

Teaching and Learning Social Theory to Advance Social Transformation:

Some Insights, Implications, and Practical Suggestions from Paulo Freire¹

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THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF PAULO FREIRE'S WORK

Before proceeding to provide a critical summary of Freire's ideas and the insights and practical suggestions that can be derived from them for the teaching and learning of social theory to advance social transformation, it is important to consider the social context from which Freire's work emerged. Freire himself asserts that his work should not be extrapolated and applied out of context. Thus examining the social context of his work will provide us the opportunity to see the underlying themes that inform his educational pedagogy.

Latin America is characterized by extreme land inequality except for countries that have implemented a radical land reform program. Land ownership is concentrated in approximately one percent of the population, the great majority of whom are Whites. Although there are other Latin American countries with more extreme inequality in land-ownership, Brazil has one of the highest. On the issue of inequality of land distribution in the Latin American region, the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) reports that "1.3 percent of landowners in Latin America hold 71.6 percent of the entire area of land under cultivation" (Todaro 1992:256). Land ownership in Latin America is indeed inextricably intertwined with the social and political structures of the region. Land is therefore not just seen as an economic property. Indeed, the lives of many peasants in Latin America are dominated by the minifundio & latifundio land ownership distribution structure, which is gravely unequal. The lives of these peasants cannot be improved by simply focusing on variables related to the criteria of economic efficiency alone. There is a need to totally restructure the social and political organization of the countries of Latin America in order to create broader opportunities for the poor to improve their levels of living (Todaro 1992).

Latin American society has also been described as having an authoritarian social structure (Frank 1992). Given the rigidity of the social structure, changing the predicament of the poor will require a systematic, unified, and deliberate effort on the part of the oppressed. Freire's scholarly work and service is an attempt to address this predicament. To understand Freire's strategy for the emancipation of the oppressed in Latin America and the world in general, we need to first carefully examine how he conceptualizes the structure of oppression and domination.

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FREIRE'S *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED*

Freire's Conceptualization of the Structure of Domination and Oppression

According to Freire, "any situation or circumstance that denies another person or people the ability to pursue their legitimate aspiration as self-affirming beings is oppression. The action itself is violence. Thus violent action on the part of some people gives birth to oppression. The oppressed may use violence but their violence is a reaction and derivation from the original violence that brought them into existence" (Freire 1992:563). Violence and oppression thus do not come into existence by chance or accident. The two are reflections of historical realities. Thus the historical genesis of human oppression and violence is the distortion of human relationship in a situation where some deny others their humanity.

When the oppressed attempt to assert their humanity, they are labeled by the oppressors with different names. The oppressed are called: "those people; savages; natives; subversives; those who are violent; barbaric and wicked etc." (Freire 1992:564-565). The violence of the oppressed can however recreate humanity according to Freire. Fanon argues along similar lines about the role of violence in recreating the self-worth of the oppressed (Fanon 1966). Freire asserts that power is central to oppression because oppression comes into existence as a result of violence, and violence can only be perpetrated by those who have power. Moreover, violence by the oppressor is a process that is perpetuated from generation to generation (Freire 1992:564-565).

In an oppressive society, Freire notes, instrumental rationality underpins how especially the oppressors see the world. In this situation, human relationship and everything (earth, property, production etc.) are reduced to objects for personal aggrandizement. The oppressor develops a materialistic conception of existence where money and profit are the measures of all things. So to be human is to have.; under capitalism humans need something outside of themselves to humanize and perfect themselves. In the worldview and consciousness of oppressors, to embark on a program of humanizing the whole of society is subversive because humanity to them is distinguished by possessing things; thereby, only *they* can be fully humans because they "have" and "having" makes you human. In this respect, the condition of being a successful capitalist or member of a dominant class might be the very condition for the denial to others the opportunity to become fully human.

Capitalists and oppressors produce a discourse that is used to legitimize their injustice. Ideas such as incompetence, laziness, ingratitude, ungratefulness, envy, are used to portray the oppressed as the problem i.e., no systemic problems or issues are perceived. Thus being human and free can be a threat to an existing oppressive social order because the social order survives by "thingifying" everything it comes in contact with i.e., treat it as an object (Freire 1992:566). The consciousness of oppressors and the social structure they have created tend to suffocate life and the creativity that make it possible by essentially promoting or supporting only public policies and creative actions that can be neatly accommodated within the framework of the dominant structures of social control. The oppressors try to guarantee that the system will always work to their benefit. In this respect, science and technology are decisively employed by the oppressors as instruments for domestication and control of the oppressed.

For those people that benefit from the existing "limit situation" (i.e., constraints) of the status quo, they resist any attempt to raise the people's consciousness to the level that they can see beyond the limit situation and explore new possibilities and act towards realizing those new possibilities. The beneficiaries of the status-quo complain about the cost of changing the situation. They ignore the fact that maintaining the status quo too has cost. Yet the change desired in Freire's thinking is not aimed at substituting one form of oppression with another, but creating a society where the conditions are there for everyone to realize their desire to be more human. As Barrington Moore Jr. (1993) has suggested, while revolutions are considered costly, we should note that maintaining the status-quo is equally costly too, even if it appears peaceful on the surface. The relevant question then is: costly from whose perspective? This raises the whole philosophical question of what type of society do we really want? What is a good society? Freire's answer to this is that a good society is the one that creates the condition for the continuous humanization and liberation of everyone i.e., eliminating oppressive conditions for all.

Freire maintains that the humanist educator "cannot think without the people, nor for the people, but only with the people" (Freire 1997:112). In contrast, in a society characterized by the structure of domination, the elites only send "communiqué" to the oppressed and see the oppressed as a reservoir for depositing information that is essentially aimed at social control and domestication even though the rhetoric and slogans used might on the surface appear to be aimed at humanizing the people. While the dominant educational curricula by contemporary standards allow for great-

er choices on the part of the oppressed, in reality, critical consciousness—if nurtured at all—is only tolerated in such education to the extent that it does not ask fundamental questions that rock the boat. Elites or oppressors in society do not deny the existence of objective reality and that such a reality oppresses the oppressed; rather, they rationalize it.

According to Freire, the concept of human rights can co-exist in a society with injustice and oppression. In the mindset of the oppressors, rights are individual rights. They exist in theory, but in practice, you have to have the means or the material conditions to exercise them. In this sense, human rights can make it possible for some to live and exist, while for others, they can only survive within the context of existing material conditions and constraints (Freire 1992:564-565). For instance, John Stuart Mill (1947) in his *On Liberty* privileges liberty and individual rights and freedom to choose over equality, never paying attention to how serious inequality in material and social conditions can make it impossible for rights enshrined in a constitution to be enjoyed or exercised by people who are living in abject poverty. For him, it is better to have liberty than equality because the latter will impinge on the former. Freire is implicitly making a critique of such concepts of rights and freedoms.

Is it possible for some oppressors to change their minds and commit themselves to helping and mobilizing the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation? According to Freire, oppressors, unless they commit class suicide, cannot produce a fully liberating or humanizing education. Doing so while the structure of domination and oppression remains intact can be a contradiction in terms. At best, it may just amount to false generosity and paternalism. The oppressors just make themselves feel good by treating the oppressed as objects of humanitarianism e.g., providing welfare. Herbert Gans (1971, 1996) argued similarly along this line when he analyzed the “positive” economic, political and social-psychological functions of poverty for the privileged classes in society, in contrast to the negative impact it has on the poor. Freire also sees education as a key instrument in the process of institutionalizing the structure of domination and oppression in society.

Education and the Structure of Domination and Oppression: The Banking Concept of Education

The banking concept of education is the idea that Freire used to describe how education is used in an oppressive society as a kind of cultural action to domesticate the oppressed and perpetuate the status quo (Freire 1997, chap.2). According to Freire, in this kind of education, the focus is on words and not their meanings or their potential power in transforming reality. The nature of the education provided is narrative and the teacher is the narrator. In this kind of educational model there is less emphasis on communication; it is rather unidirectional in nature and the teacher is at the center of the process. The process also involves sending messages by the “teacher” in the form of “communiqué.” The students are treated as reservoir in which knowledge is to be deposited for storage. The approach consequently encourages memorization. By not allowing students to be creative, they cannot be transformative agents. Praxis is not encouraged and the cooperation needed in working together as subjects is denied. Consequently, the students are almost discarded in the process (Freire 1997:52-67; Gadotti 1994:49-65).

The banking approach is built on a hierarchical model of relationship between the teacher and the students, which assumes that students know nothing and the teacher knows everything or a lot. Freire sees a learning situation where the student is construed as ignorant as a micro-replica of the structure of domination that exists at the macro level in society. Consequently, he believes a liberative education should avoid this kind of pedagogic strategy. Such hierarchy in student teacher relations assumes the teacher does not learn from the students, or at best learns little, because of the students’ utter ignorance. Freire envisions a situation where the teacher and student would be co-learners and participants in the process of understanding and changing social reality. Thus in order to teach in a manner that will create the conditions for liberation, the first act is to reconcile the contradiction between the hierarchically polarized position of teacher and student as the central element of learning pedagogy (Freire 1997:61).

The banking concept of education is characteristic of the structure of domination. It reflects and reinforces the structure (Freire 1997:64-65). Yet, this notwithstanding, the contradiction in the process allows the unquenchable desire for increased humanization to express itself (Freire 1997:54). Banking education thus treats students as something to be managed and the students’ appropriate role in learning is to adapt, just as the oppressed are expected to adapt to the structure of domination in society. Under such circumstances, students cannot ask the difficult “why” questions. Rather they get used to being passive and adaptive to the hierarchical situation. This approach to education might attempt to work on changing the consciousness or perception of the oppressed to fit the broad structure of domination. There is however no effort to fundamentally change the conditions that continue to oppress the oppressed. In such an educational system, those who fail to fit the defined criteria of normality from the perspective of the dominant group are treated as either “incompetent” or “lazy.” This is similar to the situation in mainstream society where those who do

not fit the oppressor's expectation or definition of reality are treated as lazy and misfits and therefore need to be reformed or disciplined (Freire 1997:55).

The banking concept of education has the tendency to not encourage dialogue and treats students as people who simply need assistance. It does not see humans as historical beings with the indomitable desire to be increasingly human which is their primary purpose as existing beings i.e., their ontological vocation. It tends to treat the world and reality as relatively fixed, unchanging, and permanent. Freire for instance cited a passage from Niehbur's "*Moral Man and Immoral Society*" (1960) to support his assertion regarding the resistance of dominators to a truly conscientizing education and their preference for an education that subjugates and domesticates. The passage illuminates the presumptions of the ruling class about the defined role of the oppressed in society:

A Mr. Giddy, later President of the Royal Society, raised objections which could be matched in every country: 'However specious in theory the project might be of giving education to the laboring classes of the poor, it would be prejudicial to their morals and happiness; it would teach them to despise their lot in life instead of making them good servants in agricultural and other laborious employment; instead of teaching them subordination it would render them fractious and refractory as was evident in the manufacturing countries; it would enable them to read seditious pamphlets, vicious books and publications against Christianity; it would render them insolent to their superiors and in a few years the legislature would find it necessary to direct the strong arm of power against them.' (Niehbur 1960:130 cited in Freire 1997:112-113)

Although contemporary education provided to the oppressed might offer more room, flexibility, and choices for the oppressed to improve themselves vis-à-vis the question raised above, all this is done within the broad structure of domination that remains essentially intact at its core, while changing at the margins. For instance, in his book *Savage Inequalities* (1991), Jonathan Kozol documents the grave nature of inequality in schooling opportunities across the United States such that what the education system seems to be doing (deliberately or otherwise) is sorting people into different occupations based on what the existing structure of domination perceives as functional to the system. Elites in an oppressed society therefore survive and benefit from the suffering of the oppressed. The suffering of the oppressed provides the means of survival for the elites. In this respect, any elite person who wants to become part of the humanizing process will necessarily have to commit class suicide in order to see the world from the standpoint of the oppressed and also reason and fight with them. In discussing the use of education for the perpetuation of domination and oppression, Freire devotes significant attention to what he calls "cultural invasion" demonstrating the concept's implication for domination and liberation.

Cultural Invasion: Freire's Implicit Theory of Development and Underdevelopment

Freire discusses cultural invasion as a critical component of the theory of antidiological education. The aim of cultural invasion is conquest. In Freire's own words:

The invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter's potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression. (Freire 1997:133)

It is clear that cultural invasion results in oppressed people's losing their originality, or at least, are remaining under the threat of doing so. The manner Freire conceptualizes cultural invasion is such that any social science knowledge that is imposed from the outside and not representing or building on themes generated by the oppressed would amount to cultural invasion by the elites into the social context of the poor.

Related to the above is the fact that the cultural invaders could use knowledge of the oppressed against the oppressed because the invaders have no commitment to dialogical education but continued domination of the oppressed. In a sense, this is similar to the argument by Habermas when he asserts that the aim of technical-rational knowledge is to facilitate domination and social control of the people in advanced industrial society (Habermas 1971; see also Root 1993:229-253).

Freire argues that if cultural invasion is successful, it creates a feeling of inferiority complex among the subjugated people. Under such conditions, the social institutions of the subjugated society reflect the structure of domination instituted by the dominant group at the macro level. The macro institutional structures in turn shape micro-relations with-

in social organizations such as the family. Thus he sees a connection between macro and micro processes and suggests, for instance, that parent-child relations and socialization within the family is significantly molded by the broad structure of domination at the macro-level (Freire 1997, chap.4).

In reflecting on the main elements of cultural invasion, Freire provides in my view a theoretical framework for explaining development and underdevelopment at the national and community level. If development is the capacity for subjects working in collaboration with each other to create and recreate social reality, thereby making history, then all the elements of cultural invasion negate that.

For instance, cultural invasion is aimed at conquest not freeing people, its goal is to perpetuate oppression and not end it. It promotes a parochial view of reality i.e., the invader's perspective only. Of course the invaders' perspective is that reality is fixed and given. Even if concessions are made for social reality to change, there are limits to that change and the limits recognized are those that dovetail very well with the interest of dominators (Freire 1997, chap.4).

Cultural invasion also means that the locus of decision is external to the invaded community and nation and as a result of the negative consequences of the invasion, the invaded society or community has dual identity in that apart from its own self-identity, it has also internalized the consciousness and social identity of the invading group. The sum of all these is inimical to the authentic socioeconomic development of the invaded society or community. According to Freire, development is a process that is unique to human beings because they are historical and biographical beings that have existential time, which they control. They exist for themselves unlike plants or animals. In line with the preceding analysis, Freire asserts that societies that can develop are those that exist for themselves, are not dependent on other societies, do not interiorize some other nation's identity/consciousness, and their capacity to act and transform is not alienated from them (see also dos Santos 1993:193-202).

Any society that is culturally invaded, he notes, does not have the capacity for autonomous development. Contrary to how economists use per capita income and gross income as measures of development, Freire asserts that in measuring development, "the basic, elementary criterion is whether or not the society is a 'being for itself.' If it is not, the other criteria indicate modernization rather than development" (Freire 1997:143).

In effect, Freire is asserting that without the internal capacity by people to collaboratively make history through the transformation of their society using creative acts, they are just modernizing instead of developing. He maintains that in so far as a society is in a dependent relationship, although reform within the society might be welcomed, such reform does not resolve the fundamental conditions of oppression. In this case, reform might just be an attempt to preempt demands for fundamental changes to the existing structure of society. Leaders in such societies could be used as puppets for the foreign oppressive elites (Freire 1997, chap.4).

Freire's Theory of Dialogical Cultural Action

According to Freire the first element of a theory of dialogical cultural action is cooperation. In dialogical cultural action, a stage is reached where the people who were hitherto objects now become subjects and in cooperation with each other they act to transform their social reality with the aim of humanizing themselves. In order for cooperation to be achieved, the subjects have to communicate among themselves. Dialogue is impossible without communication. The two together make cooperation possible. People cannot cooperate in making history if they cannot communicate and have a dialogue with each other. To stress cooperation, Freire asserts that leaders of a liberation movement do not lead people to emancipation or decide what emancipation is and give it to the oppressed. Rather the leaders engage in dialogue with the people to author a solution. Anything less than that is manipulative, and manipulation is one element of anti-dialogical cultural action (Freire 1997, chap.3).

Leaders of genuine liberation movements do not aim at conquering the people but through dialogue with them as subjects they lead the people to discuss the challenges in their social environment and work on transforming the environment. What binds the subjects together is the dialogue, communication, and cooperation to work on common challenges that they share in their desire to humanize themselves. A critical advantage of the cooperation among subjects is that it enables them to unveil the myths covering their social reality. Although a person might spearhead the process, ultimately all the oppressed have to be involved in the process as subjects (Freire 1997, chap.3).

The ability for the leaders and the members of the group to work together is facilitated by the sense of trust, communion, and humility between the leaders and people. As leaders show confidence and dedication to the aspirations of the people, the people respond by trusting the leaders. Leaders, however, in their trust of the people always remain concerned about the oppressor consciousness existing in the mindset of the oppressed.

There can be no liberation according to Freire without unity among the oppressed and between the oppressed and their leaders. Freire is however suspicious that leaders of a liberation movement can easily use power against members of the organization. The way to go against that tendency is working in communion with the people. While the leaders of the liberation movement owe their position to the unity among the people, the dominant elites owe their position to divide and rule tactics. Indeed, because their tactics are internalized by the oppressed, the internalized oppressor consciousness in the oppressed constitutes one of the major threats to the unity of the oppressed (Freire 1997, chap.3).

Another threat to the unity of the oppressed is their fear of freedom, especially when domination is so strong that it almost results in a state of inertia. This state of inertia is caused by the oppressors who are so powerful that it becomes an overwhelming reality to the oppressed. This situation is further solidified by the belief that certain mysterious forces are the real cause of the oppressive situation such that the oppressed see the past and present as the same and on that basis see no hope in the future (Freire 1997:154). According to Freire, the critical step in destroying the equilibrium created by domination is to de-ideologize the people by making them come to realize why they are in their predicament and how the predicament is perpetuated. This entails raising the consciousness of the people to see the need for change and work themselves towards transforming the oppressive situation based on problem posing educational pedagogy. In doing this, it has to be taken into cognizance that the people will come from different social statuses.

Depending on the social and historical situation, the process of raising the consciousness of the people will go through five levels: consciousness of being a subject; consciousness of the forces of oppression; consciousness of being an oppressed individual; consciousness of being a member of an oppressed social class; and finally, being conscious of the fact that human beings can make history through collectively and collaboratively transforming their reality. Overall, Freire asserts that “the method used to achieve the unity of the oppressed will depend on the latter’s historical and existential experience within the social structure” (Freire 1997:156). This assertion of his allows for flexibility in the application of his pedagogy for social transformation. For instance, the dialogical education for peasants will be different from that of the urban working class. And the dialogical education for both groups will vary between the developed and developing societies.

If the oppressed are able to achieve unity, the next step in the theory of dialogical education for cultural action is the need for organization among them. Organization will provide them an institutional framework within which they can articulate their understanding of reality and how to transform it. Organization will help them to counterbalance the process of manipulation that is used by oppressors to disorganize them, thereby preventing the potential for significant change. Unity and organization are critical for the liberation of the oppressed because liberation is a collective and collaborative task that can only be realized if the oppressed accept to participate in the process and be a witness to it. No leaders or educators can liberate people or bestow freedom on the people (Freire 1997:68-105).

Exactly what sort of witness in the form of participation the oppressed can engage in is a specific historical and situational question, but it is certain that they must be a witness to the process of their liberation. Being a witness and participation of the oppressed in their process of liberation must be constituted out of critical reflection (praxis) of their existential reality. There is no universal formula on how this should happen given the degree of variation in existential reality of the oppressed in different societies.

If organization is important for the participation of the oppressed in the fight for their liberation and if the fight is to be dynamic and effective, certain conditions have to be satisfied. There has to be: integrity in the organization, i.e., actions must match words; there has to be strong determination to confront reality with the aim of transforming it even though the process is fraught with uncertainties; there needs to be courage to love justice and commitment to the humanization of the oppressed through struggle for transformation; there must be faith and hope in the ability of the people to demystify the myths used to perpetuate their domination (Freire 1997, chap.3).

In effect, Freire recognizes the critical role of leadership in his dialogical theory of cultural action for liberation. He asserts that without leadership discipline, the organization for liberation will be weak, but even then, he is not naïve to ignore the danger of leaders of a liberation movement turning into oppressors of the oppressed. Thus he maintains that organizations committed to the liberation of the oppressed need to internally exemplify the values they are committed to realizing when society is successfully transformed. So Freire rests his hope for the emancipation of the oppressed in the oppressed themselves. Not even the need for a disciplined and dynamic leadership is an excuse for mistreating the oppressed. The passage below affirms his commitment to the role of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation:

It is quite true that without leadership, discipline, determination, and objectives—without tasks to fulfill and accounts to be rendered—an organization cannot survive, and revolutionary action is thereby diluted. This

fact, however, can never justify treating the people as things to be used. The people are already depersonalized by oppression—if the revolutionary leaders manipulate them, instead of working towards their conscientization, the very objective of organization (that is liberation) is thereby negated. (Freire 1997:158)

The passage above shows that Freire's vision of liberation is aware of the dangers of how organizations—even those that claim to be committed to egalitarianism—sometimes end up producing oligarchies. Robert Michels' *Political Parties* (1968), and the works of Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca (see Adams & Sydie 2001), even though having a pessimistic tone, do raise genuine practical concerns about how leaders of organizations committed to the liberation of the oppressed end up being more committed to perpetuating their leadership positions and privileges. Freire envisions such a situation in his reasoning and throws his weight behind the oppressed as a matter of necessity on the need for them to be actively involved in the process of their own liberation, instead of some people bestowing freedom on them.

The last element of cultural theory of dialogical education for liberation is a concept Freire describes as *cultural synthesis*, which contrasts with “cultural invasion” as an element of antialogical cultural theory of education. According to him, in “cultural synthesis” the actors who come from “another world” to the world of the people do so not as invaders. They do not come to teach, transmit, or to give anything but rather to learn with the people, about the people's world” (Freire 1997:161).

Freire lists several elements of cultural synthesis in addition to the one mentioned above and elsewhere in the paper. For instance, the actors i.e., educators, become “integrated with the people” and work together to transform reality; there are no spectators, given that all persons are participants and collaborate in changing their existential reality. Cultural synthesis primarily focuses on demystifying the culture that legitimizes domination. Any attempt to bring about liberation in society must delegitimize the cultural ethos that legitimize oppression, which will entail bringing about some kind of cultural transformation (Freire 1997:68-105).

Cultural synthesis cannot be built on cultural invasion. In order for it not to be cultural invasion, it has to be built on the thematic investigation of the people's concerns out of which come generative themes (i.e., topics and problems for classroom educational discussion). Given that this is a collaborative project, it unequivocally demonstrates the distinction between cultural invasion and cultural synthesis. No external model is presented to the people in the beginning of the educational program. It is their systematized generative themes that are represented to them. Because the leaders work in collaboration with the people, the two sides collapsed into one, they become co-authors, co-investigators, and collaborators in unraveling social reality and changing it (Freire 1997, chap.3).

In effect, cultural synthesis, means leaders must start from the people's existential experience and move on from there. Anything other than this is manipulative. Freire recognizes the fact that if we start from the people's existential reality, we face the constraints that depending on the consciousness of the oppressed or level of perception, the oppressed may just be asking peripheral or secondary questions, which do not relate to the fundamental questions of why and how oppression and domination exist and are perpetuated. In such situations, he still recommends that we start from the level of perception of the oppressed and through dialogue, raise the depth of the conversation to a level that the oppressed can ask fundamental and systemic questions about oppression and domination (Freire 1997, chap.3).

FREIRE'S CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL THEORETICAL THEMES RELEVANT FOR SOCIAL LIBERATION

In this section I will identify and critically examine several contemporary social theoretical themes in the work of Freire, especially his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that are relevant for the conceptualization and implementation of an agenda of social liberation and emancipation. A good place to start this analysis is by examining the three concepts constituting a triangle in Freire's work: power, violence, and oppression.

Freire: The Triangle of Power, Violence, and Oppression

We can deduce from Freire's conceptualization of power and violence that anyone who is a victim of violence is oppressed. However, one cannot successfully commit violence against another person without power. So understanding power becomes central to understanding violence and oppression in society.

There are numerous definitions of power in the political sociology literature (Dahl 1970; Lukes 1974; Poulantzas

1973; Weber 1946). Synthesizing all the numerous definitions, Harold Kerbo asserts that “power may be defined in many ways but most broadly it means the ability to compel (through force, rewards, or other means) another individual to do what you want, or to give you what you want, even when it is against the other person’s interest to do so. Whatever the means of power (economic, political, military, etc) it is a generalized commodity that can serve many interests or goals” (2003:137).

Evidently power is relational and while it can be used to pursue desirable collective goals (Dahl’s & Parsons’ position), its use generally suggests the potential of conflict of interest. Freire in his initial work tended to conceptualize society in terms of oppressors and oppressed, suggesting that power is exclusively possessed by the oppressors. But given the definition of power cited above, it is clear that inequality in power can exist even among the oppressed, and not only the oppressors. If we make such a concession, then it is easy to conclude that the social spaces for violence and oppression are numerous and not just between the oppressed and oppressors as Freire originally conceived it. It is in this respect that feminist scholars such as Bell Hooks (1993:146-154) have made sympathetic criticism of Freire’s initial work as patriarchal, androcentric, especially in his use of language and conceptualization of freedom. Hooks recognizes the significant contribution that Freire has made to our understanding of the struggle for social emancipation. As we can observe here, although the initial work of Freire ignored this broader implication of his reasoning, it seems he can accommodate this criticism without a significant adjustment to the vision of his work. Indeed, Freire asserted that he has learned very much from feminist criticisms of his initial work, which subsequently compelled him to broaden his analysis (Freire 2000; Gadotti 1994; McLaren & Leonard 1993).

For the purpose of teaching social theory for social liberation, the important lesson here is that all human relationships that involve inequality in power have the potential for generating violence and oppression, especially when there is conflict of interest. Thus, violence and oppression can exist in the workplace, in the family, in school context, in racial relationships, etc. In brief, in all human relationships that involve inequity in the distribution of power, the potential for violence and oppression exists. With globalization, it becomes even more difficult to continue to maintain Freire’s originally simple binary opposition of oppressor and oppressed in a society. It seems like social reality is much more complicated than he originally laid out in his writings.

This line of reasoning is partially supported by Ralf Dahrendorf’s (1959) power conflict theory of stratification. Dahrendorf’s main argument was that in advanced industrial societies, people live in “imperatively coordinated associations” which are organizations that shape a person’s life from birth to death. He asserts that the main faultline of conflict is inequality in power and privilege between superordinates and subordinates in organizations. The tendency is for superordinates to oppress their subordinates using their power and privilege. To complicate this situation, he argues that being a subordinate in one organization does not mean one will be a subordinate in all social organizations or units of social relationship she or he is involved in. Similarly, being a superordinate in one organization does not mean one will be superordinate in all organizations or spheres of social relationships. The implication here is every person has the potential of being an oppressor and being oppressed depending on the social relationship one is involved in. Surely, one can make a case that statuses and roles do not have the same power and privilege and therefore the potential for violence will vary with status and roles, but this does not obliterate the fact that a working poor male who is presumably oppressed in his workplace could equally be a patriarchal oppressor at home. Similarly, his wife who would be the victim of his oppression, can equally oppress her children. Furthermore, older siblings can oppress younger ones.

The critical issue to note here is that oppression is not just between developed and underdeveloped countries, or the bourgeoisie and proletariat. It is potentially present in all human relationships to some extent in so far as people are engaged in relationship of unequal power. Thus we need reflexivity in order to understand our potential to harm others and be harmed by them. If this is the case, then in some way, Freire’s original binary model is somewhat simplistic even though a seminal contribution to our thinking on oppression and emancipation.

A related critical issue that Freire’s argument generates here is that he assumes that we can easily identify the oppressor and the oppressed, and the oppressive conditions. Consequently, we can strategize to dismantle the structures of oppression and domination. But in postmodern times, oppression can exist in situations where no one single person or group is directly responsible for it. The cause of the situation might be diffused and nebulous e.g., institutional racism and institutional discrimination. In effect, oppression might exist, while the cause of the oppression is mystified. And there are multiple forms of oppression (McLaren & Lankshear 1994:5-6). This can have serious implications for the strategy a group chooses to use for social emancipation.

As illustrated, Freire makes a significant contribution to our reflection on teaching social theory for social liberation by helping us to think in terms of complex social relationships and the potential for violence and oppression in

every human being vested with power over others. We can extend the discussion on the triangle of power, violence, and oppression by examining Freire's implicit sociological imagination.

Freire's Implicit Sociological Imagination: The Macro-Micro Connection in Social Analysis

Freire is not a sociologist by training but one central theme that has run through all his work is the need to see the relationship between micro-social processes and macro-social forces in any discussion regarding the process of social transformation of society. At a broader level, he is articulating the need to pay attention to the linkages between structure and agency. He underscores how personal existential experiences are intricately connected to dominant institutional organizational structures of oppression within particular historical contexts. With regards to structure and agency, Freire's "problem posing" education is an attempt to help the oppressed unravel by themselves the mechanisms used to oppress them and work collectively towards transforming the situation. Freire emphasizes the critical role of human perception and consciousness in changing social reality. In effect, Freire takes the role of social structure and institutions seriously, but he is also confident that if the oppressed work collectively in solidarity with each other, they can change the very structures that oppress them (Freire 1997, chap.3).

Although Freire is not a sociologist by training, if we compare his thoughts with C. Wright Mills' concept of sociological imagination, we can clearly reach the conclusion that the two agree on the humanistic approach to understanding society. "The sociological imagination is that sociological vision, a way of looking at the world that can see connections between the apparently private problems of the individual and important social issues. Mills argues for a humanist sociology connecting the social, personal, and historical dimensions of our lives" (Marshall 1998:420). His approach to sociology is diametrically opposed to "abstracted empiricism" and "grand theory." In a significant way, Freire apart from insisting that we should connect people's existential experiences with the structures of domination in historical context, also avoided putting forward a grand metatheory of society. It is in this respect that some scholars criticize Freire as being colloquial in his presentation of ideas and that he does not have a well-structured systematic theory of society (Coben 1999; Gaddoti 1994; Morrow and Torres 2002:1-17). Yet Freire sees himself as a practitioner and agent of social transformation committed to transforming the existential realities of the oppressed. Instead of starting with grand theory, he starts with the existential lives of the people.

The lesson that Freire leaves for us is that we cannot explain social problems by just focusing on the individual. We have to embed the individual in a historical and social context. For instance, Freire recognizes that the oppressed may be fatalistic but fatalism is not a natural state of human existence. It is rather a reaction to the structures of domination and oppression in historical context. Yet in contemporary American society, the most popular explanation for poverty is "*Social Darwinism*" i.e., survival of the fittest, which amounts to saying there is something deficient in the natural make up of the individual that affects his or her ability to compete and succeed (Kerbo 2003:269). Freire puts his hope for change in the social agency of the oppressed, assisted by the role of the educator committed to social transformation. The human community of the oppressed can improve its condition but only if as a group, the oppressed remain faithful to the struggle. Freire then is calling all marginalized people to organize and use their agency to transform the structures of domination. Another area that Freire makes additional contribution is his emphasis on what might be called bottom-up approach to public policy.

Bottom-Up Approach to Public Policy: The Primacy of Existential Experience

Freire maintains that the existential experiences and realities of the oppressed should be the starting point for the development of educational curriculum and public policy formulation. This is a bottom-up approach to issues instead of the regular top-bottom approach. Significant insight to human emancipation has been realized from the critical approach to history, which is a kind of bottom-up approach to history, similar to what Freire is suggesting (see Iggers 1997; Roberts 2001). Similarly, in the area of rural development and development policy, especially in the Third World, it is well documented that the participatory and grassroots approaches to development have been more successful in bringing about social transformation (Roy 1987). They are more successful because the programs are not imposed from above in a technocratic manner. Rather, they are developed on the basis of partnership between representatives of community development organizations and the people in the neighborhood. In the United States, some Community Development Corporations (CDCs) have successfully used such method in running the development affairs of their communities (Kleniewski 2002:282-284). In doing so, they have revived their decaying neighborhoods and therefore increased their degree of humanization. Freireans though will argue that such strategies are at best progressive but do not fully represent the core spirit of Freire's approach to social transformation, even though they ap-

propriate some elements of it (Freire 2000:55-58).

The primacy of existential experience in Freire's approach to bringing about social transformation has two major implications. First, it means that as the historical epoch or historical situation changes, similarly, the existential experience will vary. Because the existential experience vary, the strategy adopted to liberate the oppressed will also vary. Consequently, the content of education for social liberation will also vary. This leads to the second implication, which is that according to Freire, there is no universal formula for the liberation of the oppressed that cut across time and space. Furthermore, because existential experience will vary even within the same country owing to differences in the degree of oppression by social class location, gender, race, ethnicity and region, the strategy adopted will vary even though this does not preclude cooperation and alliance among different groups (Gaddoti 1994:31-48)

Although Freire was significantly influenced by Hegel, his position here contrasts with Hegel's privileging of the state and world historical heroes who he considered to be above moral reprimand. Thus Freire gives critical role for the oppressed in the process of social transformation, and not the elites. But Freire has been criticized by some scholars as someone who is just a populist, or that his role as a teacher with a pedagogic strategy and the role of organizational leaders committed to social transformation are seen as being similar in terms of making behind the scenes decisions about the direction of learning or the content of the transformational curriculum. In this respect therefore, they argue that Freire's approach varies only to some degree from the role of leaders or teachers in an oppressive society. For instance, they assert that in his main book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1997) Freire was more likely to cite an elite scholar to substantiate his argument than cite the ordinary masses he was committed to helping and also learned from. A second criticism raised has to do with the fact that some of the critical leadership roles that Freire played in the implementation of policies of education for social transformation were all at the auspices of governing elites who set the agenda for social transformation e.g., Chile, Bolivia, Sao Paulo, Tanzania, and Guinea-Bissau. The masses might have been supportive of the leadership but critical decisions were made by the leadership instead of ordinary citizens (Coben 1998:53-115).

Freire defended himself against these criticisms, which are legitimate issues to ponder on. Yet the important legacies he bequeathed to those committed to social liberation is that public policies should be developed from bottom-up. Unfortunately, most economic reasoning that informs public policy are based on abstract empiricist grand theorizing, instead of the existential / historical experience of the people. Related to this is the fact that many public policy recommendations forced on Third World countries in the area of economic development are based on grand theories of how societies function in developed countries of the West (Bello 1994; Todaro & Smith 2003). Often, the empirical validity of such reasoning even in the West are questionable. What Freire is asserting in relation to the agenda of social emancipation is that policies for development in general should be based on the existential realities of the people; otherwise it will amount to "cultural invasion." Freire also made significant contribution to the idea of social liberation by juxtaposing community and individualism.

The Social Context for Humanization: Community versus Individualism

An important issue that Paulo Freire addressed in his work was the conditions under which a person can realize her or his freedom and become more humanized. Freire is not satisfied with the formal entitlement of rights; he wants to be sure that every person in society has the material and social means to exercise the rights. His central argument is that we can neither be human nor increased the degree of our humanization in so far as we remain as individuals. In effect, to be human and to increase the degree of one's humanization, a person needs to be in solidarity and communion with other humans. In particular, the oppressed will never experience social liberation without working in solidarity as a group to change their circumstances. If every member of the oppressed struggle as an individual, he or she will hardly achieve much, if any. By emphasizing the group and community, Freire, is not undermining the individual as an ontological being. He is rather asserting that for the individual to realize her or his "ontological vocation" to be more human, they need to be part of a community that shares solidarity.

What Freire is saying in this respect is attested to by extensive data documenting the decline of social capital in the United States. This decline is exemplified by declining degree of participation by individuals in organizations or social activities that symbolize the strength of a healthy community (Putnam 2000). But being part of a community without organization, strategizing, reflection, and action i.e., praxis, there is no hope for social liberation. Freire also has a conception of social reality that is complex and he believes that to achieve social liberation, educational pedagogy has to take that into cognizance. Freire's vision of social liberation is also tied to the critical role of effective communication.

Communication and Social Transformation: The Centrality of a Common Language

Like Jurgen Habermas, Freire's main social agenda is the social liberation and emancipation of the oppressed, of course, granting that there are different degrees of oppression (Morrow & Torres 2002:1-17; McLaren & Lankshear 1994:5-6). In both teaching pedagogy and the mobilization of the oppressed to pursue the struggle for social emancipation, there is need for a common language that all involved in the dialogue can understand. Freire does not support the use of sophisticated professional jargon that excludes or confuses people. The community of the oppressed for Freire must have a language through which they can access or participate in any dialogue. Thus Freire supports the idea of literacy in vernacular, though he is not totally opposed to literacy in the dominant language (see Purcell-Gates & Waterman 2000). Not only are the oppressed supposed to have a common language for communication, but they must also be "passionate" about it because the dialogue is about their lives and existential reality. This position contrasts Freire with Habermas. The participants in Habermas' emancipatory project are all rational beings and use the force of rationality as the only criteria to convince themselves of the validity of an argument made in a dialogue. They have presumably no passion, or if they do, using it in a dialogue would contaminate the process of genuine rational discourse (Morrow & Torres 2002:1-17).

Language is indeed what makes us really human and without it, communication will be impossible. As Whorf argues, language is not just a means of communication but it shapes our understanding of social reality (1956). Without effective communication, dialogical education and emancipatory action in solidarity will be impossible because it will be difficult to reach common understanding of the social reality that needs to be changed. This means that from the point of view of dialogical education and social emancipation, we have to move away from using technical jargon that will obfuscate the message. Indeed, we may need to learn story telling techniques so that we can powerfully communicate our message effectively, in order to connect with the oppressed without being elitist (Marris 1990). We cannot, however, connect with the oppressed without being close to them and learning from them. This however can be a very serious challenge given how society has become socially very diversified along numerous dimensions. Post-industrial society has created many social classes and social divisions resulting in segregated neighborhoods. Getting a common language for all the oppressed in their diverse groups can be a formidable task. But this is more a challenge than a questioning of Freire's wisdom. When we teach social theory, we should avoid intimidating students with high-sounding vocabularies. Even where the authors of the course text use difficult language, we should paraphrase it into more accessible form as C. Wright Mills did with some of Talcott Parsons' work (Marshall 1998:420). With many trends in this postmodern age creating a feeling of uncertainty and gloom about the struggle for social justice and emancipation, Freire makes another significant contribution by inspiring us to keep hope alive, have courage, and maintain a realistic concept of utopia for the oppressed in particular, and humanity in general.

Hope, Courage, and Utopia: The Precondition for "A Luta Continua"

Freire was someone who was imprisoned for no obvious criminal act, and later forced to go on exile from his country of birth for fifteen years because the powers that be felt threatened by his ideas about raising the consciousness of the oppressed and commitment to struggle against oppression. Freire understands that fighting for social liberation can be time-consuming, frustrating, humiliating, and even crushing. This is why he devoted some of his work to counseling people to see having hope as an invaluable resource for the struggle against the structures of domination and oppression, which are very overwhelming.

Hope in the possibility of greater humanization and believing that this is the ontological vocation of humans is critical in the struggle for social liberation. Surely the inspiration to have hope can come from many sources (Freire 2000:42-51). Freire was a Catholic and was significantly influenced by the ideas of Catholic priest and scholars resisting injustice in Latin America. But it is fair to say that Catholicism is not the only source of hope. Hope provides the courage to continue the struggle in spite of the seeming slow phase of progress sometimes and in some cases outright set back. Hope and courage provide the energy to continue fighting for a future that is believed to be possible and more human. The future that is more human and possible through continued struggles is what Freire refers to as utopia. The reader must be cautioned that Freire's utopia is not the same as the typical concept of utopia that has shaped the trajectory of 20th century violent history (Rothstein et al. 2002; Rummel 1997; Scott 1999). A critical distinction between Freire's utopia and 20th century utopia that was characterized by terror is that Freire maintains throughout his life that there is no finished or complete model of society. The struggle for increased humanization will be a continuous one and the level one is at depends on the historical epoch and their location in the social structure.

Freire has been criticized by some scholars on grounds that he did not oppose the oppressed using violence to fight for increasing their degree of humanization. His argument was that being oppressed is not a natural state of affairs. The existence of the oppressed is a product of the violent exercise of power by the oppressors. So when the oppressed react violently, they are not initiating violence, but trying to undo the violence originally deployed against them by the oppressors. Freire does not support replacing one group of oppressors with another. He only allows violence to be used to the extent that it recreates social order to a point where everyone is genuinely free to be human, including the oppressors. For Freire, you cannot dehumanize someone without dehumanizing yourself.

Thus his concept of utopia is not the type that assumes perfect harmony in society, where there will be no need to struggle. His utopia is a historically grounded one given that the struggle for social liberation starts at different historical moments and progresses at different rates. This concept of utopia has become particularly refreshing after the collapse of grand meta-theories of utopia on both the Left and Right in the 20th century. As a very realistic goal sensitive to historical reality, and vested in the solidarity of the continued struggle by the oppressed, Freire's utopia is not making any false promises. It is this realization that will make the Freirean to continue to energetically pursue social emancipation in spite of the seeming collapse of hitherto grand Left wing utopias. Without a concept of utopia, Freire would say that the struggle for social liberation (whether on the Right or Left) would lack energy, focus, and direction. With a concept of utopia as a bearing and signpost, the struggle for human emancipation will continue i.e., "A Luta Continua." As Freire reflects on keeping hope alive in the struggle for human emancipation, he recognizes the danger of skeptical postmodernism.

The Danger of Skeptical Postmodernism to Human Ontological Vocation

Skeptical postmodernists make certain assumptions about the human being as a subject and use those assumptions to criticize modern society. Freire's pedagogic strategy is aimed at transforming the oppressed from being an object in the hands of oppressors to a historical subject. However, influenced by structuralist perspective of reasoning such as Althusser's, skeptical postmodernists discount the individual because his or her actions or plans make no difference in a society where structural forces are the main social forces are the main factors used in accounting for causality and social change. "Structuralism and system analysis, then deny the possibility of a subject with any personal capacity to maintain or change social relations (Althusser 1971:160). Postmodernists vehemently agree with Levi Strauss for instance when he asserted that the commitment of his research was "not to constitute man but to dissolve him" (Levi Strauss 1966:247-255). Since structure overwhelms individuals, postmodernists are committed to analyzing society with the subject totally banished. They are skeptical about the capacity of individuals as agents of history to change structures even when the structures are oppressive. This is a very pessimistic view of history and the future of humanity. There seems to be no hope for humans living under oppression in this framework of analysis. The impression is also created that structures automatically reproduce themselves, or that when humans help in their reproduction, the humans too in doing that are compelled to behave that way by structures. According to Ball, "human agents act in a world constituted by large scale social structures that are not the products of anyone's plans" (1987:7).

In effect, skeptical postmodernists by questioning the relevance of the subject in social analysis and shaping history undermine many of the fundamental concepts that constitute the essence of Freire's pedagogy for social emancipation. There will be no thematic investigation as suggested in Freire's pedagogic strategy because of the fundamental assumptions about humans and human society that postmodernists make. Indeed, the concept "human" becomes irrelevant. It is in this respect that Freire and Freireans warned against the seeming hopelessness of some strands of postmodern theorizing with regards to the possibility of the social emancipation of the oppressed in the future (Gaudiano and de Alba 1994:123-140; McLaren and Leonard 1993:6-7; McLaren 1994:192-215). Some critiques assert that postmodern language is hardly accessible to ordinary people. Yet it is fair to also note that there are ways in which post-structuralist and postmodern analyses of the use of language to reproduce power, domination, and oppression "complement and extend Freire's position on language" (McLaren and da Silva 1993:57).

CONCLUSION

Freire's counsel to us may come across as probably too expensive. But it teaches us that oppressors should cultivate humility and avoid imposing their *Weltanschauung* (i.e., worldview) on the oppressed using either subtle or crude techniques. All the techniques used by oppressors amount to *conquest* and *divide and rule tactics*. The struggle for

increased humanization is a continuing one. As Freire argues, there is no finished model of society. Social structure is always in motion. To transform the status-quo might be perceived by some people as very expensive, but keeping the status quo is equally costly because the oppressed are on daily basis paying the price for keeping the system alive. We cannot wish the oppression away by using flamboyant political rhetoric.

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