

## Three Cheers for Airy Freire!

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This is the edited text of a short talk given at a *Concept* seminar to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the publication of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* which took place in Edinburgh on 7th December 2018.

One of the first times I asked a student to comment on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, not so long after its English translation came out in 1972, he responded with the view that Freire was too 'airy'. By which he meant that Freire's ideas can be obscure and his language opaque. Indeed, as that great Freire scholar Paula Allman put it, when we read Freire we have to be ready for a 'struggle for meaning'. And, as Freire himself insisted, educational work is 'not a weekend on a tropical beach'.

Nevertheless, the struggle is worthwhile and there are many things to cheer about 50 years after the original publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in Portuguese. I want to pick out just three reasons to be cheer-full on this occasion.

### **1st cheer: for Freire's intellectual promiscuity**

If there is one piece of advice the young Paulo definitely did not not learn sitting on his granny's knee in Recife, Brazil, it is this: 'Neither a borrower nor a lender be'. Not only does Freire borrow from all over the place, he also lends himself to all sorts of different interests and arguments. We all have particular causes we espouse as well as bees in our bonnets, and we find that Freire is, indeed, our flexible friend. I have even heard it said that the CIA made use of Freirean methods in its counter-insurgency training programmes. Which just goes to show how dangerous it is to separate methodology from ideology in Freire's work.

In theoretical terms, Freire is extraordinarily eclectic and versatile, not to say outrageously promiscuous. Never over-precious about roots or routes! This is, of course, part of the appeal of his idiosyncratically hybrid brand of Marxism, Christianity and humanism, ranging freely across a variety of disciplines: philosophy, theology, anthropology, psychology, sociology, politics and, of course, pedagogy.

### **2nd cheer: for Freire's theory of practice**

Thinking particularly about community education in Scotland, we must thank Freire for helping to give community education a theory *or*, if you wish, helping to give a *certain kind of* community education a *certain kind of* theory. Freire helps us to think about what we do and how to do it differently and better (ie *praxis*). Community education in Scotland emerged from the Alexander Report *Adult Education: The Challenge of Change* which was published in 1975, just 3 years after *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* first came out in English in 1972. The Scottish version of community education was essentially an example of social democratic pragmatism - full of good intentions but almost wholly lacking in any kind of coherent theory of community-based educational practice. For some of us, Freire helped to fill this gap by showing that one way of starting to think about what we mean by 'community education' is to see it as a social and collective enterprise rather than simply an individual and meritocratic endeavour. As Freire puts it (in a characteristically convoluted way):

The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is him/herself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.

This social nexus for learning is one of the reasons why the Alexander Report made the connection between adult education, community development and youth work. The key idea is that 'community' implies shared interests, collective identity and social purpose within specific material and cultural contexts.

In this respect, Freire came to the rescue of a novel yet radically under-theorised version of community education in Scotland. His starting point is that a ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ should be concerned to develop its curriculum from the lived experience of people in communities. This is what makes it quite different and distinctive from other kinds of education. Of all the radical thinkers I was raised on in the 1960s and 70s, ‘airy Freire’ is somehow the one that has survived, the one we keep going back to. This is partly at least because Freire’s ideas and methods continue to have a particular resonance within the cultural politics of Scotland today - despite the ironic fact that the Scottish Community Education Service as we have known it has now more or less ceased to exist. What would Freire have to say about this dismal record, I wonder?

Thinking about both Freire in Scotland as well as Scotland in the wider world, it is important to pay tribute to the distinctive contributions of some key movers and shakers: Colin and Gerri Kirkwood, whose *Living Adult Education: Freire in Scotland* remains a seminal text; Liam Kane, until recently of Glasgow University, a truly comradely critical friend; and ALP (the Edinburgh-based Adult Learning Project) which has consistently shown us over the years how Freire-inspired learning can be not only dialogical but also convivial.

What I want to emphasise is that Freire helps to make community education make sense. I should add, of course, that we need kindred spirits like Antonio Gramsci, bell hooks, Jane Thompson and Nancy Fraser to fill in some of the gaps and bring us up to date, and, indeed, to correct some of the things Freire simply got wrong.

### **3rd cheer: for Freire’s enthusiasm for dichotomous thinking**

Dichotomous, or binary, thinking went out of fashion for a while. ‘Tut, tut!’, the postmodernists would say, ‘that’s very bad - binary thinking!’. Freire, of course, turned dichotomous thinking into a veritable art form:

oppressor/oppressed

domination/subordination

banking education/problem-posing education

domestication/liberation  
integration/transformation  
authenticity/significance.

What the dichotomy (or binary opposition) does is to create the dynamic for critical engagement and change. As Martin Luther King put it: 'Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded [and taken] by the oppressed'.

Such dichotomies may not adequately describe the nuanced intersectionalities of postmodernity, but they can be a very good way of getting to grips with the basic power relations of turbo-capitalism and xenophobic populism, and thus of starting a proper political argument. The key pedagogical point is that education cannot be properly dialectical and learning cannot be properly dialogical unless the process starts with a bang rather than a whimper.

In the end, dichotomous thinking helps to keep the message radical. So here, finally, is another of Freire's dichotomies: inside/outside. As he puts it in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

...the oppressed are not marginals ... living 'outside' society. They have always been inside - inside the structure which made them 'beings for others'. The solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves'.

### **In conclusion**

2 quick points to end with:

First, a particular reviewer once accused some of us of peddling what he (rather cleverly) caricatured as a 'pedagogy of the depressed'. All I can say is that, given the state of the world we live in, depression (as distinct from resignation or what Freire would call 'fatalism') often feels like the healthy and sensible option. And yet we

should always try to remember that the idea of a ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ suggests that, whatever the difficulties and challenges, the struggle for justice must go on. Moreover, as Freire insists, we cannot escape the existential dichotomy this presents. We must choose which side we are on because:

There is no such thing as neutral education. Education either functions as an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom.

Second, in the end, Freire’s legacy is to keep us hopeful (even if we can’t help getting a bit depressed now and then!). Indeed, one of his last books, published in 1996, a year before his death, was called *Pedagogy of Hope*. This book started off as a new preface to the original *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. We still need *both* arguments - and we can’t have one without the other.

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