

*50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition of Pedagogy of the Oppressed* New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic 2020 219 pp

## A Review

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I think that it was in 1971. I was working at the Institute of Adult Education at the University of Dar es Salaam at the time. I had stopped by to drop something off at the home of Marjorie Mbilinyi, an Education Professor at the University. She held up a red covered book, a penguin edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and said, "You have to read this. It is the best book that I have ever seen on the radical potential of literacy and adult education!" I am not sure how I got my copy, but I did. I read it. And the reading of *Pedagogy* was like being immersed in an intellectual Northeastern Brazilian tropical storm. For Marjorie and myself and the many others working in education in support of Mwalimu Julius K Nyerere's vision of African socialism, Freire's book was the first piece of writing that provided us with a theoretical underpinning to what we were trying to do. It was an empowering book. It was a book of validation. It was an intellectual tour de force about adult education and literacy, a field of educational discourse that was marginal and under theorized. The stories that Freire told brought classic socialist thinkers such as Marx, Engels, Lenin, Lukacs with existentialist thinking of Sartre and deBeauvoir, with the phenomenology of Husserl, the humanistic psychology of Fromm, the theological ideas of Niebuhr, the global South revolutionary thinkers such as Fanon and deBray with the thoughts of peasants from North Eastern Brazil. No one had previously had the imagination to bring these thinkers together before. But to my mind what makes *Pedagogy* so powerful is that the theoretical scaffolding which Freire created grew from his practice. Before the theories, before the sophisticated even elegant arguments, was the lived experience of Freire and the thousands of Northeastern Brazilian peasants who were part of the transformative literacy movement based on the creation of cultural circles, circles of dialogue. At the heart of what happened when literacy learners and teachers came together to learn reading and writing through discussions of their lives of poverty, oppression and subjugation was conscientization. Freire told the world what many of us knew from our practices of teaching and learning that education is not neutral. That that process of learners being transformed from objects of theory into subjects of their own history was the heart of what education for radical social change should aspire to. His poetic ability to express his ideas such as the explanation that learners needed to move from "reading the word to reading the world" caught our imaginations. Those of us working in literacy, adult education, education more broadly not only had a critical role to play in a transition to a more just and equitable world, we were in some ways a critical or foundational element in the historic project of socialism.

There is a list somewhere of the 25 most cited social science works according to Google Scholar. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is listed as number 3 in this list. What is astounding is that *Pedagogy* is the only book out of 25 written by someone outside of Europe and North America! His is the only book from the global South, that word which we use to refer to 80 per cent of the world's population. The fact that the majority of the world's writers and thinkers are excluded

from this list says a lot about the unequal distribution of knowledge in the world. But for purposes of our reflections about *Pedagogy*, the question is what is it about this book and this man that has allowed his work to be so well known. Some have said that he was the most influential educational thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. So, the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a most welcome event.

The Introduction to the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition is by Donaldo Macedo. Macedo of the many fine critical educators who worked and published with Freire in the last years of his life was in my opinion closest to Freire. I will return to why I think that Macedo's introduction is the best piece that I have read on *Pedagogy*. Readers will also be interested to hear from Ira Shor, a good friend of Paulo's and a great teacher. Shor provides an Afterword. There are also short thoughts from a list of others who have been associated with Freire's work including Marina Aparicio Barberan, Noam Chomsky, Gustavo Fischman, Ramon Flecha, Ronald Glass, Valerie Kinloch, Peter Mayo, Peter MacLaren and Margo Okazawa-Rey. One disappointing note is that this list of authoritative voices about the work of Freire does not include a single Brazilian, Latin American, African, Asian, Caribbean, Arabic or Indigenous voice. Why not?

Macedo's introduction provides us with important insights into why *Pedagogy* the book has had the remarkable popularity that it is. The publishers note that more than 1 million copies of *Pedagogy* have been sold. Macedo opens his introduction with the observation that, "Leading intellectuals...have wisely and incessantly alerted people around the world of the dire consequences...of the far-right hegemony that, if left unchecked may potentially result in the end of humanity as we know it" (p1). Not only do we need to find an alternative political path, but central to this agenda must be the development of people's critical awareness of how they are in the world and of the world. The central goal of *Pedagogy* according to Macedo is, "to awaken in the oppressed the knowledge, creativity and critical reflective capacity necessary to unveil, demystify and understand power relations responsible for their oppressed marginalization" (p2). Macedo reminds us that Freire's intention was not specifically to advocate for a method of teaching literacy as a way of addressing the oppressive nature of 'banking method', but to introduce us to the powers of dialogue and reflection as the basis of conscientização or conscientization as the 'practice of freedom'. Macedo argues that Freire's rage and insights into the nature of class-based oppression resulted from his family's fall into poverty from middle class status when he was young. When Freire's family moved from their middle-class neighbourhood to Morro de Saude, a low-income part of Recife, he came face to face with the violence of poverty. I believe that Macedo is right about this. I also believe that the power of *Pedagogy* could not have been written without Freire's deep involvement in the literacy movements linked with the theology of liberation and revolutionary organizing in NorthEastern Brazil of the 1960s. Conscientization arose not from a study of classical thinkers but from the lives and thoughts of peasant farmers with whom he worked during these years. His genius was to learn from village intellectuals and transform their experience into a discourse which intellectuals, academics and well-educated revolutionaries could understand. Without praxis there would not have been a book called *Pedagogy*.

Ira Shor's Afterword does a lovely job articulating the pedagogical brilliance of his work. I always think of Ira as foremost a teacher, a facilitator of learning whose own explorations into how to use education as a process of liberation preceded his introduction to Freire's work. Shor's work is based in an on-going praxis. His analysis supports Freire's claim that, *Pedagogy* "is rooted in concrete situations and describes the reactions of laborers...and of middle-class persons whom I have observed...during the course of my educative work (p37). Shor provides a list of reasons why *Pedagogy* has been so widely read, debated, used and even abused over these past 50 years. While all of his reasons bear reading in full taken together *Pedagogy* provides a pedagogical link to practices of social justice, a situated pedagogy adaptable to multiple educational settings, a set of practical tools for critical pedagogues to explore, and a denunciation of oppositional leaders who denounce oppression while depending on authoritarian exhortations and propagandizing.

If you have not yet had a chance to read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, do so now. The ideas are as relevant to our battle for justice over demagoguery today as 50 years ago.

I want to close with a poem that I wrote a year after Paulo died. I share this poem because it explains I believe the other reason why the man Paulo Freire was such a powerful influence on the lives of so many of us.