



Darder, Antonia (2018). *The student guide to Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury.

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Probably the two works which have elicited the most exegeses (not always 'critical interpretations') of all writings produced through the ages, are the bible and Karl Marx's works. While Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire's famous work is nowhere near as popular as those two, Freire established himself with the publication of *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, as one of the most radical and important educational thinkers of the last century. In terms of the bible and *Das Kapital*, it is one of the apparent contradictions of Freire that he was both a Catholic (in fact, a co-founder of the Liberation Theology movement in Latin America) and a Marxist humanist.

Such apparent contradictions, however, could be perceived as an implicit opposition to a narrow Aristotelean logic and an embrace of what Erich Fromm, in *The art of loving* (1956), called paradoxical thinking. In other words, Marxism and Christianity could be seen as A and non-A excluding each other, but in Freire's thinking, they may have been part of the paradoxical rationality of the decolonising mind. A slightly different explanation of the peaceful co-existence of the two -isms (Catholicism and Marxism) in Freire's thinking is provided by the early epistemologist of the South himself: "God led me to the people, and the people led me to Marx" (cited in Schugurensky, 2014, p. 98). And according to Freire's widow, who is interviewed in the final chapter of the book under review: "Paulo... acknowledged the influence of the church on his thinking, but he also critiqued the traditional church, which merely reproduces the fear of God and intimidates and mistreats, castigates and punishes the people" (p. 160).

The publication history of *The pedagogy of the oppressed* is rather fascinating. Despite Freire writing in (Brazilian) Portuguese, the book was first published in Spanish (1968) and in English (1970). At that time, Brazil was at the height of a dictatorship and not only was it completely impossible to publish the book: Freire had been forced into exile, his work could not be discussed at universities, and even his very name was unmentionable. Thus it took till 1974 that the book could finally be published in Brazil.



Figure 1. The Penguin edition of *Pedagogy of the oppressed* features the above cover art by an uncredited artist (photo by the author) that at a glance, looks like a gun and is of course meant to resemble one. A more careful viewing reveals that it is a very sharp pencil fixed with a rubber band on a triangular piece of wood. Not only is the pen mightier than the sword: The pencil is mightier than the gun?

Antonia Darder's generally excellent student guide (that rightfully regards Freire's most famous book, *The pedagogy of the oppressed*, as worthy of exegesis) is meaningfully enhanced with a foreword by Donaldo Macedo (the translator of many of Freire's works and a leading Freire expert in his own right), and an enjoyable and informative interview with Ana Maria Araújo (Nita) Freire (Paulo's surviving second wife) from 2016. Antonia Darder is a Puerto Rican and American scholar, artist, poet and activist. She holds the Leavey Presidential Endowed Chair in Ethics and Moral Leadership in the School of Education at Loyola Marymount University.

The student guide proper kicks off with a succinct, yet insightful biographical sketch ("Lived History") which is accompanied by a dozen of well-chosen black-and-white photographs throughout Freire's vita. Freire's biography is well-known and it is unnecessary in our current context to reconstruct it. Apart from the chapter in Darder's book, a more detailed insight can be gained in another Bloomsbury publication, Daniel Schugurensky's *Paulo Freire* (2014). Freire's biography has been broken down into three main periods: Early Brazil (1921-1964); Exile (1964-1980) and Late Brazil (1980-1997). Parts of Freire's childhood were

characterised by poverty and the dehumanising and humiliating experience of hunger. To cite Freire: "I didn't understand anything [in school] because of my hunger. I wasn't dumb. It wasn't lack of interest. My social condition didn't allow me to have an education" (cited in p. xviii).

The book's second, well-structured chapter focuses on Freire's "Intellectual History" and is organised in three main sections with further subdivisions. The main inclusion criterion for discussing certain traditions and authors was whether or not Freire is citing their works in *The pedagogy of the oppressed*. Chapter 2's sections are: (1) Early influences (sub-divided into: radical theological influences, Latin American philosophy, existentialism, and phenomenology); (2) revolutionary influences (Marxism; Marxist intellectuals; critical theory; and anticolonial theory); and (3) educational philosophical influences (Henri Bergson; John Dewey, and Pierre Furter).

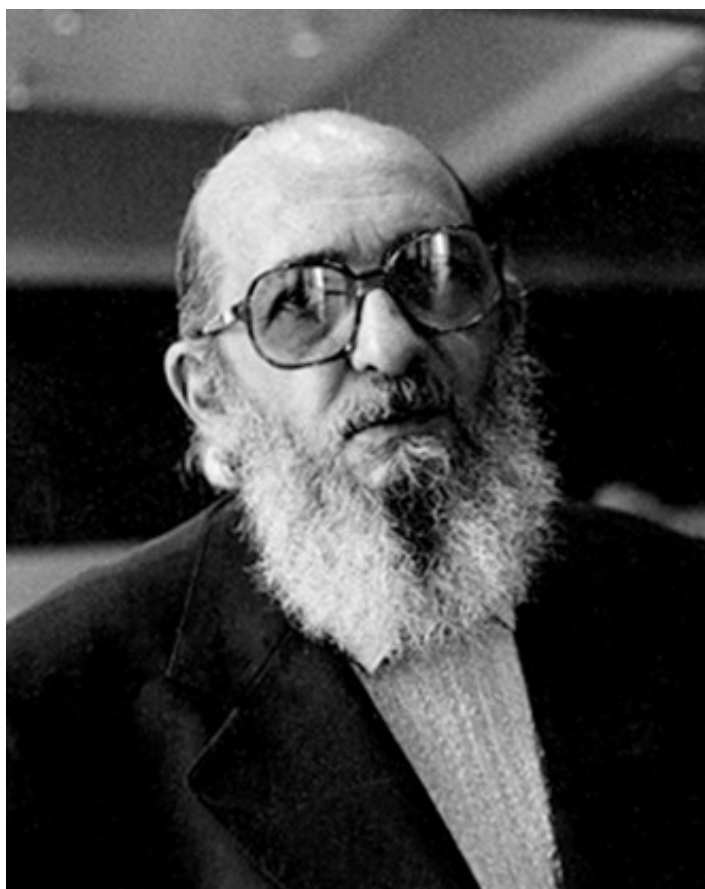


Figure 2. Paulo Freire started to sport a big beard from around 1970 onwards. This photo from 1977 was taken by Slobodan Dimitrov (CC BY-SA 3.0 license).

In chapter 2, just as for the remainder of the book, there are too many interesting passages to discuss within the narrow confines of a book review. The parts that interested me most, and that I knew relatively the least about, were the succinct introductions to Frantz Fanon's and Albert Memmi's postcolonial theories and their divergences. Memmi, a Tunisian Muslim and son of a Jewish-Italian father and Berber mother, aptly described the economic and ideological phenomenon of colonialism as akin to fascism, with racialised violence being its instrument of human

oppression.

Chapter 3 provides a helpful dialogue with the book, reconstructing its main themes chapter by chapter. It focuses on the many key concepts that can be found in Freire's seminal text: in chapter 1 of the original text, some of Freire's key concepts are humanisation as an inescapable concern; alienation as the colonised mentality of oppression; the oppressor-oppressed contradiction as a tragic dilemma; and pedagogy as revolutionary praxis. In chapter 2 of *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Freire set out to unveil how education functions as an instrument of oppression. He introduced his famous *banking concept of education* in which "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those who they consider to know nothing", with people consequently being turned into automatons (p. 108). Freire counter-proposed a *problem-posing pedagogy* in which dialogue is indispensable and that aims at reinventing education for the practice of freedom. One of the trickiest and most important terms in Freire's terminology is *conscientização*, a term often kept untranslated in its Portuguese original. It is perhaps best translated as 'critical consciousness' (a better choice than the somewhat clumsy 'conscientisation?').

Freire, in chapter 3 of *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, discussed the dialogics of the word and naming the world and provided a methodology of *conscientização* so that people can become masters of their own thinking. In Freire's final chapter 4, he unapologetically asserted the revolutionary nature of his approach, arguing for the "umbilical cord of magic and myth which binds [us] to the world of oppression" to be cut and for the oppressed to unite (Freire, cited in p. 146). Darder's final chapter comes in the form of an interview with Freire's widow, in which Madam Freire sheds useful light on the impact, influences and legacy of Freire. Compared to the dense prose of the previous chapter, this one makes for enjoyable reading.

To this open-minded reviewer, much of Freire's life and his works in general – and much of this student guide – are intriguing and well worth our critical consideration. To me, however, the nefarious 20th century trio of Hitler, Stalin and Mao are a red flag. While Freire has thankfully nothing nice to say about the first two evil dictators, he has written approvingly on Mao Zedong's misnamed 'cultural revolution' (following the catastrophe of the 'Great Leap Forward' (another gross misnomer) during which tens of millions of Chinese died of starvation). In 1968 (when *Pedagogy of the oppressed* was first published), the horrors of Maoism were still relatively unknown, so Freire and other contemporary leftists might be forgiven for their enchantment with Mao as a result of their ignorance of the horrors of the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward. In *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Freire argues that "the culture of domination" needs to be "culturally confronted" and links this to the following approving footnote: "This appears to be the fundamental aspect of Mao's Cultural Revolution" (Freire, 1993, p. 28, fn. 10).

I have even greater difficulties with Freire's statement from 1974, made two years before Mao's death and at a time when the horrors of the Cultural Revolution had become

more well-known. Freire wrote in a difficult-to-access article, entitled "Conscientisation", that revolutionary changes of the "infrastructure" of society are usually not accompanied by a concomitant change of the "superstructure: While Freire is at least critical of Stalin (who, as Freire sarcastically writes, finally "solved" the problem "by shooting down the peasants"), he comments: "It is also the problem that Mao Tse-tung had and has, but he came up with the most genial solution of the century: China's cultural revolution" (Freire, cited in Khakpour, 2020). My difficulties become immense when more than ten years later, in 1985, Freire writes in his *Politics of education: culture, power, and liberation*:

"One of the great merits of the Chinese Cultural Revolution was its rejection of static, antidialectical, or overconservative concepts of China's history. Here there seems to be a permanent mobilization of the people in the sense of consciously creating and re-creating society. In China, to be conscious is not a slogan or a ready-made idea. To be conscious is a radical way of being, a way characteristic of humanity" (Freire, cited in Khakpour, 2020).



Figure 3. A scene from the ballet *Red detachment of women* (1972 production), one of the model dramas promoted during the Cultural Revolution. Photo by Byron Schumaker (public domain). Source: [https://web.archive.org/web/20051227194520/http://www.gmu.edu/library/specialcollections/acsnic6\\_13\\_8f.jpg](https://web.archive.org/web/20051227194520/http://www.gmu.edu/library/specialcollections/acsnic6_13_8f.jpg)

With Freire himself failing to distance himself from the horrors of Maoism, some critical evaluation of Maoism in Darder's only recently-published book would have been most appreciated. Otherwise, the accusation could be made that the critical Left somewhat fails to criticize even the most disastrous leftist ideas that led to incredible suffering and deaths of millions. Uncritical exegesis could easily turn into hagiography. In particular, I am referring to a footnote that links Althusser's critique of education to Mao (p. 61) and the discussion of "cultural revolution as living praxis" in Freire's chapter 4 (pp. 147-149).

To be sure, my major disappointment in terms of admiring references to Mao's Cultural Revolution is more with Freire himself rather than with Darder's book. I have, however, also other minor issues with the book under review. The book largely omits Freire's and Ivan Illich's mutual influence on each other. Perhaps Gabbard in his *Silencing Ivan Illich Revisited* (2020: that I reviewed in another JALT issue – Rudolph, 2020) was right after all that Illich has been excluded from the canon of educational philosophy, also in the context of Freire? Another area for improvement would be to reference better. Darder's Chapter 3, in particular, does not provide any page numbers to *The pedagogy of the oppressed* which would have made it so much easier to cross-reference to the book that the student guide studies.

At around 200 pages, this is a relatively slim tome. I would have found it useful to also make more comparisons between *The pedagogy of the oppressed* and other works by the prolific Freire. In particular, Freire's *Pedagogy of hope* (1994) is a revisiting of his earlier book, and it could have been useful to compare and contrast the two books systematically. Antonia Darder could counter-argue that if she had followed my wish, she would have well gone beyond the scope of her book, which after all was to be a *A student guide to Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed*. Moreover, Darder has authored another book which offers a more holistic approach on Freire: *Reinventing Paulo Freire. A pedagogy of love* (2017).

It is precisely this thought of reinvention that Freire also endorsed:

"Freire often reminded those who praised and adopted his ideas to not try to imitate his pedagogy, which was grounded in a particular historical and geographical context, but rather that we should seek ways to reinvent his ideas, so that our labor might truly be in sync with the actual conditions teachers are facing within their particular historical and geographic contexts" (pp. 18-19).

This means that if we discover flaws in a work such as Freire's, or things that are not applicable to a particular historical and geographical context, we should feel free to reinvent them. Freire's humility here is redeeming and makes him part of my ever-growing 'toolbox' when thinking about, and practicing, learning and teaching. Despite the above-mentioned critical comments, I nonetheless recommend Darder's book highly to all interested in Freire and his educational thought. Although Freire's own prose packs a punch, it is not easy to read. Consequently, many readers may like to get some support in appreciating his approach, and Darder provides much valuable scaffolding in interpreting Freire.

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