A Pedagogy for the Oppressor: Re-envisioning Freire and Critical Pedagogy in Contexts of Privilege

Chris K. Bacon

"I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred; he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity."

_Nelson Mandela (1994: 625)_

"Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human."

_Paulo Freire (1970: 44)_

"A study of education for social justice is not complete without reference to the work of Paulo Freire." At that time, I had no idea who Freire was, only that I would have to completely revise what I thought was my final paper. Though chagrined about the added work, I had no idea that my entire outlook on education was about to change.

This was one of many transformative conversations I had with David Selvaraj, Executive Director at Visthar, a non-profit organization advancing the rights of marginalized populations in Bangalore, India. That semester, I was one of fifteen undergraduates from the U.S. participating in Visthar's "Social Justice, Peace, and Development" programme. For many of us, our experience at Visthar was the first time we had truly grappled with issues of power, privilege, and our own complicity in systems of oppression - systems like those explored in Freire's seminal work, _Pedagogy of the Oppressed_ (1970).

A decade later, Freire's work is a cornerstone of my own practice with students, youth workers, and future educators in the U.S. and abroad. Much of this work, however, is conducted among participants whose race, nationality, sexual orientation, and a host of other factors place them in positions of relative societal privilege. Among such populations, Freire's work generally elicits one of two reactions: Some participants feel unjustly pigeonholed into a stigmatized role of the "oppressor" and therefore distance themselves from the work. More often, however, the opposite occurs - as participants increasingly identify with the cause of the oppressed, they begin to identify themselves as oppressed, and we are left in what Allen (2002) called "a delusional space where everyone is the oppressed and no one is the oppressor." In such a case, we rally to resist the oppressors but neglect to identify whom exactly we are resisting, for if this is done, we may come to realize that we are speaking of ourselves.

Since Freire's approaches, and those of the wider field of critical pedagogy, are characteristically geared towards the oppressed, less work has explored the application of these theories among more privileged populations. Since these groups arguably represent..."
Freire’s “oppressor,” one must ask: Is critical pedagogy relevant for such groups? And more important, are such groups relevant to critical pedagogy? Answering these questions requires a re-envisioning of the paradigm of pedagogy of the oppressed. One must explore what role, if any, the oppressor should play in what Freire called “the human task: the permanent transformation of reality in favor of the liberation of people” (1970: 102). These ideas will be explored below as a “Pedagogy for the Oppressor.”

PART I: IS A PEDAGOGY FOR THE OPPRESSOR NECESSARY?

The “Why Bother?” Mindset

For Freire, true liberation can only stem from the oppressed themselves. In his words:

Although the situation of oppression is a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress, it is the latter who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle (1970: 47).

This paper takes no issue with that point. The transformative work done within and among the oppressed must continue unabated. However, does this mean that the oppressors are released from any obligation to act? Should the oppressor play any role, albeit secondary, in expediting the movement toward liberation? Just as France and England completed the English Channel Tunnel by digging from their separate shores, perhaps too, in justice, there is movement to be made on both sides.

Some discount the need for critical pedagogics among the privileged. Derman-Sparks and Ramsey noted that many shrugged off the idea with a “why bother” mindset: “After all, their children [are] not confronted by negative identity-damaging stereotypes and alienated from images and practices in their classrooms” (2004: 1). This mentality overlooks two key points: First, it presumes that privilege on certain social spectra, such as race or social class, inherently immunizes individuals from all other “negative, identity-damaging stereotypes” grounded in gender, sexual orientation, or otherwise. While unfounded attempts to imply false equivalence between all forms of oppression must be eschewed (McLaren 2001; Peel 2001), the dismissal of critical pedagogy as inherently irrelevant to the lived experiences of the privileged oversimplifies the dynamics of oppression.

Secondly, the “why bother” mentality absolves the privileged from any examination of their own role in oppressive systems. As Breault stated, while students from privileged backgrounds “are seldom considered at-risk…. They come from a social class that is at-risk to maintain the status quo” (2003: 4). Since, historically, those in power control the systems that create, maintain, and reproduce the social order, this population is the linchpin of the system’s continuation. As such, pedagogies that explicitly explore the dynamics of oppression are deeply relevant among such groups, particularly in addressing the role that privilege plays in maintaining unjust systems.

A Different Pedagogy for a Different Positionality

For Freire, the oppressor and the oppressed exist in dialectical kinship and, therefore, must both be liberated from the dehumanizing system of oppression (1970). This should not be taken to mean, however, that the oppressors themselves are oppressed (Allen 2002). Consequentially, Freire’s approaches cannot simply be transposed onto the situation of the oppressor; fundamental differences in privilege, access to power, and investment in the status quo must be taken into account. While a Pedagogy for the Oppressor may ground itself in the same liberatory goals as pedagogies for the oppressed, it must be theorized and operationalized differently within contexts of relative privilege.

While some work has been done in this vein, certain points of ideological dissonance arise when enacting a Pedagogy for the
Oppressor: First, there is the question of how one identifies the oppressor in the first place, particularly in contexts where the distinction is not always clear-cut. Second, there is the problematic nature of how the oppressor should be viewed: as a complexified individual, or as a faceless problem to be corrected. Finally, there is the seeming paradox of an educator’s desire “change” the oppressor without reverting to an anti-Freirean “banking model” of education that categorically devalues students’ background funds of knowledge.

The remainder of this paper explores these tensions. However, it must be kept in mind that a Pedagogy for the Oppressor must only exist in explicit service to the larger liberatory goals of the oppressed. Therefore, at each juncture in exploring a Pedagogy for the Oppressor, one must continuously ask “Does this expedite the journey toward liberation?” and use the answer as a metric for the efficacy of such a pedagogy.

**PART II: A PEDAGOGY FOR THE OPPRESSOR**

**Complexifying the Caricaturized Oppressor**

Freire wrote from a context in which, for him, there was a clear demarcation between the oppressor and the oppressed. As such, his work puts little emphasis on how one identifies and names the oppressor. While there are certainly circumstances of unambiguous oppression, in many contexts, making such a clear distinction becomes problematic. An effective Pedagogy for the Oppressor must, therefore, be able to readily specify and contextualize variegated dynamics of oppression. Many discussions around oppression, however, revolve around a *caricaturized oppressor* - a faceless, unnamed entity that represents all things oppressive. Such a conceptualization, however, often becomes impractical when confronted with a classroom full of living, breathing students and the multifaceted roles they occupy.

To draw out this complexity, Allen (2002) advocated a more nuanced understanding of oppression, borrowing from Collins’s

**Black Feminist Thought** (2002). Rather than a bifurcated dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed, Collins outlined a matrix of *intersectionality*:

Intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice (2002: 18).

For Collins, oppression is not static; its dynamics shift depending on the context, the issue at hand, and the individuals involved. For example, Collins argued that women may act in solidarity against oppressive patriarchal systems, but this does not nullify other power dynamics, such as race or class, that continue to exist *within* the oppressed group. In this way, oppression is operationalized contextually, highlighting the particular dynamic being addressed, but also acknowledging the multifaceted identities of the actors involved.

The complex, contextualized nature of this approach is decidedly relevant within a Pedagogy for the Oppressor. Through such a matrix, students can begin to engage in a more nuanced exploration of the oppressed-oppressor dynamic. As Allen and Rossatto wrote,

> Students should understand that they can be simultaneously the oppressor within one totality and the oppressed within another, and they should be concerned about both their own oppression and their oppression of others (2009: 171).

As such, a student who considers herself oppressed in terms of her social class may be confronted with her own privilege in terms of race, sexual orientation, or any number of social dynamics. Under the traditional, bifurcated understanding of oppression, such a situation regularly creates a predictable ideological dissonance: If one can only exist as either oppressed or oppressor,
individuals confronted with their own privilege often become defensive and resistant. Acknowledgement of privilege, after all, would mean aligning oneself with the oppressor and renouncing all solidarity with the oppressed. On the other hand, a more complexified conceptualization of oppression carves out a space in which contextual privilege can be acknowledged and explored, free from the dichotomized-oppressor stigma that obstructs open and honest dialogue before it can begin.

The Humanized Oppressor

Even after oppression is complexified, a second ideological dissonance emerges: A strong body of educational literature argues that effective pedagogies must value students’ home cultures and the “funds of knowledge” they bring into the classroom (Delpit and Dowdy 2008; González, Moll, Amanti 2013). But what happens when those funds of knowledge constitute the very ways of thinking that a critical educator sets out to change? As a result of this tension, many discussions of critical pedagogies among the privileged involve an “enlightened” teacher who must “fix” a group of “broken” students.

So how does one reconcile the valuation of students’ funds of knowledge with the fact that, in all likelihood, these knowledge funds reinforce oppressive systems? To answer this question, one must ask whether deficit-based views of students as “oppressors to be fixed” will expedite freedom for the oppressed. Since teachers who hold deficit views of their students are far less likely to be impactful (Ford, Harris, Tyson, Trotman 2002; Howard 2013; Ladson-Billings 1999), a solution may lie in giving recognition to individual students’ personal journeys toward critical consciousness—seeking to understand, rather than dismiss, their background knowledge base. Jansen (2009) described an encounter with a white undergraduate at a South African university who “returns from a field trip to the Apartheid Museum and is filled with anger as she challenges the professor for what she feels is a lack of balance in dealing with the pain of loss among whites” (Jansen 2009: 186).

Rather than writing off the student’s objections, Jansen advocated first understanding her reaction in terms of her background knowledge base:

The young white woman... had just had a terrifying experience. Until that day, her belief system rendered blacks as the aggressive enemy and whites as decent and civilized. Everything she was told about her people fell apart as she encountered, for the first time, the racial oppression and economic exploitation of whites upon blacks. To simply dismiss this young woman as an incorrigible racist is to incite racial anger and conflict on both sides of the divide.... [Instead,] her humanity must be accessed (Jansen 2009: 188)

The challenge, therefore, lies not only in humanizing the oppressor, but in compellingly accessing that humanity in a way that takes students’ prior knowledge and value systems into account - even if these are the value systems brought into question within a Pedagogy of the Oppressor. It is, indeed, a delicate and difficult balancing act, particularly as the critical journey turns inward, as one’s own role in maintaining oppressive systems must, inevitably, be confronted.

Gradients of Gradualism

While complexifying oppression and humanizing the oppressor lay important groundwork for a Pedagogy for the Oppressor, the role the privileged play in maintaining social inequities must be addressed for meaningful change to occur (Kemmel 2002). Most proponents of critical pedagogy agree that a) oppression must be made visible, b) students must understand the ways they benefit from oppressive systems, and c) students must critically examine their own role in perpetuating these systems. While most approaches incorporate all three tenets, some address all aspects at once, asserting that students must immediately confront their own privilege and complicity in oppressive systems. Others argue that “direct and unmediated confrontation with disruptive
Re-visioning Paradigms

knowledge" seldom results in lasting change (Jansen 2010: 374). Instead, such shock-and-awe approaches often “chas[e] off resistant oppressors, leaving them unchanged and still perpetuating their dehumanizing tendencies against the oppressed” (Allen 2002: 31).

While some might argue that a gradual approach is tantamount to coddling potential oppressors, as Freire argues, “One does not liberate people by alienating them” (1970: 79). Additionally, a distinction must be made that gradual does not mean slow. A gradualized approach is a decidedly strategic one that takes into account the human tendency to fear and resist fundamental systemic change, even when such changes are beneficial (Marris 1974). While arguments for more forthright approaches are valid, a more direct route is not always more expedient if one is fighting an uphill battle against defensive resistance. It must again be remembered that the larger goal of a Pedagogy for the Oppressor is emancipation for the oppressed, and a pedagogy that alienates rather than creating allies is likely of little help to the that cause.

Conclusion: Solidarity in Difficult Dialogues

It is at this point that the educator plays an increasingly pivotal role in a Pedagogy for the Oppressor. As students begin to critically examine their own complicity in oppressive systems, there will likely be defensive resistance (Derman-Sparks, Ramsey 2004). However, in such situations, there may be a desire for educators to ideologically distance themselves from the students. As Jansen (2010) noted,

The natural compulsion of any teacher is to tell, to demonstrate authority and to inculcate (what a brutal word) knowledge.... It is especially the case that when controversial questions or difficult subjects emerge, the teacher is even more attentive to managing the classroom situation lest things get out of control. Unfortunately, this is the direct opposite of what is required for a critical dialogue.... (371)

Ironically, this leads some to fall back on pedagogies grounded in the very “banking concept” of education Freire argued against. In such a system “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (1970: 72). However, it is at this point that critical educators, rather than placing themselves above the dialogue, must become part of the dialogue. In a truly impactful Pedagogy for the Oppressor, educators must be present in solidarity with their students throughout the complex, demanding journey. If complexifying oppression and humanizing the oppressor mean valuing students for who they are, and a gradualized approach recognizes where they are, then the next stage of a Pedagogy for the Oppressor is about truly being where they are.

In this way, a Pedagogy for the Oppressor returns to its source: Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed. For Freire, education was not a vertical hierarchy in which an enlightened teacher hovered above flawed students in need of knowledge deposits. Instead, Freire advocated a co-constructive education between teachers and students. As he wrote,

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, though the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human being pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (1970: 72).

This co-constructive knowledge forms the foundation for an impactful Pedagogy for the Oppressor. Complexifying oppression, humanizing the oppressor, and a gradualized, strategic approach all offer possibilities for productive applications of Freire’s work in contexts of relative privilege. Rather than dismissing the need for critical pedagogies in such contexts, a Pedagogy for the Oppressor fosters critical dialogue among educators and students, all of whom represent a miasma of privilege, funds of knowledge, and contextualized experiences from which to draw strength in solidarity. While this approach cannot take the place of the work occurring among the oppressed toward the larger emancipation
of humanity, a Pedagogy for the Oppressor may provide possibilities for expediting the journey.

References


