



The (Im)possibility of Education: Theory and Method in Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Gayatri Spivak's *Righting Wrongs*



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Abstract

Postcolonial critics Paulo Freire (1921–1997) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942–) have both made attempts at offering pedagogical formulas that take into account the student's experiences in order to oust oppressive tendencies from the classroom, and at first glance, many of their ideas seem close to identical: Freire speaks dismissively of “banking” education (75), and Spivak rejects rote learning (“Righting” 551); Freire argues that a reconciliation of the teacher-student contradiction is a prerequisite for proper education (all participants need to be “teachers and students” simultaneously [53]), and Spivak exhorts the educator to “learn to learn from below” (548). In other words, both scholars advocate a pedagogy whose “very legitimacy lies in...dialogue” (Freire 109), and they both undertake what this text labels a methodological leap from theory to practice. The aim of this article, then, is to find out how or to what extent Freire and Spivak render their pedagogical theories practicable and whether they manage to circumvent the danger of transference, of imposing the educator's agenda on the learner. The article's response to this question is no, in Freire's case, and yes, but only provisionally, in Spivak's. When Freire puts his teacher in charge of deciding what voices in the classroom should be heard and what voices should be gagged, he leaves the door open for renewed oppression and a mere turning of the tables, clearly against the grain of his own line of argument. Spivak, on the other hand, leaves no loopholes for oppressive tendencies in her methodology; however, as she usually shuns “the production of models [of practice] as such,” withdraws her own formulas, and uses deconstruction as a “safeguard against the repression or exclusion of ‘alterities,’” her settling for a certain praxis can only be temporary and provisional (“Can the Subaltern” 103, Norton 2110).

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"I mean your analysis...no, better call it ours—aren't we showing contempt for him, for that poor man—in analysing his soul like this, as it were, from above, eh?" (Dostoevsky 236).

For more than two millennia, well-balanced dialogue has been a highly respected means of stimulating awareness and critical thinking in students. The responsive pedagogue who learns from their learners is often elevated as an obvious good, antithetical to the self-absorbed lecturer. As admirable as this idea may be, however, it raises some questions, not least the methodological question of how any teacher might be able to avoid the risk of imposing ideas and ideals on students and what didactic methods may facilitate the kind of dialogue that allows for contributions from all participants. Unfortunately, as the supposedly praiseworthy practice of the dialogical educator is seldom challenged, questions of this kind often remain unanswered.

Postcolonial critics Paulo Freire (1921–1997) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942–) have both made attempts at offering pedagogical formulas that take into account the student's 'reality' in order to oust oppressive tendencies from the classroom, and at first glance, many of their ideas seem close to identical: Freire speaks dismissively of "banking" education (75), and Spivak rejects rote learning ("Righting" 551); Freire argues that a reconciliation of the teacher-student contradiction is a prerequisite for proper education (all participants need to be "teachers *and* students" simultaneously [53]), and Spivak exhorts the educator to "learn to learn from below" (548). In other words, both scholars advocate a pedagogy whose "very legitimacy lies in...dialogue" (Freire 109)—and, as I will argue, they both undertake what this text labels a *methodological leap*, from theory to practice, from thought to action.

The impulse that prompted this text was to find out how and to what extent Freire and Spivak render their pedagogical theories practicable and whether they, in doing this, manage to circumvent the danger of transference, i.e., of imposing the educator's agenda on the learner. These inquiries can be taken to pose the question if it is possible for any pedagogue to initiate a didactic model based on dialogue without establishing a 'fixed' itinerary for the student to follow. In other words, the problems described above concern not only Freire and Spivak but all reflective practitioners. Thus, a scrutiny of the methods advocated by the scholars in question has an indisputable value for the general field of pedagogy.

My review of the theoretical ideas that undergird Freire's and Spivak's pedagogies will demonstrate that although Freire displays an awareness of the risk that his pedagogy will merely reproduce and reverse the logic of oppression, his attempt to address the student's internalization of the oppressor's voice falls prey to precisely this risk. It will also be argued that even if Spivak is more successful in shunning authoritarian tendencies, her corollary mistrust of formalized methods makes her pedagogy appear more impracticable. The article will thus conclude that the merit of Freire's and Spivak's work might not lie so much in their respective methodologies but in their confidence in teacher and student alike and in their recognition of teaching as an indispensable but incredibly difficult and contextually sensitive task.

Background

Although Freire's and Spivak's texts might have general significance, the very specific contexts in which their respective pedagogies were founded must not be ignored. Freire's life and career, firstly, was marked by circumstances that compelled him to use the terms "oppressed" and "student" interchangeably, and Spivak's pedagogical aphorisms, secondly, revolve mainly around the education of the "subaltern." For Spivak, this term denotes a subject who is removed "from all lines of social mobility" and exists *outside power*, "subordinate to it but never fully consenting to its rule, never adopting the dominant point of view or vocabulary as expressive of its own identity" ("Scattered" 475, *Norton* 2111). This is the subject, then, whom

Spivak refers to when she speaks of the “student” or the “learner,” and this is the subject her didactic examples primarily concern. Yet, as Spivak puts it, “in the hope that [her] words will be read by some who are interested in comparable work elsewhere, [she is] always pushing for generalization” (“Righting” 551). Encouraged by this invitation, I will take the opportunity to juxtapose Spivak’s generalizations with those of Paulo Freire in the hope that this will yield valuable results for teachers wishing to learn both *with* and *from* their students. The first step will be an attempt to place Freire and Spivak in their respective theoretical contexts.

Freire

Although the theoretical differences between Freire and Spivak abound, there are also important similarities between the lines of reasoning that constitute the foundations of their pedagogical programs. One of these correspondences concerns ideology as a phenomenon that needs to be charted and understood before a liberating pedagogy can take place. Drawing on Karl Marx—and heirs as diverse as Herbert Marcuse, György Lukács and Louis Althusser—Freire discusses the ideologically constituted myths that check the liberation of the oppressed, such as “the myth that the oppressor order is a ‘free society,’” “the myth that anyone who is industrious can become an entrepreneur,” and “the myth of the universal right of education, when of all the Brazilian children who enter primary schools only a tiny fraction ever reach the university” (Freire 120). Due to a fatalistic *false consciousness* (66, 111), Freire has it, the oppressed fail to unmask not only these myths but also, on a more general level, the fact that there “is no history *without* humankind, and no history *for* human beings... [,] only history *of* humanity, made by *people* and (as Marx pointed out) in turn making them” (111). A reified view of history, then, makes change appear as an impossibility.

Freire is a devout dialectician, and this manifests itself not least when he attempts to disclose the “true” world hidden behind the veils of ideology. In Freire’s understanding, this world tends to be structured according to a binarist logic. For instance, the oppressed are antithetical to the oppressor, “problem-solving” education finds its opposite in “problem-posing” education, and science is diametrically opposite to magic (Giroux 19). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, binarisms of these kinds often block out any nuances that may exist in between oppositions. Critiquing this limiting logic, Henry A. Giroux suggests that, in his struggle against colonialism, Freire “often reverses rather than ruptures its basic problematic” (Giroux 19). Giroux juxtaposes the “elements [in Freire’s later work] of a criticism that shows an affinity with emancipatory strands of postmodern discourse,” on the one hand (19), with the repression of heterogeneity in the “monolithic figures and stereotypes of colonialist representations” that arguably haunt *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, on the other (Parry qtd in Giroux 20). This dichotomy is compelling, especially since the progression would be in keeping with postmodern times; unfortunately, however, it is also almost as reductive as the binary thinking that Giroux objects to. Though it is true, for instance, that Freire contends in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that “[r]evolutionary praxis must stand opposed to the praxis of the dominant elites” because “the latter constitute” the antithesis of the people, he also warns his readers by suggesting that if the oppressed rise to power as dual beings—the oppressor and the oppressor logic still housed within themselves—they will only have imagined to have ceased power (Freire 107–108, 112). Their “existential duality,” Freire writes, “may even facilitate the rise of a sectarian climate leading to the installation of bureaucracies which undermine the revolution” (108). This duality, in its turn, then, will very likely result in a mere reversal of the “terms of the contradiction” (38). And this is not enough. For the people to become “fully human,” Freire argues, a “[r]esolution of [this] oppressor-oppressed contradiction” and a “new social consciousness” are absolute necessities (38, 124).

This idea of a new kind of consciousness could be understood as Freire’s adherence to “certain problematic elements of modernism,” focused on the production of new languages and “new spaces of

resistance” (Giroux 18): some form of a programmatic modernist utopianism, in other words. However, “Freire’s own belief in the diverse ways in which the oppressed struggle,” which Giroux, too, acknowledges (18), is also evident in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In a footnote, for instance, when discussing the necessity of interaction between different communities, Freire points out that “[t]his requirement implies the consciousness of *unity in diversification*” (Freire 123, my italics)—a term strikingly similar to Donna Haraway’s notion of *unity via affinity*, which was presented at least in part as a critique of dialectics as a “dream language,” and which suggests that it is not necessary for the oppressed to all speak and resist in the same way, as long as there is there is “political kinship” (Haraway 2213, 2197). At any rate, the fact that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* shows an awareness of the risks associated with a totalizing language, but still to some extent speaks it, is significant (cf. Clarence W. Joldersma, who argues that “Freire’s constructivist epistemology, based in freedom, is at its root an attempt to relate to the world by a totalizing relation, grasping it by means of naming” [136]). The author wants to map, to systemize, to educate, and to transform, but soon seems to realize that the only means he has at his disposal are flawed. However, his decision to *try anyway* is an important feature of his own pedagogy, and it provides an apt link to this article’s other focal point.

Spivak

Ideology is for Spivak as central as it is for Freire; yet, much has obviously happened in this line of reasoning when the former enters the academy. This means that she must position herself in relation to ideas that were still in their infancy when Freire wrote his magnum opus. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” for instance, Spivak criticizes Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault for ignoring “both the epistemic violence of imperialism and the international division of labor” in their respective works (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern?” 84). Introducing this argument, Spivak writes of Foucault that his “commitment to ‘genealogical’ speculation...has created an unfortunate resistance to ‘mere’ ideological critique” (68). For Foucault, Spivak notes, this results in a number of theoretical failures. One of these, she contends, is the tendency to regard the masses as “undeceived” (69). Explicating this idea, in one of Spivak’s quotations, Foucault proposes that “‘the masses *know* perfectly well, ‘clearly’...they know far better than [the intellectual] and they certainly say it very well”]; thus, these people need no intellectual spokesperson (69). Spivak diagnoses this notion as the symptom of the idea of a “mechanical relation between desire and interest”: the masses know their interests because they know their desires, and “‘interest always follows and finds itself where desire has placed it” (68). “An undifferentiated desire is [here] the agent,” Spivak explains, “and power slips in to create the effects of desire: ‘power...produces positive effects at the level of desire—and also at the level of knowledge” (69). This “parasubjective matrix,” then, “cross-hatched with heterogeneity, ushers in the unnamed Subject” (69).

What worries Spivak here, it seems, is the restoration of a sovereign subject who is always capable of speaking for itself. She also notes the irony of the fact that this restoration is executed by those who purport to be its most severe critics: the advocates of poststructuralist theory (72–74).¹ This restoration bothers Spivak because she believes that the imperialist “constitution of that other of Europe...was in the interest of a dynamic economic requiring that interest, motives (desires) and power (of knowledge) be ruthlessly dislocated”; differently put, that desires and other driving forces were rearranged so as to contribute to the fulfillment of certain goals predicated on the ideology of colonialism (75). The point here is that the success of the colonial project proves that the masses cannot always speak “for themselves” since ideology is capable of rearranging their desires (73). Thus, a theory of ideology becomes indispensable for

¹ For a sustained discussion of this disagreement between Spivak, Foucault, and Deleuze, see Sharon Stein and Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti’s “Complicity, Ethics and Education: Political and Existential Readings of Spivak’s Work” (33).

intellectuals interested in the relationship between all global divisions of labor, as well as in the relationship between teacher and student.

Responsibility and complicity are two keywords in Spivak's critique of Deleuze and Foucault. The intellectual, she declares, has an "institutional responsibility," and this responsibility is evaded if one masquerades "as [an] absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves" (75, 87). The intellectual's task, of course, is not to speak *for* the Other but to find out and demonstrate *why the Other cannot speak*. In other words, the intellectual should not attempt to represent the Other but to represent how the Other is represented and how ideologically conditioned representations silence the very object of representation. Ignoring this task—by "abstain[ing] from representation" altogether—makes the scholar more than necessarily complicit in the incessant obliterating of the voice of the oppressed, of the culturally and materially damaged "[o]n the other the side of the international division of labor" (80). Therefore, Spivak argues, one should instead address the major problem "that the [Other's] itinerary has not [yet] been traced as to offer an object of seduction for the representing intellectual" (80). The question, then, is how this kind of sketch could be drawn.

One of the most essential works for scholars trying to make sense of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" as well as Spivak's ideas on education is Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production*, written four years after Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Influenced by Althusser's concept of "internal distantiating," Macherey argues that, by endowing ideology with a form, literature illuminates "ideology's contradictory relation to real history" (Eagleton "Macherey and Marxist" 151). Ideology is here seen as unitary and, thus, an illusion sustained only by silences that, if spoken, would reveal the ideology as a "structure of absences" (150). To unmask ideology, the critic needs to interrogate the "unconsciousness" of the investigated texts to look for significance in the margins (150). Adopting and modifying this method of interpretation, Spivak sets herself the task of reading "the social text of imperialism" to find out "what it cannot say," what is repressed ("Can the Subaltern?" 82). This "measuring [of] silences," then, for Spivak, becomes synonymous with an investigation and description of "the...*deviation*' from an ideal that is irreducibly differential" (82).

From a pedagogical point of view, these ideas are tremendously valuable, since a tracing of ideological absences potentially brings to our attention why certain voices speak while others are silent. Consequently, Spivak's pedagogical program—and its dialogical character—is a logical continuation of her critique of ideology. In her pedagogy, Spivak combines her Machereyian Marxism with Derridean ideas (which she tries to render more practicable) and applies this line of thought onto the world of education. Like Freire, Spivak shows an awareness of the many pitfalls that threaten an undertaking of this kind; nonetheless, however, she, too, suggests that we must take the risk of severe failure, that we must "acknowledge complicity and yet walk the walk" (xi *Outside*).

The Methodological Leap: Tactics

Although respect for the learner is an obvious cornerstone in both of the pedagogies discussed here, it should be acknowledged that this respect does not go so far as to suggest that either the student or the teacher is a "complete" human being; on the contrary, Freire, for instance, states first that hope is a prerequisite for dialogical education, and then that hope, in its turn, "is rooted in men's incompleteness, from which they move out in constant search—a search which can be carried out only in communion with others" (72). Furthermore, as previously implied, this notion of "unfinishedness" regards not only people but their world as well: reality is constantly transformed into something that cannot be foreseen, and this "process of *becoming*" is key (65). Because supposedly, this mindset—which renders the *present* dynamic and the *future* uncertain—is meant to function as a safeguard against the oppression of what is fixed and

predetermined, and against this background, it becomes necessary for Freire to stress that education must be an “ongoing activity” that is “constantly remade in the praxis” (65). This is yet another junction where Freire crosses paths with Spivak, who, similarly, espouses a “Humanities to come” and addresses the very problem that gives rise to the research question of this paper (“Righting” 526); to wit: the question as to how it might be possible for educators to develop methods for an activity that is supposed to be spontaneous, uncoercive, and dialogical, and how a method that has been written down (and is thus fixed) can remain versatile and responsive to a dynamic present.

As mentioned earlier, one of the main objectives of Freire’s pedagogy is to reveal ideologically conditioned myths as false representations of reality. This is achieved by focusing on concrete situations and joining the people in an analysis that goes so deep as to force the latter to either “divest themselves of their myths, or reaffirm them” (Freire 138). The former option is, of course, a painful undertaking, as it involves the tumbling of a world that for its ‘inhabitants’ seemed real just a moment ago. Freire exemplifies with details from an educational program called “Full Circle,” which took place in New York City in 1968:

A group in a New York ghetto was presented a coded situation showing a big pile of garbage on a street corner—the very same street where the group was meeting. One of the participants said at once, “I see a street in Africa or Latin America.” “And why not in New York?” asked the teacher. “Because we are the United States and that can’t happen here.” Beyond a doubt this man and some of his comrades who agreed with him were retreating from a reality so offensive to them that even to acknowledge that reality was threatening. For an alienated person, conditioned by a culture of achievement and personal success, to recognize his situation as objectively unfavorable seems to hinder his own possibilities of success. (138)

For Freire, this passage illustrates how the participants do not “talk and act for themselves as active Subjects of the historical process” (139). Rather, we must assume they are *subject to* the historical process. To change this, to make people “considerers” of the world, carefully prepared methods must be used (120), and these methods need to operate so that they relate directly to the “felt needs” of the students and to the situations that limit their agency. Beyond these limit-situations—made up of social contradictions—lie “untested feasibility” and “potential consciousness” (94). Untested feasibility is the antithesis to “perceived practicable solutions” and “presently practiced solutions”; in other words, it represents a new way of life, free from the oppression which is always manifest in limit-situations (94). Attaining this new life, however, is no easy task: even problem-posing educators might fail to guide their students to a perception of the “untested feasibility lying beyond *the limit-situations which engender [...] their needs* (97, italics mine). Here, a parallel may be drawn to Spivak’s argument that colonialism managed to dislocate the “interests” and “desires” of the Other in a way that facilitated the global and exploitative division of labor (“Can the Subaltern?” 75). To elaborate on this comparison: For Freire and Spivak both, what people covet is not always the result of some innate and incorruptible desiring-machine: sometimes, ideology and its limit-situations will generate and rearrange peoples’ desires, and thus, these desires do not necessarily tell us what political action, or lack thereof, that would improve the lives of the masses.

Freire’s antidote to corrupted needs is “thematic investigation” and “codification” (Freire 98–99). The student’s relationship to reality must first be investigated by an interdisciplinary team working with the students, and then, thematic findings that are believed to have generative potential are codified in the form of photographs, sketches, or oral presentations (98, 95). The next step is the decoding process, which may look as follows:

In one of the thematic investigations carried out in Santiago, a group of tenement residents discussed a scene showing a drunken man walking on the street and three young men conversing on the corner. The group

participants commented that “the only one there who is productive and useful to his country is the souse who is returning home after working all day for low wages and who is worried about his family because he can’t take care of their needs. He is the only worker. He is a decent worker and a souse like us...

There are two important aspects to these declarations. On the one hand, they verbalize the connection between earning low wages, feeling exploited, and getting drunk—getting drunk as a flight from reality, as an attempt to overcome the frustration of inaction, as an ultimately self-destructive solution. On the other hand, they manifest the need to rate the drunkard highly. He is the “only one useful to his country, because he works, while the others only gab.” After praising the drunkards, the participants then identify themselves with him, as workers who also drink—‘decent workers’ (99).

“In contrast,” writes Freire, “imagine the failure of a moralistic educator, sermonizing against alcoholism and presenting as an example of virtue something which for these men is not a manifestation of virtue” (99–100). It is significant here that the teaching situation and the teaching material build on the students’ perception of reality and that the students themselves partake in producing the lesson. Furthermore, and finally, it is also crucial that the form of the lesson is permissive, that everyone gets to speak, since this promises to bestow on the seminar an openness that, in turn, paves the way for a nascent type of critical thinking.

Drawing implicitly on the unfinished or indeterminate character of Freire’s pedagogy, Peter McLaren touches on the difference between *strategies* and *tactics*. Strategies, McLaren notes, quoting Michael Shapiro, “belong to those who have legitimate positions within the social order and consequently are part of ‘a centralized surveillance network for controlling the population,’” whereas tactics “‘belong to those who do not occupy a legitimate space and depend instead on time, on whatever opportunities present themselves’” (McLaren 161). The tactical educator, accordingly, is a teacher who “seizes the space of the classroom to engage in a dialogue about issues not on the formal curriculum” (161). This teacher’s pedagogy, McLaren declares, inevitably takes place in the terrain of the Other, and the tactics that inform it are “dispersed,” “nomadic,” and “difficult to administer because they cannot be pinned down” (Conquergood qtd in McLaren 162). It is tactics rather than strategies, then, that govern Freire’s pedagogy: the Freirean seminar should be devoid of determinate itineraries but charged with an openness toward the unexpected. Even as Freire works with reasonably concrete pedagogical formulas, in other words, “faith” in the students and their voices makes for a tactic that is “difficult to administer” but that also renders the teaching less vulnerable to the logic of the oppression it seeks to overthrow.

While Spivak’s pedagogy as a whole may not be easily summarized, few first-time readers probably fail to note that a relatively small number of keywords frequently recur in her texts. For instance, nouns such as “humility” and “imagination”—accompanied by verb phrases like “‘open ourselves to an other’s ethic’” and “‘learn from below’”—inform Spivak’s writing and sketch a pedagogy that cannot be definitely planned, and that will not work unless teachers check their will to dominate (Simmons 141). The pedagogy is also explicitly focused on the importance of working with the culture of the students and with desires as a productive force. One should also note that at least some of the teacher’s openness to the students’ experience hinges on the ability to acknowledge non-realist perceptions of time and space. Whereas realist modes of thought espouse an objectively observable linearity that supposedly helps authors and theorists produce politically productive accounts of cause and effect, the rationale for embracing other temporalities and other experiences of reality would be that even things that are not objectively observable or causal can still be felt—by students, for instance.²

² For a helpful discussion of this feature of Spivak’s pedagogy, see Snaza (52–56).

Again, desire is for Spivak no self-evident indicator of what people really need. More specifically, she suggests that it “is wrong to think that [the people ‘below’] would have a clear intuition of the public sphere and know exactly what they need and want” (Spivak qtd in Shaikh 183). Put even more bluntly: “[y]ou don’t oppress people for centuries and then expect that their intelligence somehow remains unscathed” (183). Building on statements such as these, Spivak introduces the idea of education as “an uncoercive rearrangement of desires” (Simmons 141). If global capitalism “deceives” us into desiring certain products and a particular way of life, education, too, must operate in a similar fashion: the “‘developed post-capitalist structure’ of today’s world must ‘be filled with the more robust imperative to *responsibility* which capitalist social productivity was obliged to destroy” (Kitcher qtd in Spivak “Righting” 24, italics mine). As the word “uncoercive” suggests, however, an educational rearrangement of desires “is not imposed by the teacher but takes place in a manner analogous to the reading of texts, not as ‘analyzing’ and ‘diagnosing’ but as a ‘*no holds barred self-suspending leap into the other’s sea—basically without preparation*’” (Simmons 141).

As a theoretical concept, Spivak’s *leap without preparation* brings to mind the unfinished tactics McLaren finds in Freire’s pedagogy. This becomes even clearer when she adopts the term “telepoiesis” from Derrida. In Spivak’s hands, this term signals an activity focused on “creating toward a distant future with a ‘distant other’” (Simmons 142). Like Freire’s pedagogical theory, Spivak’s rearrangement of desires “is never accurate and must be forever renewed” (142), and as a practice, Spivak argues, it leads to an awareness of the distance “between the ego and the other [a gap that ‘will never be bridged’]”. This awareness, then, in turn, vouches for “humility and suspension of certainty” (Simmons 142), which, again, in turn, helps us recognize, in Linda Alcoff’s words, the “‘impetus to always be the speaker and speak in all situations...for what it is: a desire for mastery and domination’” (Alcoff qtd in Kapoor 56).³ Commenting on this line of thought, William Paul Simmons notes that Spivak tries to “imagine a learning that requires turning off [one’s] own voice” (Simmons 142). He also observes that this kind of learning, this “leap into the other’s sea,” this rearrangement of desires, will only be possible in a “Humanities to come”—a teaching and a learning that can never be given a determinate itinerary, lest it loses its entire potential (141). Two highly related prerequisites are here of great importance: the imaginative ability in both student and teacher, and the latter’s learning to learn from below.

“Learning from below,” writes Ilan Kapoor, “is a tried and tired formula”—and for Spivak, he continues, “it results mostly in more of the same. Serious and meaningful learning from the subaltern requires an anterior step: *learning to learn*. I have to clear the way for both me and the subaltern before I can learn from her/him” (Kapoor 56). The “on-the-ground application” of this learning, then, as construed by Kapoor, is “suspending my belief that I am indispensable, better or culturally superior; it is refraining from always thinking that the Third World is ‘in trouble’ and that I have the solutions; it is resisting the temptation of projecting myself or my world onto the Other” (56). Spivak herself has previously described this process of suspension and resistance as the *unlearning of one’s privileges*; recently, however, this has changed: “you cannot fully unlearn your privileges,” is the new deal (Spivak qtd in Shaikh 182–183). The closest we can get, according to Spivak, is seeing our privilege as “instrumental more than anything else,” as something that can be used as a means of change (183). To sum up, whether one calls it “learning” or “unlearning,” the point here is that we should strive to “open ourselves” and imagine the Other “through the Other’s eyes as much as possible” (Simmons 141–142).

As the close-to-literary metaphors above indicate, Spivak’s ideas on education are not easily put into practice. The theorist herself even goes so far as to call teaching in groups “[n]ecessary but impossible tasks—like taking care of health even though it is impossible to be immortal; or continuing to listen, read,

³ This can be compared with Freire’s notion that the “antidialogical individual, in his relations with others, aims at conquering them” (119).

write, talk and teach although it is impossible that everything be communicated” (“Righting” 575). Similarly, Spivak often writes of the “(im)possibility of cultural studies” (*Outside x*): an utterly ambiguous notion suggesting both that the humanities are an impossible project that never fully succeeds in reaching its noble goals, and that this project—with its obvious focus on the imagination—is the best possibility there is to understand ourselves and one another. Furthermore, as stated before, Spivak tends to repeat that the Western cultural studies intellectual is always complicit in constituting the Other; yet, again, however, in lieu of better options, s/he must “walk the walk” (xi). As Nathan Snaza has pointed out in one of his readings of Spivak, though, this ‘walk’ must be crutched by the realization that Western humanism is not self-evidently ‘good,’ but something that needs to be critiqued—even when it is used—because of its pretenses “to universality” and its implication in “humanizing” or “civilizing agendas” (Snaza 58).

In an interview with Nermeen Shaikh, Spivak touches on the question if the above-mentioned complicity can ever be transformed into something relatively benevolent and productive. The answer is yes: “If you can think of com-plicity as being folded together, you begin to work at the other’s textile much more carefully,” Spivak argues (Spivak qtd in Shaikh 184). The role of the teacher is here the role of the suturer or the “invisible mender,” someone who learns “the weave of the torn cultural fabric” of the other “in unexpected ways”—remember Spivak’s espousal of a “Humanities to come” (“Righting” 546, 548). In other words, to exit the textile metaphor for a moment, the task Spivak assigns the pedagogue is to gently look for collective habits that have been lost and superseded by new ones, and then render these habits instrumental. This pedagogical move could consist, for instance, in trying to “access and activate the tribals’ indigenous ‘democratic’ structures to *parliamentary* democracy by patient and sustained efforts to learn to learn from below” (548). To clarify: the object in this procedure would be to activate ways of life that belong to a “cultural fabric” that has been pushed aside after “centuries of oppression and neglect,” and to put these “ways” to influential and liberative use in contemporary society (548). This is a design that may look as if it affirms the current administration of late capitalist Western style parliamentary democracy, but that actually tries to alter it from within (see other Spivakian concepts, such as ‘affirmative sabotage’ and ‘hijacking’), by way of suturing it to pre-existent societal structures that were *not* imposed from above. The supposed result is liberation from below, via indigenous democracy. The influences from Macherey and Derrida are here evident. The “indigenous ‘democratic’ structures” in Spivak’s comment constitute that which has been repressed in the cultural text of imperialism; it is what is now silent—it is an absence. What remains less evident, though, is how these ideas may be put to pedagogical use.

As mentioned earlier, and as suggested by her metaphorical language, Spivak usually refrains from offering methodological instructions or concrete political plans of action. In “Righting Wrongs: Accessing Democracy among the Aboriginals,” however, she makes one of few exceptions. Here, the idea of “a new pedagogy” is substantiated by a reference to an Indian schoolbook, published in the mid 1800s. The author, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Spivak explains, “fashioned pedagogic instruments for Sanskrit and Bengali that, if used correctly, could suture the ‘native’ old” with the “new”—which at this time was represented by Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay’s “Minute on Indian Education” (44). In Spivak’s view, Vidyasagar’s primer is an extremely helpful tool for undermining rote learning and triggering the child “to locate meaning without a teacher” (45). The key to this efficacy lies in the fact that the book nudges the pedagogue to “jumble the structure” of the teaching and thus, to encourage students to think on their own (44). “The first part of the book,” Spivak writes,

is for the active use of the teacher. The child does not read the book yet—just listens to the teacher, and learns to read and write by reading the teacher’s writing and writing as the teacher guides. Reading and writing are not soldered to the fetishized schoolbook. In very poor rural areas, this is still a fine way to teach. (If you have been stumped a hundred times in a lot of places by both teacher and student producing some memorized bit from the textbook when asked to ‘write whatever comes to mind,’ you are convinced of this.) Halfway through the book,

the child begins to read a book, and the title of that page is *prothom path*, [i.e.,] 'first reading,' not 'first lesson.' What a thrill it must have been for the child, undoubtedly a boy, to get to that moment. Today this is impossible, because the teachers, and the teachers' teachers, indefinitely, are clueless about this book as a do-it-yourself instrument. Well-meaning education experts in the capital city, whose children are used to a different world, inspired by self-ethnographing bourgeois nationalists of a period after Vidyasagar, have transformed the teacher's pages into children's pages... (45)

In other words, as formerly used in rural Bengal, Vidyasagar's primer vouched for independent reading and thinking and thus differed from top-down schoolbooks that are construed as objective due to the fetishization that obscures the labor and thereby also the values involved in the material's production. Retrieving this old and 'correct' way of working with Vidyasagar's primer, then, Spivak tries 1) to bring to the reader's attention a piece of social weave that has been forgotten, 2) to understand it and work with it gently, and 3) to suture it onto the current pedagogical practices in rural West Bengal. The "generalizable significance" of the current misguided use of primers, Spivak states, "is that, at the onset of colonialism/capitalism, when the indigenous system of teaching began to be emptied of social relevance, there had been an attempt to undo this. The discontinuity between the colonial subject and the rural poor," however, "is such that the instruments of such undoing were thoughtlessly deactivated" (45). To now activate one of these instruments again means entering into dialogue with the Other, thoughtfully, and with the intention of recognizing the point of methods that were not imposed 'from above.'

The Methodological Leap: Freedom and Practicability

Clearly, both Freire and Spivak firmly reject pedagogies that somehow project one world onto another or that silence rather than activate voices other than the teacher's. It is just as clear, moreover, that, in spite of the risk of becoming what they critique, they both make attempts at launching methods for a liberating pedagogy. A common objection to conservative conceptions of freedom is that the liberty of the few—to own land, for instance—often rests on the oppression of the many. And unsurprisingly, since Freire conceives of freedom rather as a condition for "human completion" (Freire 29) and "the capacity to go beyond present knowledge to change the current perceptions of reality" (Joldersma 134), he cautiously takes into consideration the risk that the oppressed equate freedom with landownership and, in turn, the privilege to oppress (Freire 28). Thus, he attempts to immunize his methodology against any tendencies that might simply reverse the oppressor-oppressed binary. This attempt, however, is not entirely convincing, which becomes clear when Freire gives the reader an account of his views on *confidence*, a concept that is thoroughly discussed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

"A real humanist," Freire explains, "can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favor without that trust" (42). This idea of confidence permeates *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* via a number of different phrasings; for instance, the reader learns that "trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change," that "faith in the people is an *a priori* requirement for dialogue," and that whoever lacks this "will fail to initiate (or will abandon) dialogue, reflection, and communication, and will fall into using slogans, communiqués, monologues, and instructions" (42, 71, 48). To use a Spivakian metaphor, it stands beyond any doubt that the ability for a teacher to have confidence in the students is the warp and woof of Freire's pedagogy. Yet, there is a caveat. The oppressed often internalize the oppressor:

This confidence should not, however, be naïve. The leaders must believe in the potentialities of the people, whom they cannot treat as mere objects of their own action; they must believe that the people are capable of participating in the pursuit of liberation. But they must always mistrust the *ambiguity* of oppressed people, mistrust the oppressor 'housed' in the latter (150).

Here, one of the saving clauses that make Freire's methodology work comes into effect. As the teacher in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* not only initiates dialogue but also supervises it, s/he can make sure that it does not transmute into something undesired, and this arbitrary distinction between the true voice of the student and the internalized voice of the oppressor is, of course, a considerable threat to the pedagogical indeterminacy that Freire values so highly, even if the purpose of this indeterminacy is very likely to foster in students what Bakhtin would call "internally persuasive discourse": the capacity to think in "an independent, experimenting and discriminating way"—in short: to be free, epistemologically speaking (Bakhtin 345).⁴ Giroux gets close to this problem's core when he inquires how one can "explore the contradiction between validating certain forms of 'correct' thinking and the pedagogical task of helping students assume rather than simply follow the dictates of authority, regardless of how radical the project informed by such authority" (Giroux 19). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* never answers this question; rather, it makes the need for a response seem even more urgent.

This contradiction raises issues of practicability that are indeed pertinent also to Spivak's pedagogical formulas. Ilan Kapoor homes in on this problem by way of noting that, as explained by Spivak, "the ethical encounter with the subaltern" needs to happen at a "face-to-face" level in order not to be exploitative (Kapoor 58)—Snaza, by the way, traces the Levinasian logic of this position and writes that the teacher must 'let go' and "dwell *with* the students as equally faced beings" (58). Although Kapoor agrees with Spivak, he is discomforted by her reticence to find out if this idea is practicable on a larger scale: "not attending to issues of do-ability," Kapoor asserts, "gives [Spivak's] work a romantic, utopic dimension" and "endows her discussion of the ethical encounter with the subaltern with a quasi-mystical, ecstatic character..." (58), perhaps somewhat symptomatic of the deconstructionist's unwillingness to indulge in the practical and concrete.⁵

Reviewing one of Spivak's major works, Terry Eagleton, too, objects to her supposed failure to consider practicability and social change. It is the notion of "complicity," Eagleton maintains, that blunts the critical potential: "Spivak," Eagleton argues, "is logically mistaken to suppose that imagining some overall alternative to the current system means claiming to be unblemished by it" (*Figures* 166). Moreover, Eagleton combines his critique of Spivak's aloofness with the concept of factual change with a questioning of her "pretentiously opaque" language (159). Although post-colonial theory "makes heavy weather of a respect for the Other," he notes, "the reader, its most immediate Other, is apparently dispensed from this sensitivity" (159). Important to note here is that what Eagleton finds wanting in Spivak is not theoretical simplification; rather, he argues that she is guilty of the commonplace "mistake of supposing that the concrete is simple and the abstract is complex" (*How to Read* 142). Questioning this "misconception," Eagleton contends that it is not until a phenomenon is inserted into its "complex social context...that we can construct a 'concrete' concept of it"—and this, one might argue, is a far greater challenge than indulging in vague discussions that are really nothing but rough sketches, nothing but "preliminary outline[s] of the actual reality" (142). This critique of Spivak's "simple" abstruseness is arguably in keeping with Kapoor's delineation of Spivak as a romantic utopian without political potential.

For a number of reasons, Spivak herself would, of course, plead not guilty to these allegations. The concept of utopia, to begin with, is understood and valued quite differently in Spivak's own writing. For her, to be utopian is not to neglect to think or discuss that which is difficult to imagine; rather, it is to be concrete when one should not—it is to practice a mode of thinking that "allows us to figure the impossible" ("Righting" 575). Simply put, in Spivakian theory, it would be a mistake to endow complex matters with concrete and

⁴ Furthermore, Freire also declares that some "restraints...must be imposed on the former oppressors so they cannot restore the oppressive order" (39). This statement is arguably informed by the same logic that assigns Freire's pedagogue the task of deciding what voices that should be listened to. Freedom for all is the goal, but before it is achieved, the suppression of some detrimental attitudes is inevitable.

⁵ As Derrida puts it: "Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one" (Derrida qtd in Royle 4).

simple formulations (because “plain prose cheats” [Spivak qtd in Morton 6]). Thus, Spivak explains that she remains a “consensus breaker among metropolitan activists, who feel they can know everything in a nonvague way if only they have enough information, and that not to think so is ‘mystical’” (548). Implicitly contesting this claim, Spivak suggests that, when it comes to teaching, we can only speak about the “*form*” (Shaikh 175). “The substance of teaching,” she continues, “informs or is informed by this form. I am not talking about ‘what’ because that is the problem: people think that just giving a lot of ‘what’ actually does work as teaching. The trouble to learn is no longer undertaken” (175). Even speaking of form, however, is to Spivak a risky undertaking, and this is most likely due to the constant threat of simplification.

It should be possible, though, to second Eagleton’s critique of Spivak’s jargon while still defending her inclination to shun concretization. Whereas academese is often the result of overproduction and a reluctance to revise, abstract thought *can* indeed be an attempt to acknowledge actual complexity (and to speak once again with Haraway: we do not all speak the same, resist the same, even when we have recognized the same problem). In the case of pedagogy, moreover, abstraction may also be a sign of confidence, not only in students from different contexts but also in the teacher’s professional ability to determine what methods that meet the needs of a given classroom.

Spivak’s Formulas

Despite her aversion to deceivingly simple formulas, Spivak does not refrain completely from producing them herself. In this article, two examples, “learning to learn from below” and “unlearning one’s privileges,” have been mentioned. “Strategic use of essentialism,” to offer one more example, is yet another formula that has gained enormous popularity among scholars across the globe. As demonstrated by the quotation below, this is a fact that fills Spivak with great discomfort:

Once I started really getting into doing something about this, about unlearning my privilege, I took it away. It is ‘learning to learn from below,’ if you want a formula. I have also become extremely suspicious of the fact that people seem to like my little formulas: to take another example: ‘strategic use of essentialism,’ I have put that to rest many times, but people have not given it up. (qtd in Shaikh 183)

The takeaway here is that as soon as a formula is put to use, it must be put to rest because, as a mere formula, it will unavoidably be invalidated by reality and context. In this retraction of formulas, this reversed methodological leap, lies Spivak’s solution to the problem that, if received uncritically and practiced without any respect to individual and situational specificity, *all* methodological instruction is oppressive. By annulling her own ideas as they—one by one—prove insufficient or faulty, Spivak implicitly tells her reader that didactic methods are invariably provisional and context-bound and that, for her, the ongoing *quest* for pedagogical knowledge is the main virtue. In other words, the search for a way to teach and learn is indispensable, but its findings can never be universal or everlasting. This ‘fact,’ Spivak herself would probably label a “success-in-failure,” typical of deconstruction, which—in Vanessa de Oliveria Andreotti’s words— “always falls prey to” itself, but which can still pose questions and cause doubts and thereby “lead to better practice” (74). In other words, as the deconstructionist constantly problematizes established notions, s/he, too, eventually ends up deprived of the possibility to offer any universalisms. Yet, by scrutinizing the production of the taken-for-granted, deconstruction can act as a corrective device that helps people resist their impulse to believe that ‘I’ always ‘know better’ than ‘them.’ When harnessed in Spivak’s thoughts on education, then, this theoretical approach becomes a means of circumventing the danger of methodological oppression, of avoiding the instilling of one’s own ideas on proper education in students and teachers.

Drawing on Marx to substantiate the idea that educational programs are never universal, Spivak claims that “working hands-on with teachers and students over long periods of time on their terms without thinking about producing information for [her] academic peers is like learning a language ‘to be able to produce in it freely’” and hence “to move in it without remembering back to the language rooted and planted in” her—“[...indeed] forgetting it” (“Righting” 548). Spivak proposes, then, that non-oppressive teaching is only a possibility when pedagogues divest themselves of the idea of theorizing and instead focus all attention on the classroom. If this operation is completely successful, it seems, it is not necessarily translatable into academic language; if teachers have managed to “*leap into the other’s sea*,” this is because they have suppressed the impulse to scrutinize, analyze, and lecture (in other words, the inclination to produce new scholarly knowledge [Spivak qtd in Simmons 141]). When education for once works, it is beyond the scope of scholarly language, and therefore, inaccessible to the academy. For Spivak, this is arguably a very convenient conclusion, allowing her to leave many difficult questions unanswered. And whereas this evasive move is what immunizes Spivak to demands that she needs to concretize her theory, it is also indeed what justifies Kapoor’s accusations of mysticism and romanticism. Yet, one could also argue that Spivak’s pedagogical usefulness is to some extent up to the reader, who could choose to either reject the whole pedagogy because of its supposed impracticability or consider adopting certain elements as the basis for a tactic.

Conclusion

Freire and Spivak both agree that ideology exerts an influence on felt needs, that people consequently do not always know what measures would improve their lives, and that this lack of self-knowledge calls for the intervention of a pedagogue who is aware of these problems. Freire’s line of reasoning builds on the idea of the teacher as a person in the know and the student as a subject whose consciousness needs to be raised, and even though Spivak is somewhat more careful in relation to such matters, by subscribing to the idea that the masses are deceived, her reasoning, too, implies that the successful teacher is able to effect the falling of scales from the student’s eyes. Somewhat ironically, then, by posing as epistemic rescuers, Spivak and her pedagogue risk constituting the Other as destitute of all kinds of non-ideological knowledge.

The danger of this critique, of course, is that it makes for a deadlock where no pedagogic action at all is possible, and this risk of complete paralysis is very likely what makes both Freire and Spivak *try anyway*, as I have called it—what makes them both leap from theory to practice. Spivak, for one, is evidently aware of her own complicity (Norton 2110), and, moreover—in spite of her concept of an “uncoercive rearrangement of desires”—she contends that “education [, after all,] inevitably is coercive” (Lee and Mascarenhas). In other words, Spivak acknowledges that without any guidance or leadership, the idea of education (a liberating pedagogy no less) would go down like a house of cards.

To answer the main inquiry of this article, which posed the question if Freire and Spivak manage to present pedagogical methods that are immune from “the danger of transference,” the reply must be “No” in Freire’s case, and “Yes,” although only provisionally, with regard to Spivak’s work. When Freire puts his teacher in charge of deciding what voices should be heard and what voices should be gagged, he leaves the door open for renewed oppression and a mere turning of the tables, clearly against the grain of his own line of argument. Spivak, on the other hand, leaves no loopholes for oppressive tendencies in her methodology; however, as she usually shuns “the production of models [of practice] as such,” withdraws her own formulas, and uses deconstruction as a “safeguard against the repression or exclusion of ‘alterities,’” her settling for a certain praxis can only be temporary and provisional (“Can the Subaltern” 103, Norton 2110). As stated before, this refusal to offer a lasting alternative is both Spivak’s problem and her solution to methodological oppression.

To further clarify these differences between Freire and Spivak: it is clear that Freire's dialectics inform his pedagogical methods and that this results in rather rigid dichotomies, but also that the *synthesis* of Freire's dialectical reasoning allows for "alterities," diversification, indeterminacy, and openness—at least in theory, until his methods ban the "internalized voice," as if to ensure that the teacher's agenda is implemented. Were it not for this last move, Freire and Spivak could painlessly have joined forces in the same curriculum. As should be evident by now, however, Spivak does not validate the kinds of saving clauses Freire eventually resorts to. Although she, like most scholars, has an agenda, and a fairly concrete idea of what the world needs politically, this does not corrupt her pedagogical creed, which is protected by her avoidance of firm positions, her investigations of 'stories in between,' and her constant moving from one subject position to another.

Thus, pedagogy emerges as an "impossible task," and yet also the best possibility there is for mutual understanding (and *love*, as Freire would have put it). In other words, the combination of teaching and learning is a most necessary (im)possibility for which the perfect and completely satisfactory form can never be found. While Spivak is the one who explicitly gives voice to this idea, Freire, too, is evidently aware that the theoretical language with which he constructs his pedagogy is far from perfect. But in conclusion, although this article has laid bare a few potential problems in the respective methodologies of Freire and Spivak, it has also shown that the most valuable lesson to be learned from these pedagogues may not concern a certain methodology, but an attitude that acknowledges the student as an intelligent, faced being, and that checks the teacher's self-assumed superiority. Tactics rather than methods, perhaps, but no less valuable for that.

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