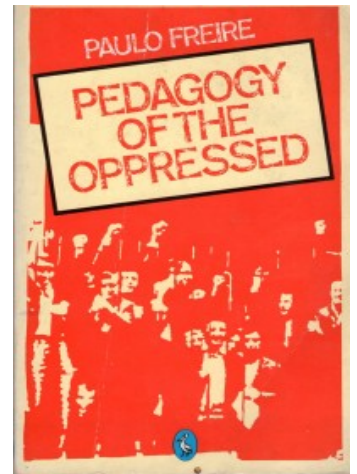


Review: Pedagogy of the Oppressed

It's a classic that I've not had the opportunity to read. Others will be familiar with the Brazilian author, *Paulo Freire*, and will be able to do a better job than I in placing him in the social volatility and the fomenting revolutionary thought of South America in the late 20th Century. You know, Che Guevara and all that.



My reasons for picking it up are different: It was partly due to an interlocutor on the internet who “encouraged” me to read it (I think as a defence of his position, which is strange because I don’t think Freire would approve of either his manner or method); but it was mostly due to my ongoing search for understanding as to the warps and wefts of Western political philosophy, and particularly that of progressive politics.

The reading of this book has brought me to two conclusions:

1. Western progressives do revolution really really badly.
2. Church (in the right mode) has the potential to do revolution (transformation?) really really well, as an expression of God’s project (= mission).

These are the matter of substance, and my ready point of application throughout the book.

Freire is an educator, and this *is* a pedagogy, a method or theory of *teaching*. The focus in this book is the context of an *oppressed* class within an *oppressive* societal framework.

The implicit goal of the book is to so educate the oppressed that they are no longer that.

But this does not mean freeing the oppressed as just an exchange of places within the oppressive regime – the oppressed learns to “win” at the oppression game, so to speak – but towards a revolution that doesn’t just eliminate the oppressor, but the oppression itself. If there were a broad brush-stroke critique of Western progressives from this book it is this – they are seeking to *win* the oppressing game, not transcend it; Western progressivism looks more like sectarianism – a reaction against “conservative” than anything that is likely to bring freedom and bring life.

Even in his initial broad terms, contemporary Western progressivism falls afoul of Freire’s fundamental pedagogical project – the promotion of *dialogical* interaction, and the eschewing of objectifying didacticism. That is, there is no seeking to engage, there is a “telling what to do” in which a supposed “alignment with the oppressed” is grounds for pontification by a growing elite.

...a sectarian of whatever persuasion, blinded by his irrationality, does not (or cannot) perceive the dynamic of reality – or else he misinterprets it. (Page 17)

This is the error of both Left and Right. It’s just that the Right are blind to others, and the Left are blind to themselves. Freire wants, rather, the “radical”:

The radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a ‘circle of certainty’ within which he also imprisons reality. On the contrary, the more radical he is, the more fully he enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he can transform it. He is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. He is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them. He does not consider himself the proprietor of history or of men, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he does commit himself, within history, to fight at their side. (Pages 18-19)

This radicalism is at the heart of Freire's pedagogy (and therefore his revolution). Like all good revolutionary theories, it is applicable at the small scale (in families, communities, church growth theories!) to the large scale (cultural revolution). It achieves this by being thoroughly humanistic, in the good sense of the word – engaged in the “humanisation” (we might say “flourishing”) that liberates both oppressed *and* oppressor, through transformation of both lives and the historical contextual surroundings of those lives.

As I progressed through *Pedagogy* I realised that some of the concepts were familiar; in my world they are picked up in movements such as that of Missional Communities that are inherently dialogical in their mechanism and transformative (revolutionary?) in their intention. Moreover, there is a necessarily similar attitude with regard to their method. We might say “discipleship” – Freire talks about a pedagogy that must be “forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed” (Page 25). His is a method in which the oppressed find themselves, and therefore find that the surrounding system is reliant upon them, dependent on them, indeed, found “within” them – and is therefore graspable, changeable, and transformable.

There are even some common words to describe this means of transformation – *action-reflection*. For the church leader, this is the fundamental building block of discipleship. For Freire, it is the fundamentals of effective political action. I don't think the two are mutually exclusive.

Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated. At all stages in their liberation, the oppressed must see themselves as men engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human...

The insistence that the oppressed engage in reflection on their concrete situation is not a call to armchair revolution. On the contrary, reflection – true reflection – leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection. (Page 41)

In the face of progressive (and other) politics that slip into sloganeering (imposing and asserting a predetermined culture, rather than walking with the people – oppressed and asleep alike – to allow them to discover, and act upon, the truth) here is an incentive for gospel-hearted people and the church.

It is a thoroughly biblical framework of acting in the world, and reflecting it. The “reflection” aspect that is the natural locus of the church at work brings orthodoxy to practice and so foment and encourages and validates orthopraxy – right, revolutionary, world-changing actions.

This is the stuff of discipleship.

The rest of Freire’s book flows from this basis. In particular, his further work applies to the “teacher” or “leader” in the revolutionary context. This is invaluable for those engaged in church and the Western World. Freire’s force is to move leaders/teachers away from imposition and “bank deposit” teaching to dialogical teaching based on problem-solving – not mere academic problems, but problems in *reality* – in which *reality* itself mediates the disjointed approaches and different perspectives that are brought.

Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information... Indeed, problem-posing education, breaking the vertical patterns characteristic of banking education, can fulfill its function of being the practice of freedom only if it can overcome the [teacher-student] contradiction. Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist

and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers... They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow... Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught (Page 53)

This is an image that is antagonistic to much Western progressivism, which has become expert at “talking down.” But it is a wonderfully *pastoral* image that should be (but often isn’t of course) naturally embraced by church leadership. In fact, Freire remarks on the qualities of such a leadership – “love” (page 62), “humility” (page 63), “faith” albeit of a humanistic sort (page 63), “trust” (page 64), “hope” (page 64), and “critical thinking” (page 64). These are not the hallmarks of Western progressivism, or the manner of rhetoric deployed in progressive politics in recent times. They should heed Freire:

Manipulation, sloganizing, ‘depositing’, regimentation, and prescription cannot be components of revolutionary praxis, precisely because they are the components of the praxis of domination.” (Page 97)

Consider the emotive manipulation in the euthanasia debate, the sloganeering in every debate reduced to the cry of “bigot”, the regimentation needed to keep people “on message” and away from dialoguing about reality, and the tools of anti-discrimination law and other litigiousness to win the day. This is progressive politics at the moment. And it is oppressive.

When Freire talks about the anti-dialogical methods of “conquest” (page 109), “divide and rule” (page 111), “manipulation” (page 116), and “cultural invasion (page 116) – I think not only of the domination of the currently entrenched conservatives, but on the equal readiness for domination on the left. In the last few years of the political arc, people ran to what they thought was freedom, got imposition and

“cultural invasion” and have run back. We live in an endless cycle of back and forth between two ends of the same oppression.

Towards the end Freire puts forward dialogical motivators – “cooperation” (page 135), “unity for liberation” (not for its own sake, note) (page 140), “organisation” (page 143), and, of most interest to me, “cultural synthesis” (page 146).

Here is the DNA of Christian mission – being in the world but not of it, not imposing, nor ignoring, nor objectifying, but *incarnating, participating, engaging*

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 or to transmit or to give anything, but rather to learn, with the people, about the people’s world... the actors become integrated with the people, who are co-authors of the action that both perform upon the world... there are no spectators; the object of the actors’ action is the reality to be transformed for the liberation of men.

Cultural synthesis is thus a mode of action for confronting culture itself, as the preserver of the very structures by which it was formed. Cultural action, as historical action, is an instrument for superseding the dominant alienated and alienating culture. In this sense, every authentic revolution is a cultural revolution. (page 147)

I don’t see any of that in progressive (or conservative) politics. I just see more and more self-made people, imposing their world-view.

It isn’t surprising, because in the end I don’t think Freire’s project is possible without divine intervention. It relies on rehumanising, rebirthing, regenerating, reengaging. And these are, without doubt, gospel applications and divine

imperatives.

God help us.