taught, who delegate their parental authority to the teacher. Ultimately, the authority of the parents and the teacher is derived from God who made the family the essential building block of society. Those who pretend that reasonable authority is not legitimate and who attack its proper exercise are living in a utopian dream that will turn into a nightmare of chaos and excess (VanTil, 23-24).

The authority of the teacher is also the authority of an expert; that is, a person who knows the discipline and its content very well. Therefore, the teacher is superior — that is, knows more than the students — which is not a circumstance to be flaunted by the teacher, but a reality to be happily recognized. That someone knows more than someone else and is trained to overcome the latter’s ignorance is a matter for rejoicing, not complaining about “domination.” In fact, the teacher’s aim is to produce enduring alteration in the student, which in many cases is an alteration that runs contrary to his or her natural inclinations (Wolterstorff, 3-6). More specifically, the teacher aims at increasing the student’s cognitive knowledge of the world. This is a very serious and life-enhancing undertaking because without an education, provincialism and ignorance threaten to enslave the mind of the student. A traditional liberal arts education, as has been pointed out, frees students from these conditions. Dare we mention that all this happens under the benign authority of a good teacher? Freire talks a great deal about becoming free, but then wants to diminish contact with accumulated knowledge — traditionally the way one was freed from poverty and degradation.

Another task to which teachers who have classroom authority dedicate themselves and to which they urge their students to set their minds is the development of certain skills and abilities — evaluation of evidence, reading and written expression, and computation. Again, the authority of the teacher gives her justification to consider what the student needs in this regard and to see to it that the student learns what is needed. Finally, the duly authorized teacher who considers her students a charge that she must oversee, must try to cultivate in her class responsible moral action that is consistent with the Christian Scriptures and their fair implications (Wolterstorff 1980, 33-35). These moral actions are in keeping with what even the unchurched would want for their children — telling and respecting the truth, being ready to assist others in need, and yes, respecting duly constituted authority. Does this sound quaint and old-fashioned? Perhaps, but according to this view teachers are not “facilitators,” “guides on the side” or “equals” to the student. Instead they are persons whose status, calling and expertise set them apart to lovingly but firmly pull students along through the labyrinth of education. Finally, the students should emerge from what is largely an artificial and contrived process, having been altered, modified, changed, improved — that is — educated.

### **V. Freire on oppression — Freire, Marx and the radical Christian left**

The progressive Freirean pedagogy just described — dialogical, problem-posing, non-traditional and egalitarian in its view of the relation between teacher and student — is not an

isolated set of teaching methods, but is part of a larger leftist worldview to which Freire subscribes. Though Freire's pedagogy would save students from what he clearly regards as an interest-deadening, teacher-dominated classroom, he is not proposing child-centered, Dewey-inspired progressive methods in order to make traditional classroom content more palatable to students, although many U.S. educators have read Freire this way.

In fact, Freire has a strong neo-Marxian thrust to his thought. That being the case, why has he become so popular with liberal U.S. educators who are, nevertheless, not Marxians? The version of Freire that most U.S. teachers have embraced is what could be called a critically sanitized version. Usually they have read Chapter 2 of "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," which contains his Dewey-like critique of traditional educational practice. Except for a relative few who consider themselves part of the critical pedagogy movement, American teachers have had little contact with Chapters 1, 3 and 4 of "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" that contain what is clearly Marxian ideology. If Freire's aims and purposes are to be accurately represented, this radical political portion of his thought cannot properly be separated from his pedagogy.

First a summary. Though Freire went through a "liberal democratic" period, that phase came to an end with the publication of "Pedagogy of the Oppressed." He had become a radical leftist, embracing Marxian socialism (Mackie, 94). The key elements of Marxist thought — class struggle, the prevalence of oppression and domination, and the necessity for revolutionary action to remedy the inequity of modern capitalist society — appear full-blown in Freire's writing as well as quotations that laud the views of 20th century practitioners of revolution — Castro, Guevara, Mao, Lenin and others (Mackie, 104). Freire commentator Peter Roberts sums it up well when he calls the influence of Marx over Freire "towering" (Roberts 2000, 10).

Before addressing his particular views, it should be pointed out at this juncture that Freire was a participant in a larger intellectual, religious and social movement in Latin America whose dimensions are too broad for treatment in this paper. Suffice it to say that after World War II, certain segments of the Catholic Church in Latin America were energized to advocate a greater social and even radical political commitment by the church to the poor and disadvantaged. In large measure these efforts were given impetus by the issuance of various papal encyclicals: *Mater et Magister* (1961) (Kadt, 85) and *Populorum Progressio* (1967); the subsequent statement by Latin American bishops known as the Medellín Documents (Medellin); Vatican Council II (1965); and the development of liberation theology (Elias, 38-41 & 135-148) and its most prominent spokesman, Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez. In Protestantism, a similar mixture of humanitarian views and radical leftist ideas was evident in the meetings, agendas and pronouncements of the World Council of Churches (Lefever, 22-47). These movements converged to produce a kind of claimed complementarity between the Old Testament teachings about oppressed persons — widows, the fatherless, the poor — and classical Marxism with its stress on class conflict and its use of the same term: "oppression." Of course the Marxian use of this term focused on the purported degraded position of Third World peoples due to the presence of capitalism in the world. Freire was raised a Catholic, though certainly, according to his later statements, he became an unorthodox one. However, he was an actor in these broad movements and his work as a consultant for the World Council of Churches for a period of 10 years further exposed him to what was to be known as the most radical version of liberation theology, which is actually heavily Marxian (Elias, 79, 136; Torres, 121-123).

### **A. Freire's view of history — Oppression and struggle**

In keeping with the contours of that broad intellectual movement, Freire's writings maintain that the "fundamental theme" of the modern era is "domination" (Freire 2002, 103). He asserts that human social life is a struggle between the "oppressor and the oppressed." But to whom is he referring as the "dominated" and the "oppressed"? They are men and women whose behavior is prescribed by others — the oppressors. "Any situation in which 'A' objectively exploits 'B' or hinders his or her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression" (55). Elsewhere Freire argues that to be oppressed is to be dehumanized and only when liberated is a person restored to being truly human (78). Freire commentator Paul Taylor calls Freire's definition of the oppressed unclear but concedes that when Freire refers to the "oppressed" he is most often talking about "peasants, the illiterates, the colonized, and the poor" (Taylor, 67). Darder comes to a similar conclusion: "Without question, when Freire spoke of the ... 'oppressors,' he was referring to historical class distinctions and class conflict within the structures of capitalist society — capitalism was the root of domination" (Darder, 39).

Thus Freire adopts a classical Marxian theory of history, which holds that "... [M]odern society is an antagonistic society; classes are the principal actors in the historical drama of capitalism and of history in general; the class struggle is the moving power of history ...." Moreover, the "antagonism" between oppressors and oppressed is a "polarization into two blocs and only two" (Aron, 202, 151).

#### ***Freire's philosophy of history, critiqued***

One criticism of "class struggle" as a theory of history held by both Freire and Marx is that it is "binary"; that is, it requires that all members of society be able to be placed in one of two exclusive categories — oppressed or oppressors (Weiler, 362). Such a view of history is at best simplistic. Even if a group of people acts in concert according to something called "class interests" on a certain issue on a certain day, there is no necessary agreement on a different issue the same members will agree. In other words, the views of workers themselves, "the proletariat," will not necessarily always coincide. The same is true with the other "class," the oppressor-capitalists. The fact is that the relationship between various individuals and groups of individuals within a society is eminently more complex than the two categories advocated by Marx and Freire.

### **B. Freire on evil and its source**

The Freirean philosophy of history contains within it a view of the source of evil in the world. The Freirean claim is that wrongdoing and evil are the result of the work of capitalists. "Nowhere ... does [Freire] subject socialist systems to similar criticisms with regard to their tendencies to dominate the consciousness of their peoples and to develop oppressive state socialisms" (Elias, 84). Of course, this one-sided treatment raises certain obvious questions. For example, if oppression is the exclusive product of the evils of capitalism, how does Freire explain why millions of people in the 20th century have fled or tried to flee from countries in which capitalism was outlawed and state socialism was established — the former Soviet Union, Cuba and North Korea being examples?

#### ***Freire's deficient view of evil***

A more fundamental criticism of Freire's adoption of Marx is the selectivity with which both view evil in the world. According to David Koyzis' cogent analysis, false ideologies often have a

distorted view of the source of evil in the world (29, 40). This kind of incompleteness is evident in Freirean thought. The evil oppression that Freire condemns is that produced exclusively, as he sees it, by a single class and the system it creates — the capitalist-oppressors and capitalism. The contrast with a scriptural view of sin and evil is striking. When the Scriptures speak of evil, they speak of general depravity; that is, the sinfulness of all men and women (Romans 3:23). That tendency to do the wrong, to practice evil deeds, is generic to all members of the human race and their cultural products are reflections, to a certain extent, of that sinfulness. According to Christian teaching, sin is rebellion against God that inclines all humans to do wrong, not just those who are members of a particular class. This failing in Freirean thought is what Elias is referring to when he says, "... there is little recognition of original sin, the problem of human evil, and the sense of the tragic in human existence" (Elias, 55-56). Elias perceptively gets to the root of the problem when he criticizes Freire for seeming to regard the oppressed who are liberated from capitalism as completely freed from sin and evil inclination (Elias, 56). Freire's view could be called "selective depravity" rather than general depravity. That faulty view of sin means that the Freirean (and Marxian) definition of what is wrong with the world — capitalists and capitalism — produces a misshapen, erroneous view of the essential source of human suffering and disquietude. It is much like the harmful effects produced by a faulty medical diagnosis: The physician fails to identify the real problem and therefore prescribes the wrong treatment.

### **C. "Salvation" according to Freire**

Continuing to use Koyzis's analytical framework, once the advocates of a false ideology identify a source of evil (though incorrectly), they invariably propose a way of overcoming that evil. Ideologies, being quasi-religious systems, must offer what theologians would call a soteriology; that is, "a worked-out theory promising deliverance to human beings from some fundamental evil that is viewed as the source of a broad range of human ills ...." In short, a way of salvation (Koyzis, 29).

What is Freire's plan of "salvation"? How does Freire envision the oppressed being freed from capitalist oppression? It starts with the oppressed reflecting on their own oppression and its causes by being instructed under a new pedagogy or means of teaching — the pedagogy of the oppressed. "[F]rom that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their [own] liberation" (Freire 2002, 48). "The process of salvation cannot be realized without rebelliousness" (Freire 1998, 105). Freire believes that the oppressed, if taught properly, will gain a kind of "revolutionary consciousness," what Freire calls "conscientization" (109). This heightened consciousness will be kindled in the oppressed by instruction and teaching — the pedagogy — of revolutionary teacher-leaders. This belief is what inclines Freire to "defend the eminently pedagogical character of revolution" by saying that "... [t]he revolutionary leaders of every epoch who have affirmed that the oppressed must accept the struggle for their liberation ... have also implicitly recognized the pedagogical aspect of this struggle" (Freire 2002, 67-68). The teaching and instruction is in the form of a dialogue. "Dialogue with the people is radically necessary to every authentic revolution" (90). By learning about their oppressed circumstances, which is done by reflecting upon them under the guidance of their revolutionary leader-teacher, they will conclude that they must take "action directed at the [societal] structures to be transformed" (126). "The structures of society ... the capitalist mode of production, have to be changed for society to be transformed" (Shor and Freire 1987a, 175). So, in summary, "salvation" comes from pedagogy that ignites political consciousness and leads to revolution.

### ***The weakness of Freirean soteriology***

From an orthodox Christian standpoint, this soteriology — theory of salvation — is deficient in several respects. First, by claiming that political revolution is the source of salvation, Freire elevates one particular aspect of reality, in this case abrupt social and economic change, to an absolute or god-like place in the scheme of things. This common and destructive tendency in human thought is called “deification” (Wolterstorff, 28; Koyzis, 40). As a consequence of the deification of revolution — revolution as a savior — the place of Christ as true Savior is diminished in Freire’s analysis. Interestingly, Elias points out that Freire seldom mentions Jesus (Elias, 141), probably because he has replaced Christ in a very real sense as redeemer and substituted revolution as his savior instead. Freire himself says, “I do not feel very comfortable speaking about my faith. At least, I do not feel as comfortable as I do when speaking about my political choice, my utopia, and my pedagogical dreams” (Freire, 104). Freire is certainly unorthodox here because orthodox Christianity teaches that Christ is the answer to reconciliation with God and with one’s fellow humans by means of his first and second comings. Instead, Freire follows the proponents of liberation theology (Elias, 41, 79) and the radical left movements of Roman Catholicism. Freire says forthrightly, “... salvation implies liberation, engagement in a struggle for it. It is as if the fight against exploitation, its motivation, and the refusal of resignation were paths to salvation. The process of salvation cannot be realized without rebelliousness” (Freire, 104). Thus Freirean soteriology converts Christ into a political revolutionary figure. Elias says of Freire, “The true Christian gospel in his [Freire’s] view should be prophetic, utopian, and revolutionary calling for believers to work for change, revolution, and liberation. Jesus is depicted by Freire as a person who worked for radical change” (Elias, 86). Elias goes on to say, “Freire does not accept the concept of God as Savior ...” (141). Saving, according to Freire, is an entirely human undertaking: “... [Freire] states that we do not save ourselves alone but in communion with others” (Elias, 141). Freire’s soteriology includes a view of Easter — the Christian account of salvation. Predictably it is politicized and humanistic. “For Freire, ‘every Christian must live his Easter, and that too is utopia. The man who doesn’t make his Easter, in the sense of dying in order to be reborn, is not a real Christian’” (Elias, 142). What Freire seems to mean is that “the religious revolutionary is involved in living out the Passover or Easter through denouncing oppression and announcing liberation” (Elias, 86). So, although Freire appropriates and uses Christian soteriological terms, he empties the terms of their traditional meanings and fills them with new and often clearly unbiblical meanings. Salvation becomes synonymous with a political revolution against capitalism.

### **D. Three key terms**

Three key terms used by Freire deserve further consideration: pedagogy, conscientization and revolution. It is apparent that Freire is using the term “pedagogy” in a non-traditional way. To Freire, teaching and instruction are tools for engendering revolution, not the means by which instructors encourage students to master certain school subjects. Freirean literacy programs, though they did include ordinary grammar and syntax instruction, were primarily programs of radical political education. That is precisely what Freire believes constitutes the core purpose of educational endeavors. They should be the means of radically transforming the political outlook of the students. It is what he means by “the pedagogy of the oppressed.”

The second term Freire uses is “conscientization.” His use of the term has earned for him considerable attention, but at the same time criticism. To Freire, “conscientization” means the

gradual transformation of a person's view of life and the world from a kind of naïve consciousness to a critical consciousness (Roberts, 2000, 138-139). For example, a Brazilian peasant begins with a view of life that is apathetic and fatalistic, under girded by the view that things happen to him due to some kind of magical higher power. Critical consciousness, which Freire is trying to engender, is a deepening awareness of cause and effect in social and political relations. But it is a particular kind of awareness. This latter state should involve a realization in the peasant-student that his condition in life can be improved if social and economic structures can be altered by his own political action. It is indisputable that the proponents of liberation theology happily endorsed Freire's method of combining literacy training with large doses of radical leftist instruction about the evils of capitalism (Torres, 122).

Peter Berger raises important questions about whether Freirean teacher-revolutionaries were showing proper cultural respect for the poor and downtrodden of the Brazilian northeast, Guinea-Bissau or Tanzania, for instance. Was not Freire gratuitously assuming that these oppressed peoples, lacking the ability to recognize their own circumstances, needed "consciousness raising" by an elite of "political activators" (Berger, 112)? As Berger says in summary, "Consciousness raising' [to which Freire refers] is a project of higher-class individuals directed at lower-class population."

Suffice it to say that the debate about "cultural invasion," or the imposition of modern cultural views upon people who have their own native culture, goes beyond the purview of this paper. Nevertheless it is certainly hard to imagine any educational undertaking that does not modify, to some extent, the views, culture and outlook of those taught. If one carried the arguments of critics like Berger to their logical conclusion, education would always be regarded as unacceptably intrusive and in some sense destructive of the intellectual worldview of the participants and thus demeaning to them. If one takes that position, the poor and uneducated would have to be left in their current state of ignorance, though still possessing their "cultural dignity."

Another term used by Freire is, of course, "revolution." What is Freire's understanding of "revolution"? Does it mean simply a rapid but peaceful social or economic change? Or does Freire believe that the class struggle between the oppressed and their oppressors can result in a morally defensible but violent revolution by the oppressed? Freire's view of revolutionary violence is that it may well be necessary. His ethical rationale for the defense of violent revolution is that the revolutionary violence produced by the oppressed is a justified reaction to the situation of oppression, which "itself constitutes violence ..." (Freire 2002, 55). "Violence is initiated by those who oppress, who exploit ... not by those who are oppressed, exploited and unrecognized" (55). By taking this position — that is, seeing violence as a necessary and proper part of revolutionary change — Freire aligns himself with liberation theologians like Helder Camara, a Brazilian Catholic archbishop, who viewed revolution as a "second violence"; that is, one that is a proper reaction to oppression (Kirk, 31).

### ***The necessity for cultural revolution***

Freire warns that once the oppressors see the beginnings of revolution they will attempt to undermine the new understandings of the oppressed who are being liberated. The oppressors, seeing their power being threatened, will propose certain "myths" that they maintain as true and will try to "market" them to the oppressed. Freire's catalogue of what he regards as oppressor myths includes these along with others: that private property is necessary to human progress, that anyone who is industrious can achieve economic well-being, and that all men are created equal

(Freire 2002, 139-140). Fundamentally, complains Freire, it is the institutions of “child rearing and education” — in other words, the home and the school — that transmit these oppressive myths to the next generation with the intention of keeping them under domination. To overcome this pattern, Freire says, revolutionary leaders must “initiate a ‘cultural revolution’” (158). “‘Cultural revolution’ takes the total society to be reconstructed, including all human activities, as the object of its remolding action. ‘Cultural revolution’ is the revolutionary regime’s maximum effort at conscientizacao [conscientization] — it should reach everyone, regardless of their personal path” (158-159). Here one sees Freire’s totalitarian vision in its starkest form. Current society is to be completely remade, from top to bottom. No one is to be exempted from the workings of revolutionary fervor.

## **VI. Summary**

Freire desires a new kind of pedagogy — dialogical teaching — in which the teacher-revolutionary leader elicits from students factual but unanalyzed accounts of the life adversities they experience as the oppressed in a capitalistic society. The teacher-revolutionary leads the students to fit their experiences into a theoretical framework in which the students begin by identifying the origins of their oppression (capitalistic structures) and end by readying themselves to take revolutionary action intended to transform all aspects of the oppressive society. This is the “pedagogy of the oppressed.”

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