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# **Transformative Learning: The Trojan Horse of Globalization?**

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**Abstract:** C.A. Bowers suggests that transformative learning ala Paulo Freire may be the Trojan horse of neoliberal globalization by deepening the ecological crisis and colonizing indigenous cultures. This paper critiques Bowers' argument and proposes a contextual pedagogy for sustainability education.

## **Introduction**

In the *Journal for Transformative Education*, C.A. Bowers (2005a), suggests that transformative learning, particularly Paulo Freire's pedagogy, may be the Trojan horse of neoliberal globalization. He argues that what is often considered "transformative, enlightened and liberatory" by critical pedagogues may actually be that which is now most problematic by perpetuating some of the most destructive Western cultural patterns. Instead, he proposes that indigenous cultures are the only "real source of resistance to the imperialism of market liberalism" (2005a: p. 123). These critiques are not new, but Bowers offers them from within the deep ecology movement and indigenous cultural preservationism. First, I will support Bower's contention that transformative learning theory and practice is founded on some problematic Enlightenment assumptions. Second, I will discuss the marxian ontology and political economic analysis behind Freire's work that leads Bowers' and many other theorists and practitioners to misinterpret his theories and misapply his pedagogy. Finally, I shall argue for a contextual pedagogy of sustainability that incorporates a careful political economic assessment in each context, particularly an analysis of the depth of Western penetration in each locale.

## **Bowers' Argument**

C.A. Bowers' first critique of Freirean transformative learning is that it promotes a way of knowing that is "fundamentally different from the cultural ways of knowing of the indigenous groups" (2005a, p.117). He says that Freire's ideas undermine the local commons by transforming indigenous ways of knowing, making them more susceptible to economic and technological globalization and thereby contributing to the loss of traditional ecological knowledge systems and to environmental degradation. His second critique is that globalization and the market mentality require a form of transformative learning and thus, industrial culture is not a conservative force as often theorized, but a liberal force utilizing transformation to perpetuate Western hegemony. He suggests that Freirean practitioners are complicit in Western liberalism by considering industrialism to be a conservative rather than "transforming" force (2005a, p.118). His third critique is that transformative learning promotes anomic individualism, implicit in ideas of autonomy and critical reflection, which undermine intergenerational spiritual and moral traditions. Freire's ideas, then, are ethnocentric and universalist, as they work to reduce cultural/linguistic diversity; the diversity that encodes intergenerational ecological knowledge. His fourth critique is that Freire has a "penchant for interpreting cultural differences as representing different stages in the evolutionary development of cultures" (2005a: p. 119). Freire's theory of conscientization implies a unilineal, universalist approach to knowledge aligned with Western notions of progressivism.

His fifth and final critique is that Freire and his followers were not critical of the banking nature of their political agenda and how this agenda ignored the importance of natural systems and of maintaining the commons as non-privatized and non-commodified. Bowers is doubtful of Gadotti's assertions that Freire was developing an ecopedagogy near the end of his life. In summary, then, Bowers charges that Freire is a "reactionary," a "western thinker" with "oppressive" ideas. He charges Freirean followers and critical pedagogues of being "critical theory fundamentalists." He uses the articles in *Rethinking Freire* (2005b) to support his contention that Freire's work has constituted cultural invasion.

### **The Enlightenment Roots of Transformative Learning**

As a practitioner and scholar of critical transformative learning for over 20 years, particularly in sustainability education, I agree with Bowers' primary argument that transformative learning generally is founded on some problematic Enlightenment assumptions. The most notable assumption is the liberal notion of the primacy of individual judgement in determining issues of conscience and definitions of the good life. Modern thought has promoted the responsibility of each citizen for deciding how to live with others through a conscious contractual relationship with society. In the often uncritical use of "critical reflection" and even in ideology critique, transformative learning perpetuates this ideal of individual sovereignty and the authority of conscience over traditional/institutional authorities.

I also agree with Bowers' critique that transformative learning is founded on the key Enlightenment assumption of progress, which privileges change over tradition and even reifies change (2005b: p. 157). Change as an Enlightenment concept originally meant the rejection of what had gone before and the unfettered faith in change as betterment. In particular, "transformation" was embraced by the modernist project because it was considered the most radical, complete form of change and thus the most advanced form of "betterment." Elsewhere, I have critiqued the fundamental idea that the deepest, most sedimented ideas of individuals and societies need to be disturbed and transformed (Lange, 2004).

Finally, I agree with Bowers' argument that transformative learning has often promoted a rationalist way of knowing. Kant's idea of enlightenment was for individuals to emerge from intellectual immaturity by using their rational thinking processes to think for themselves, without relying on the authority of "entrenched guardians" – religious leaders to give religious answers, doctors to give medical answers and so forth (1784/1983). Through reasoned thought in an educational context, it was expected that individuals would develop moral ideas as well as moral qualities - generosity, strength of will, and self-control - thus attaining full human dignity.

There are many other omissions and myopias within Enlightenment thought reflected in transformative learning theory, which have been well debated. Furthermore, there is already theorizing that argues for rehabilitating the original, richer concept of individualism, honoring extrarational ways of knowing, and reintroducing the notion of limits. Important to this paper, is the question of whether the problematic forms of these concepts are present in Freire's thought.

### **Marxist Ontology and Freire's Theorizing**

In 1970, through the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire was considered a revolutionary Third World voice disrupting the hegemony of Western educational practice by offering a liberatory pedagogy for the most marginalized Latin American citizens. Mayo

(1999) points out that Freire certainly had his blind spots and limitations, partially due to his social location and to the historical, political-economic context he was working in. Schugurensky (1998) explains, though, that Freire was open to critique and reconsidering his assumptions, yielding a body of work that was “dynamic” over his lifetime, yet retaining a general coherence. It is true that Freire’s formation remains rooted in Western political thought (Schapiro, 1995), but while some modernist assumptions are problematic, others hold promise. Allman (1994) is adamant that the misappropriation of Freire into practice is not necessarily due to his faulty theorizing, but the lack of understanding of his philosophical roots in marxism (1999: 88). I will contend that Bowers himself is still rooted in Western political thought and combative intellectual exchange, demonstrating how difficult it is to transcend the “limit-attitudes” of our historical age. As Foucault says, moving beyond limits is always “limited and determined” as we must always work within the existing “paradox of the relations of capacity and power” (1984: p. 47). Bower’s cultural analysis from an idealist position misses the vital difference between a liberal and radical ontology, yielding unsurprising issues.

One of the key differences between a liberal and radical ontology revolves around the relation between the individual and community. Carol Gould (1978) explains that Marx proposes a *social* ontology whereby individuals are fundamentally individuals-in-social-relations rather than liberal autonomous individuals who relate to an external world. For Marx, individuals are constituted by their relations to other humans, to history, to society and to the Earth. A social ontology, then, is the “study of reality that reflects on the social roots of the conceptions of reality” (Gould, 1978: p. xv). In other words, our daily movements are informed and shaped by the ideas and concepts that are part of our social world, many of which have originated in the material realities of our lives. Marx discusses the “‘commodity fetish’ where we come to desire, even lust after, commodities because we associate their value with their intrinsic properties, never seeing the social and environment relations embedded in these commodities.

This marxian understanding is diametrically opposed to the ontology within capitalist free market societies – where reality is composed of separate, atomistic individuals who relate to each other and things in external ways. This is the classical liberal idea of individualism – a person separate from others whose rights are protected by law and whose interactions in concert constitute a society. In contrast, Marx strongly asserted that bourgeois liberal society artificially separates individuals from the community, community from environment, economics from politics, and production from production relations, rather than seeing these phenomena as all internally related, as faces of the same phenomena (Sayer, 1987). Marx suggested that politics and economics were conceptually separated in liberal bourgeois thought as a way to dominate without appearing to dominate. For instance, as long as people have a vote and a say through a representative in the political sphere, they will not contest injustice in the economic sphere.

Human freedom in liberalism, then, is about exercising individual choice, notably in the marketplace, with minimal governmental encroachment on individual rights, notably property rights. McPherson argues that liberal democracy developed only after the capitalist market system was well established, serving to legitimize it (1965: pp. 9-10). Liberal notions of freedom are illusory, however, as individuals “divest their political power and activity, their choices, their decisions and the execution of political activities, to other people” (Allman, 1999: p. 41). We accept a profound lack of democracy in our economic lives and a desiccated

version of political democracy lacking real engagement, given hegemonic ideologies legitimizing them.

In 1970, Freire was developing his pedagogy with the Brazilian rural poor who were oppressed by large landowners as well as with the urban poor who had been dislocated from their land, and subsequently urbanized and exploitatively waged (or underwaged/unwaged). His assumption was that both groups had been enclosed into a capitalist economic system where they had become “beings-for-another” rather than “beings-for-themselves” (Freire, 1970: p. 34). They had been subsumed into a system of domination where “the oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination. The earth, property, production, the creations of men, men (sic) themselves, time – everything is reduced to the status of objects at its disposal” (Freire, 1970: p. 44). Such capitalist social relations create a fatalistic consciousness supported by ideologies saying that being dominated is natural and inevitable.

Most intriguing is Marx’s evolutionary ontology that Freire built upon. In pre-capitalist societies, Marx asserted that relations of domination and inequality still existed, even though these societies were classless with communally held land. He discusses pre-capitalist societies as stratified by rank and status and social positions ascribed by birth and where kinship created dependency and servility among some subgroups. Hegel called this phase “being in itself” where people do not understand themselves as differentiated from others but part of an uncontested unity that subordinates the self to the group (Gould, 1978: p.132).

Marx argued that the next stage of economic change was capitalism – an intrinsically exploitative form by taking more labour from workers than it pays for, to create profit. Marx considered capitalism to be a historical necessity in that it develops self-differentiation through the liberal notion of individualism. However, while people differentiate themselves, this is an abstract notion of freedom, enshrined in law. They actually remain dependent because they are reliant on wage labour to procure their basics. They acquire formal equality but not concrete equality because they are a “being for another” in the economic realm and in antagonistic relations (Gould, 1978: 6-7). The consciousness that results is what Freire called a naïve transitive consciousness, awakened but easily manipulated (Freire, 1985).

Freedom and justice for Marx, then, is moving to a third stage that he anticipated would be “communal individuality” - where there is both concrete AND abstract equality. Individuals are now “beings in and for themselves” where all members are aware of themselves as individuals but self-consciously re-root themselves in their social and natural relations. They transcend the disunity that is fostered through abstract and fragmented liberal notions and achieve a “differentiated unity” (Gould, 1978: p. 7), thereby overcoming all alienated relations.

Therefore, I would argue that Freire’s work is definitely NOT aligned with liberal individualism given the marxian ontology implicit in Freire’s work. Bowers is correct that Freire has a “progressive” orientation but it is via Marx - anticipating a dialectical shift in consciousness as socio-economic realities change. Both Marx and Freire hold a vision of ultimately overcoming the alienation intrinsic to capitalism and restoring human relationships with each other and the Earth. While Freire’s early work was anthropocentric and his environmental concerns undeveloped, his theoretical framework lends itself to an ecopedagogy.

This argument about marxian ontology raises some significant questions in relation to indigenous societies, that are not my place to answer. Even though the land may be communally held and consciousness profoundly shaped by kinship/spiritual relations to land;

are there still relations of domination? If there are, is Bowers suggesting these internal relations of domination must remain intact as part of traditional belief systems? If it can be argued that a communal individuality exists in indigenous societies, then they DO stand as important exemplars of a relational ontology. I am arguing then, that marxist communal individuality and indigenous relational ontologies can be similar phenomena. I would argue that Freire, like world systems theorists, considered most societies to be penetrated by capitalist political economic relations to some degree. An analysis of the depth of penetration is necessary to understand indigenous reality, including contradictions, and how best to protect their societies from (further) intrusion.

### **Applying Freire's Liberatory Pedagogy**

Many years ago I heard Freire say that each theorist-practitioner needs to assess their own context and carry out their own political economic analysis. They need to work to reinvent power in their own time and place, a message he oft repeated. In others words, Freire urged practitioners NOT to universalize his pedagogy in an instrumental way, done one way in all times and places (Schugurensky, 1998). He explains:

One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding. The starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people" (Freire, 1970: 84). [An educator must] not believe in the myth of the ignorance of the people...they cannot sloganize the people, but must enter into dialogue with them... Otherwise, education continues to be a form of social manipulation (1985: 159).

In reviewing the work of various Freirean practitioners in *Rethinking Freire*, it is clear that in some cases these practitioners were imbued with Western notions that shaped their use of Freirean pedagogy, as many of us were (a critique of my own work can be found in Lange, 1998). In India, Siddhartha explains that he considered Freire's ideas imperialistic as they, "implied that people gave up their own worldview and embraced the one offered by Freire" (in Bowers, 2005b: p. 87). From Mexico, Terán charges Freire with universalism saying, "Educational theories that promote a single universal solution to the pressing social issues of our time foreclose the possibility of finding alternative paths to the good life" (in Bowers, 2005b: p. 71). No doubt Freire would have agreed, given his humility and caution about dogma. Our job as educators who respect Freire's heritage is to think for ourselves and thus reinvent the pedagogy in ways that relate best to our own context.

In returning to the idea that indigenous communities are the only real resistance to neo-liberal globalization, the argument is not clear. Is Bowers suggesting that indigenous societies constitute resistance simply by virtue of their existence, while not being cognizant of their resistance? One response would be to echo Bauman's (2001) contention that being in community is an unconscious act, and by becoming conscious of it, we make the bonds more tenuous and ultimately dissolvable. However, it is not clear if simply continuing to live as a traditional, sustainable community in an unconscious way could adequately be considered resistance to globalization. How long can communities live "uncontaminated" by Western society before they need to make choices about the forces that will ultimately come to bear given the inherent expansionist dynamic within capitalism? This is why a political economic analysis needs to accompany an idealist or cultural analysis and why "ecology needs Marx" (Gimenez, 2001).

On the other hand, if Bowers is arguing that they understand themselves to be part of the neo-liberal globalization resistance movement, then are they not already conscious of Western ideology and economics and have mastered ideology critique as part of transformative learning via the Enlightenment heritage? In Terán's article, all of the Mexican protagonists were university-trained and in a self-conscious way implemented what they called a vernacular education center. They had overcome the bourgeois concept of individualism by relocating "politics" within their day-to-day lives rather than a separate sphere of activity, and thus consciously re-embedded themselves in their social and environmental relations. They very purposefully regenerated cultural spaces, reconstructed traditional stories, learned traditional wisdom and knowledge, and lived sustainably from the land - in defiance of expert knowledge and the waged economy. Can it not be argued then, that these community members are manifesting a "communal individuality," through a critical consciousness of the global significance and local impact of their actions? This is a core contradiction in Bowers' argument.

### **A Contextual Pedagogy for Sustainability Education**

The global challenges facing us today beg the question: what is required of us as educators in this historical moment? Thus, my final critique of Bowers is a pedagogical one. The deep changes in cultural patterns of thinking that he says are needed, include: moving to a view of individuals as nested in complex networks of relationships; understanding responsibility in terms of past, present, and future; understanding technology is not culturally neutral or universally progressive; moving away from a commodification of knowledge, skills, and relationships; and moving beyond thinking other cultures are undeveloped and each generation must make itself anew. This agenda is important for societies enclosed in the capitalist system for many years, implying a "transformation" is needed. But Bowers needs to differentiate his educational agendas. Perhaps his agenda of "conserving education" that conserves linguistic/ cultural diversity and ecological knowledge is most appropriate for societies that theoretically have not been enclosed in the capitalist system. Otherwise, he can be charged with universalizing his own ideas. I contend that a contextual analysis and dialogue must be carried out with the community, before any educational approach is created, to ascertain the depth of penetration of Western economic and cultural globalization. Educators can enrich each other's work by sharing findings around (re)creating sustainable societies - the struggle to reweave the social fabric, protect environmental relations, protect relational ontologies, and anticipate communal individuality. In this way, transformative learning is not the Trojan horse of globalization.

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