



This is a repository copy of *The student guide to Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/134857/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Herrick, T. (2018) The student guide to Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*. ISSN 1468-1366

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2018.1503497>

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

The Student Guide to Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, by Antonia Darder, London, Bloomsbury, 2018, 191pp., £12.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4742-5562-2

This book intends not just to inform new readers about Freire's work and life - it also hopes to fire them up into the kind of theoretically-informed social action that was a hallmark of his long career. Antonia Darder, commentator, critic, and developer of Freire's ideas, states in her introduction that "Underlying this volume is a radical hope that its use will sustain the intellectual and political formation of students, enhancing their sensibility to the political and pedagogical possibilities for building democratic voice, participation, and solidarity in the struggle for our humanity". She also intends to "illuminate [...] the central thesis and critical concepts that Freire introduced", and "to potentiate and enhance philosophical and pedagogical engagement with the themes" (p. xxii). It's an ambitious project, especially one to pursue across only 170 pages, and four chapters; perhaps inevitably, its success is a little mixed, but where it is strongest is in giving a sense of Freire's lived life, his commitments and beliefs, and how these directly shaped and influenced the best-selling text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970).

The book is structured into four chapters: the opening two explore the history of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the first in terms of Freire's life and the situation of production of the text, and the second locating it within philosophical and intellectual history. The third then analyses the text chapter-by-chapter, and a fourth and final chapter offers an interview with Ana Maria Araújo (Nita) Freire, his widow. In reviewing the book, it seems sensible to begin with the first and last chapters, as they most explicitly handle the biographical material, and by bookending the text in this manner, they helpfully frame *Pedagogy* as a specific text emerging from particular circumstances of production at a given moment in history.

As a first chapter, the biographical sketch of Freire very helpfully delineates the tumultuous political context against which Freire's thought and work developed, including how his plans for a national adult literacy strategy grounded in dialogue and mutual exchange were stymied by a military coup, which led to the dictatorial regime that forced him to leave Brazil in 1964. It convincingly makes the case that his geographical peregrinations across Latin America, North America, Europe, and Africa, are connected with his intellectual development, his commitment to supporting the oppressed wherever they might be found, and his dedication to ideas being reinvented and reshaped in new contexts rather than being carted along like so much baggage. Generous illustration helps give a sense of the man and his life. This brief sketch of Freire's life is effective, and provides a snappy way in to understanding his work for newer readers.

The final chapter, presenting an interview with Nita Freire, Paulo's wife, returns to this biographical theme and rounds out some of the details of Freire's life and the creation, dissemination, and reception of his works. She emphasises the importance of human connection in his life and work, suggesting it is a dimension of critical pedagogy that is often neglected in Anglophone interpretations of his work: "Paulo believed that it is up to teachers to awaken in their students this human sensibility that we all have; a sensibility that helps us develop a more profound concern for life...for the 'the other,' for the society, for the country in which we live, for the world" (p. 164). This goes hand-in-hand with a critique of

neoliberalism, described by Freire in Nita's telling as "the antithesis of any possibility for an egalitarian society" (p. 165), which is an aspect again potentially overlooked by contemporary readers; Nita takes care to emphasise the centrality of class struggle to understanding Freire's work. Again, this is all useful insight and critical commentary, and it builds a case both for the groundedness of Freire's thought within a particular socio-historical context, and its ongoing relevance today. "The question of class struggle is at work in every form of oppression" (p. 167) argues Nita towards the end of the book, thereby returning to Donald Macedo's *Forward*, and its remarks about being more humane in the era of Trump's dogmatic politics (p. xvi): what matters is authentic engagement in this struggle, with hearts open to the experiences of others, and an ongoing commitment to see justice done.

The middle two chapters - offering an intellectual history of, and a chapter-by-chapter commentary on *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* - are, to me, less successful. The intellectual background offers a slightly dizzying selection of authors and ideas (liberation theology, Marxism, Existentialism, Latin American philosophers, anticolonial thinkers....) all of whom feature in or impinge on *Pedagogy*. There is much in these 65 pages that is useful, and especially for the students to whom the title of the book is addressed, if you are coming to these ideas for the first time the summaries and potted histories are, one by one, likely to be valuable. They are also a very helpful investment in the third chapter, which guides the reader through *Pedagogy* in a step-by-step, section-by-section approach. The writing style adopted works well, where direct quotations from Freire are interwoven with Darder's commentary, a stylistic device permitting "Freire's voice to remain active and present throughout [Darder's] direct engagement with his work" (p. 93). At the end of each chapter, there are "Questions for reflection and dialogue" which are extremely helpful, and which speak clearly both to readers encountering these ideas for the first time, and those who might have been circling around them for a while.

There are, however, costs to this approach. Firstly, for all the good that is brought by supporting new readers in engaging with a single text by Freire, especially one that is so widely circulated and taught, it does seem a curious choice to treat it in isolation. Some of his later works (most obviously *Pedagogy of Hope* [Freire and Freire, 1994]) explicitly revisit some of the assumptions and foundational arguments of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and identify where some of the gaps, tensions, and shortcomings might be. By treating *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in isolation, benefits arise from focusing the reader on the specific cultural and historical contexts - but so do limitations, in even the suggestion that these ideas, presented in this form, represent their clearest and furthest exposition. Darder's argument (p. xxii) is that this introductory text provides inspiration for readers to travel further, and that by offering a guide to the most well-known and widely-taught of Freire's work, she offers them the understanding and confidence so to do. In its own terms, this is a valid argument, and I hope that readers follow through on that invitation.

Secondly, and in close connection, there is a cost in terms of overall commentary on *Pedagogy* and Freire's eclectic approach to sources. The third chapter might have benefited from an explicit conclusion, pulling together the different threads of the text, and identifying points for further discussion. Significant questions are left in the air, for instance how some

of the open-ended aspirations of phenomenology, concerned to explore the structuring of human consciousness, might sit with aspects of Marxism, which argues for a clear and linear direction for human history. Equally, the strand of thinking influenced by radical Catholic writings, and liberation theology in particular that emphasises a shared humanity, takes a bit of squaring with anticolonial movements that are not without a sense of strong national identity and a firm sense of borders and boundaries. It is one of the pleasures and generative energies of Freire's work that the tensions produced by these different sources lead to further questions, ideas, and points of contention. Presented alongside each other in this text as a catalogue of influences on Freire, and without the structural opportunity to explore them further, they risk seeming a little flat.

Lastly, and because of the points identified above, some of the gaps in Freire's thinking cannot be adequately explored in a book of this format. Darder is undoubtedly correct in affirming that "It goes without saying, that for Freire, dialogue as a communal activity seeks to establish a democratic process of engagement that can ultimately lead to transformative action and greater critical awareness of the concrete conditions that impact our lives" (p. 113). It goes without saying for Freire, but for at least some of us, this is still a problematic contention - what exactly are the processes or mechanisms for getting from a changed mode of interaction within the classroom, to socially transformative action? How do we get from recognising that life may not be all that it offers for most people, to creating conditions where that kind of human flourishing is more likely? It's not a straightforward process, and students of Freire's work perhaps deserve being engaged with some of Freire's critics on this point, such as the well-known work of bell hooks and Peter McLaren, and perhaps less familiar commentaries (e.g. Ellsworth, 1989; Jackson, 2007) that highlight some potential difficulties with his approach.

Indeed, readers could do much worse than accompanying their reading of this text with Darder's own excellent and recently-updated, *Reinventing Paulo Freire: A Pedagogy of Love* (2017), which offers much more in terms of critical discussion and extension of Freire's ideas. The *Student's Guide* in its own terms has an excellent bibliography, and is a good starting-point for learners new to Freire's work. As a text that introduces Freire's thought, and how it relates to his life and historical experiences, this is a strong start for new readers. If it can inspire further generations of students to read and work with Freire, that will be good; and what would be even better would be for them to pick up the fire and inspiration for political change, on the level of individual, collective, and social structures and relations.

References

- Darder, A. (2017). *Reinventing Paulo Freire: A Pedagogy of Love*, London: Routledge
- Ellsworth, E. (1989). Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 59 (3), pp. 297-324.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Freire, P. & Freire, A. M. A. J. (1994). *Pedagogy of hope: reliving Pedagogy of the oppressed*, New York: Continuum.
- Jackson, S. (2007). Freire Re-viewed. *Educational Theory*, 57 (2), pp. 199-213.

Tim Herrick

University of Sheffield
t.herrick@sheffield.ac.uk

