

Understanding the Oppressor

As Robert Huesca describes in his essay, “Participatory Approaches to Communication for Development,” Latin American scholars in the 1970s, noting persistent underdevelopment in their communities, offered revolutionary criticism of the then-dominant modernization paradigm which prescribed a top-down method for development. Eschewing practices and predominantly Western philosophical frameworks that “blamed individuals, not systems, for continued underdevelopment,”¹ the Latin American intellectual community developed discourse and research into a “Dialogic Praxis” that favored a bottom-up, grassroots approach to development.² Arguably, the most influential of these writers was Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator-activist that penned “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” in 1970. Anchoring Freire’s theories for participatory empowerment and humanization of the Oppressed with Huesca’s succinct historical summary of participatory communication practice, I argue that sustainable development lies in understanding the nuances of the system of oppression beyond a strict duality (as Freire asserts) and working to effect transformation both amongst the Oppressed (bottom-up) and the Oppressors (top-down).

While Freire offers the world a systemic strategy for liberation, the seemingly class-based binary of Oppressor/ Oppressed that forms the base of the book is far too monolithic to encompass the subtleties of this multifaceted relationship. Are all Oppressors cognizant of or deliberate in their subjugation of others? Is it not possible for one to be both “Oppressor” and the “Oppressed?” For example, unless the “Oppressor” is strictly defined as “white-able-bodied-heterosexual-Anglo-male,” their exists within the

¹ Robert Huesca, *Participatory Approaches to Communication for Development* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc, 2003), p210

² Huesca, p211

community of Oppressors entire groups (women, homosexuals, the disabled) whose deviance from the normative power structure renders them “oppressed.”

In defining the Oppressor, Freire renders him static and seemingly incapable of affecting social change. They are instigators of dehumanizing violence, able only to extend a false generosity derived from the inflexible self-interest of perpetuating oppressive systems of privilege. “For the oppressors, ‘human beings’ refers only to themselves; other people are “things”³ and their very existence depends on the continued subjugation of the oppressed.⁴ Oppressors can only “possess life” rather than breed it, transforming everything around it into objects and things that can be filed as their property. For the oppressors, “*to be is to have*, and to be the class of the ‘haves’”.⁵ And to maintain their class, Freire points to the Oppressor’s use of science and technology as “unquestionably powerful instruments” through which is perpetuated the “oppressive order through manipulation and repression.”⁶ By this definition, acquisition of material goods and the use of science becomes the defining factor between Oppressor and Oppressed, and a problematic distinction it is, since it disallows the Oppressed from participating in this system of acquisition and technological progress.

But just who are the “Oppressors?” Who are their heirs? One immediate reason for the need to acknowledge the multiplicity of roles within the system of oppression is that movement between “Oppressor” and “Oppressed” is too fluid to allow for a strict binary. Oppressors can be Oppressed, the Liberators can turn into Oppressors, the Oppressed themselves are complicit in their very subjugation. Freire acknowledges this fluidity himself in describing “the rare peasant, who, once ‘promoted’ to overseer, does

³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed-30th Anniversary edition*. (New York, NY: The Continuum, Inc, 1970), p57

⁴ Freire, p58

⁵ Freire, p58

⁶ Freire, p60

not become more of a tyrant towards his former comrades than the owner himself.”⁷ Afflicted by the “fear of freedom,” Oppressor and Oppressed alike are wary of awakening from their roles in the regime because “freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility.”⁸ It is far more convenient to persist in the system than to change it; as Freire points out, “liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one.”⁹

Development therefore needs to move into a clear understanding of the nuances of the system of oppression. Huesca points out that without clear definitions, “oppressive social relationships can be and are reproduced under the guise of participation.”¹⁰ A clearer criteria for who (or what) constitutes the “Oppressor” would reduce the emergence of unintended inequitable power relations. Furthermore, in keeping with Huesca’s suggestion that development begin to align itself with social movements, expansion of the oppressor/oppressed binary beyond class-based discourse would facilitate a more universal application of a very powerful pedagogical prescription for humanization through social change.¹¹ Enhancing this discourse with analysis of, say, the global civil rights movement of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender community, would challenge the posited polarity of oppressor/ oppressed with the inclusion of issues of gender, sexuality, race as well as class. For example, movements such as the LGBT struggle for equality, where identities of privilege are often compounded by simultaneous identities of oppression (i.e., white-male-gay-working-class, black-female-lesbian-upper-class) offer well-rounded, contemporary case studies for analysis.

Though “Pedagogy” offers a clear manifesto for the Oppressed and their

⁷ Freire, p46

⁸ Freire, p47

⁹ Freire, p49

¹⁰ Huesca, p220

¹¹ Huesca, p221

revolutionary leaders, it does not offer a clear portrait of the oppressive regime, nor a path for the equally crucial transformation of the Oppressors. While applying the virtues of participatory development, one cannot ignore the power of institutional change and support; in working from the grassroots, development must also occur from the top-down. While it is essential that the Oppressed are made aware of their subjugation and, in knowing, conduct “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it,” it is just as important for the Oppressors to be allowed to transform themselves within their system of privilege.¹² If it is the Oppressors that create and maintain the system of tyranny that continues to dehumanize the Oppressed, then who better to change the parameters of this system than its very authors. While it is true that freedom of the Oppressed cannot be “given” but rather “acquired by conquest” by the Oppressed themselves, working with the perpetrators of the oppressive regime to, at the very least, mitigate the obstacles towards acquiring this freedom can only serve to benefit all.¹³

Freire does acknowledge that while there are instances where the Oppressor has demonstrated the want to move in solidarity with the Oppressed, even in this gesture the Oppressor cannot free himself from “their prejudices and deformations.”¹⁴ However, in the event that the Oppressor is able to fully *commune* with the struggle and for a *comradeship* with the Oppressed, this is often times only a minority within the greater leadership of the oppressive regime. What shall be done with the majority of Oppressors who will not commune nor form comradeship? Are they there to serve merely as targets for the impending revolution? Or, like the Oppressed, can they be educated to become agents for change within the regime of their own design?

What appears to be an incongruous element to Freire’s argument for the

¹² Freire, p51

¹³ Freire, p47

oppressed community's self-directed assertion of voice and liberation is his observation that the revolutionary leadership group is "made up of men and women who in one way or another... belonged to the social strata of the dominators."¹⁵ In rejecting their privilege, they are able to commune with the people, who in turn "must find themselves in the emerging leaders."¹⁶ However, one begs the question whether the success of these revolutionary leaders is found not so much in their solidarity with the subjugated, but in an inherently augmented understanding of the system of Oppression rooted in their hybrid Oppressor-Oppressed identity? As heirs to the knowledge of oppression, these revolutionary leaders operate by translating the "language" of oppression into strategies for its diffusion. However, effective use of this skill cannot come from total rejection of privilege and oppression, but in past complicity in its design.

If it is indeed the role of the revolutionary leadership to "help the people help themselves critically perceive the reality which oppresses them," then why cannot the same be done to help the Oppressors perceive the reality which oppresses others?¹⁷ Huesca points to the need for development practitioners to "cultivate a stronger, more directive role for themselves ("transformational leadership") aimed at constructing a shared vision and commitment to action in a community."¹⁸ In doing so, it is imperative that practitioners work to educate colleagues (many of whom are likely to be representative of the alleged Oppressor class) working in particularly large development institutions in ways of employing participatory models of development that are not strictly administrative. As Huesca points out, the increasing popularity of participatory practice (mirrored equally by the rapid denunciation of the modernization antithesis)

¹⁴ Freire, p60

¹⁵ Freire, p163

¹⁶ Freire, p163

¹⁷ Freire, p166

¹⁸ Huesca, p219

brought elements of inclusive reform to project design vis-à-vis the creation of “pro-social” messages through focus groups and surveys that, once implemented, still mirror the dominant paradigm.¹⁹ It becomes increasingly evident that by educating perpetrators of the dominant paradigm, building “buy-in” and securing institutional support can practitioners ensure that deployment of participatory development is not met with hollow promises or a veiled reversal to denounced, ineffective methodology.

It is not enough to work *against* the regime of oppression; rather, it falls on the shoulders of development practitioners, educators and revolutionary leaders to awaken the Oppressors and enlist their resources. The enlightened Oppressor (who, at the point of self-awareness, carries the potential to be a revolutionary leader and a very effective agent for systemic reform) must work within the regime and mitigate its maleficence by striving to make the system more equitable not so much on behalf of the Oppressed, but for the benefit of all humanity. Sustainable, egalitarian and efficient development calls for a simultaneous top-down, bottom-up approach that builds institutional political support for participatory practices.

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¹⁹ Huesca, p215