

Theoretical Analysis of Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Theatre of the Oppressed

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Augusto Boal based *Theatre of the Oppressed* a lot on Paulo Freire's work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. There are obviously several parallels between the two as well as differences, specifically the settings both practices are based on. Boal's focus is working with communities who are oppressed and creating conversation through theatre. Freire's focus is mainly on the classroom working with students and teachers to create a co-learning environment to give the students the tools for their own success. Boal and Freire speak a lot about what will be needed for a revolution. Freire speaks on how "reflection and action become imperative when one does not erroneously attempt to dichotomize the content of humanity from its historical forms". (Freire, 2006, p. 66) He insists that the oppressed should engage in reflection on their situation but that does not mean that he is calling for 'armchair revolution'. Boal makes a similar comment by saying "the theatre itself is not revolutionary: it is a rehearsal for the revolution". (Boal, 1979, p. 122) Both of these works see the value of working with oppressed people towards their revolution. Having ownership and responsibility over your own revolution leads to powerful change. This paper will analyze *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as well as *Theatre of the Oppressed*. It will explore how they can work in tandem with each other.

Paulo Freire highlights how the objectification of the oppressed in society, alongside uncritical models of education, results in the internalization of oppression. "The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom". (Freire, 2006, p. 47) The oppressed during their struggle to regain humanity should not turn into the oppressors and instead become restorers of humanity to both. (Freire, 2006, p. 44) More times than not the oppressed tend to become oppressors or 'sub-oppressors' because their ideal vision is to become "men but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity." (Freire, 2006, p. 45) This is because the oppressed have lived so long

‘connected’ to their oppressors. So, they can’t see a version of humanity outside of this dynamic. They aren’t fighting for their liberation but to become versions of their oppressors.

The objectification of the oppressed in society is rooted in the ideals of the oppressor. The oppressors grow accustomed to their dominant class because most times the oppression has been going on for generations. Freire explains that this makes the oppressors possessive of the world. Not just material possessions but of the people and the world. Thus, the oppressor transforms everything surrounding them into an object of its domination. This leads to their materialistic concept of existence and money and profit are all that matters. This becomes a class war against those who have and those who don’t. “Humanity is a ‘thing,’ and they possess it as an exclusive right, as inherited property.” (Freire, 2006, p. 59) The objectification of the oppressed leads to the uncritical models of education that try to keep them complacent.

Freire explains what he calls “Banking model of education” in the Pedagogy of the Oppressed. He goes on to use this term to describe established education systems. It refers to students are containers into which educators must ‘deposit’ knowledge. In essence, it is saying educators give students items to receive, memorize and repeat without questioning. He argues that this keeps them complacent in the oppression. In the banking concept of education, “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.” (Freire, 2006, p. 72) He speaks about how this type of education extends only to receiving and storing. This again dehumanizes the oppressed. Freire says, “for apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human.” (Freire, 2006, p. 72) In this model of education, “good” students patiently wait and receive deposits from their educators. Whereas true knowledge, Freire explains, “emerges only through invention and

re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world and with each other.” (Freire, 2006, p. 72)

The dehumanization of the oppressed is apparent in teaching in this model because it continues to objectify the oppressed and void them of any humanity in the eyes of the oppressor. With the educator believing that they hold all the knowledge, and that the student has no knowledge of their own to share with the educator. Similarly in the eyes of the oppressor when it comes to false generosity. Freire explains that “false generosity constrains the fearful and subdued, the ‘rejects of life’, to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving to that these hands – need to be extended less and less in supplication so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world.” (Freire, 2006, p. 45) The model of education that Freire speaks about here is just another version of false charity to keep the oppressed hands extended.

“Theatre is political, and politics is theatre.” (Heritage, 1994, p. 26) It has been long debated about the relationship between Theatre and Politics. Plato argued that the poetics should be “expelled from a perfect republic because poetry only makes sense when it exalts the figures and deeds that should serve as examples; theatre imitates the things of the world, but the world is no more than a mere imitation of ideas – thus theatre comes to be an imitation of an imitation.” (Boal, 1979, p. XIII) Boal goes on to explore that while Aristotle claims that poetry is independent from politics, that Aristotle helped craft “an extremely powerful poetic-political system for intimidation of the spectator”. (Boal, 1979, p. XIV)

Theatre was once made by the people and for the people. There were no spectators, just performers. Then there was shift to a chorus of people on stage and an audience watching which then followed Thespis which separated the chorus and brought out single actors to perform.

Present day there are actors by profession and spectators that could never imagine stepping on to the stage and performing. Yet, Boal argues that “The means of producing theater are made up of man himself”. (Boal, 1979, p. 122) He says that the oppressed are liberating themselves and taking back theatre and making it their own. In order to do this the spectator needs to start acting again. He refers to them as ‘spect-actors’.

Boal shows how spect-actors can engage thoughtfully with the work with something he calls Forum Theatre. This style of theatre starts with a short performance which demonstrates a situation with an oppressor and an oppressed person. There will also include at least one secondary oppressor/potential ally. There is also a Joker that is the acting facilitator of the performance. Once the short performance has finished the spect-actors are given the opportunity to stop the performers at any time while the performance is running again. They themselves will take the place of the oppressed person and try a strategy they think will work to overcome the oppressor. This will can go on as long as the spect-actors want, and anyone can stop the performance at any time and jump in and try their own strategy. Alongside the performance there is also a conversation being facilitated by the Joker with everyone.

This type of work is inherently political as it gives the oppressed the tools, they need in order to break free from their oppression. Boal said, “it is a rehearsal for revolution”. (Boal, 1979, p. 122) In order for the oppressed to stand up and see change they need to have the tools of revolution in their bodies. While (the spect-actor) “rehearses throwing a bomb on stage, he is concretely rehearsing the way a bomb is thrown; acting out his attempt to organize a strike, he is concretely organizing a strike. Within its fictitious limits, the experience is a concrete one”. (Boal, 1979, p. 141) Boal believes that all you need to create theatre is your body. “However, in a rigid, hierarchical society we have been taught to move our bodies in certain ways that serve

the purpose of the bourgeoisie. Theater of the Oppressed is designed to teach theater through a multi-stage process starting with exercises that focus the movements of the body and continually scaling into theater as discourse.” (Yale Campus Press, para. 5)

Both Boal and Freire touch on a similar idea: you cannot merely give the tools to fight oppression to the oppressed if they do not know how to use them. Freire does so with problem-based learning and Boal does so with performance and theatre. They also both agree that participants bring their own knowledge into the space with them. Boal encourages the spect-actor to come into the scene and bring a new strategy in for the oppressed. The theatre is not meant to tell them what they should do but instead is a rehearsal for what they feel like they should do. Freire argues for a problem-posing approach in education where there is an emphasis on critical thinking for the purpose of liberation. The learners in this classroom model are everyone, teacher and students alike. There is a shared experience here where they are co-learning as well as co-teaching. The educator understands that the students have their own set of lived experiences and knowledge instead of being an empty vessel. Both Boal and Freire see the oppressed as subjects that have the ability to change the world and not the objects that the oppressors portray them as.

Somewhere Boal’s practice stands out from Freire is action. Freire believes strongly that there should be critical thinking as well as action. Boal tends “to take this capability of action for granted. By focusing on action, he seemed to disregard the significance of critical thinking and the step of generating the impetus”. (Lee, 2015, p. 162) The spect-actor model works if the people are willing and wanting to stand up and join the action. There are several things that can keep someone from fully jumping in: language barrier or confidence in the language spoken, anxiety or even just wanting to observe and learn that way. Do these things put them back into the spectator role or by showing up and listening are they still spect-actors? Critical thinking can

happen without standing up and joining them on stage so is that still constructive? Lee states in their paper that they went to a Theatre of Oppressed workshop wanting to see how they can incorporate this model into their classroom and motivate the students to jump in and participate. They felt it was never discussed and themselves as a spect-actor they didn't feel like they could intervene in the scene with their own strategy for several reasons.

I believe there is a real opportunity to take both Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Theatre of the Oppressed, mold them together and also critically analysis them and create something new and more inclusive. For this to truly help all oppressed people we need to take into account some of the hesitations I listed above. Those are not just hesitations for theatre and performance but can be seen in classrooms, workplaces, public and in private settings. There needs to be an expansion of these ideas to account for differences in oppressed people and their needs and abilities.

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