Swaraj and Conscientização: An Essay on Gandhi and Freire’s Philosophy of Critical Education

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Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) and Paulo Freire (1921-1997) were prominent figures within the theoretical debates surrounding critical education. Even years after their death, Gandhi and Freire’s ideas are still considered valuable to the contemporary philosophical development of education. Some similarities as well as differences that can be found in their philosophy of education were shaped by the particular context in which they lived. Mahatma Gandhi, an icon in the Indian struggle to achieve independence, was mainly known for his principle of non-violence in the anti-imperialism movement. Gandhi’s philosophy of education was thus part of his resistance against colonialism. On the other hand, Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, social theorist and politician, was known as an advocate of critical pedagogy. His philosophy of education was grounded in his view that education is a means for liberation from oppression.

This essay seeks to present a comparative review on Mahatma Gandhi and Paulo Freire’s works. The Problem of Education, first published in 1932, is a compilation of Gandhi’s writings and speeches on education during British colonialism in India. Pedagogy of The Oppressed, first published in 1968, is part of Freire’s reflection on being a public school teacher and a working class educator in Brazil. Specifically, the essay examines Gandhi and Freire’s critiques on education and the alternative methodologies they proposed to ad-
dress these critiques. This essay also identifies the similarities and differences within their philosophy of education by looking into their personal biography. This approach is to understand how experiences of living in particular geographical setting and historical epoch had influenced their thoughts.

**GANDHI AND FREIRE’S CRITIQUES ON EDUCATION**

The similarity in Freire and Gandhi’s critiques on education lies in their views of education as a means to maintain domination. However, contextualized by different geographical setting and historical epoch, they have different perspectives on the nature of domination that is embedded in education. Gandhi, whose thoughts were generated in the specific context of British colonialism in India (1612-1948), understood domination within the context of colonialism and implied on the role of education in maintaining oppression. In doing so, Gandhi portrayed Western education as serving primarily the interest of the colonizer whilst impoverishing the lives of the colonized.

During this period, the British Government rapidly established schools to produce a class of educated clerks needed to support British administration in India. For Gandhi, the consequence of this establishment was the commoditization of education. In particular, there was a tendency for parents and young Indians to view school as a way to improve their livelihoods through obtaining clerical jobs. This resulted in a dichotomy between modern jobs as a preferred type of work compared to conventional ways of earning a living. Thus, Indian youth gradually left traditional work, such as hand spinning and other arts and craft production, in preference of obtaining modern jobs in government offices. Consequently, India gradually lost its production capacity to fulfill basic needs and thus became dependent on foreign products. This caused deprivation of means of supports among Indians, in which the poor were affected most. For these reasons, Gandhi believed that government schools impoverished the livelihood of Indian People and trapped them further in the circle of slavery (p. 3).

Another crucial aspect of Gandhi’s work was his view on the Western system of education as a form of cultural imperialism. Gandhi believed that the formalization of English in schools, particularly as the language used for teaching, had resulted in the disconnection of students from their cultural roots; which later detached them from...
their own community. Gandhi’s main concern lies in the students’ Indian language deficiency as “disengagement from their community” (p. 5). Most of the Indians, especially the poor who lived in rural areas, were illiterate in English. Meanwhile, the use of English in schools had weakened the capacity of students to speak in their native tongue of Gujarati and Hindi. As a result, students found it difficult to communicate the knowledge they received from schools to their community; especially to the most underprivileged within the society structure. As such schools primarily benefited the interest of the imperialist and the rich, thus insufficient in improving the livelihood of the poor (p. 6).

In contrast to Gandhi, Freire sharply separated the oppressor from the oppressed, but did not specify the context in which the readers can identify the characteristics of either (p. 28-32). In spite of that, one can contextualize Freire’s differentiation of the oppressed and the oppressor by looking into his past experience of dealing with public school students and the working class. Referring to the context of post-colonial Brazil in which Freire lived, the oppressed may refer to any social group in powerless positions in relation to the oppressor. Thus, the oppressor would always need to maintain an imbalanced relationship to sustain their domination. In this sense, one can associate the connection between the oppressed and the oppressor with the exploitative relationship between the working class and capital owners in a capitalist society. In a broader sense, one can also link this connection with the relationship between citizens and a repressive regime within an authoritarian state.¹

At the heart of Freire’s critique on education was his view on the “banking concept of education” that he considered as the oppressor’s way of maintaining domination. According to Freire, the way in which teachers transfer their knowledge to students was similar to the way people deposit their money in the bank. This concept assumes students as blank slates to be filled with teachers’ knowledge and that the appropriate way to teach was to deposit teachers’ knowledge

¹ According to Freire, the situation of oppression involved the restriction of freedom, which led to “dehumanization” that affected not only the oppressed but also the oppressor (p. 29). One can interpret that the type of freedom that is restricted within the situation of oppression may vary from freedom from fear, freedom to be entitled of basic rights, to freedom to think and speak critically. Such restrictions related to freedom could only occur within the imbalanced relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor.
to the students. Instead of building a reciprocal dialogue, there was a tendency for teachers to dictate unquestionable knowledge (p. 58). Moreover, students were expected to memorize and repeat knowledge transferred by their teachers, resulting in students’ lack of creativity and capacity to think critically. Thus, the “banking concept of education” went well with the interest of the oppressor, for passive and uncritical students take as given by the oppressive system. As such students’ lack of awareness prevented them from questioning and transforming not only their oppressive reality, but also the domination of the oppressor (p. 60-63).

GANDHI AND FREIRE’S PROPOSAL OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Although Gandhi and Freire perceived the education system as a representation of the ruling class, both proposed alternative methods of education to address their critiques. This signifies that they still believed in the role of education as a medium for social transformation.

According to Gandhi, the genuine national school, in contrast to the government school, could bring India to swaraj or independence from colonialism. Contextualized by the spirit of anti-colonialism, Gandhi underpinned the role of the genuine national school within the non-cooperation movement that is associated with the anti-colonial struggle. Gandhi believed in the need to struggle for national independence, while his belief in Hinduism forbade him to conduct violent acts. Steered by his faith in the power of ahimsa, the non-violent principle in Hinduism, Gandhi idealized the principle of non-cooperation to guide the anti-imperialist movement. Through the non-cooperation movement, Gandhi inspired Indian people to express their resistance towards colonialism in non-violent ways; which is by rejecting any form of cooperation with the colonial government. In education, the non-cooperation principle was expressed by rejecting government school and alternatively established the national school (p. 35).

In Gandhi’s vision, national schools educated students with capabilities and characters needed to achieve Indian independency. Shaped by the non-cooperation principle, Gandhi formulated several prescriptions for a genuine national school and experimented with creating the
curricula for a formal school. Two significant principles guiding the national school curricula are the indivisibility of school and traditional work and the use of traditional language as the medium of teaching (p. 291-293). In national schools, traditional work becomes part of the school curricula. The rationale behind this idea was the wish to introduce the value of manual labor to students. Thus, students could appreciate the importance of traditional work and modern knowledge with the same degree. This is so they can fulfill their future role of contributing to the local community through manual labor (p. 151, 240, 276). National schools used Gujarati and Hindi as the medium of teaching while English is positioned as a supplementary language. These reflected Gandhi’s view for students to learn in their own language and to communicate in the same language used by the rest of society (p. 293). The underlying national school principle was Gandhi’s antithesis to his previous critique on Western education. Through this principle, he denounced the gap between students’ knowledge and the actual needs of the society. Thus, national schools were envisaged to produce students motivated by non-cooperation that is considered necessary to achieve an independent India.

Gandhi set up a model of national curricula as his proposal for alternative education, while Freire proposed general methods of alternative education and tried to avoid a universalized model. However, similar to Gandhi, Freire believed in the role of education as a way to achieve social transformation. According to Freire, “pedagogy of the oppressed” as an opposition to “pedagogy of the oppressor” shall lead both the oppressed and the oppressor to liberation; which helps them regains humanity. His ideas on education as a medium of social

2 One of Gandhi’s legacies related to the national school curricula is Gujarat Vidyapith, which is one of the national school models established by Gandhi in 1920. It consists of primary, secondary and tertiary school as well as university that applied Gandhi’s national school principle in its program (Gujarat Vindyapith, n.d.).

3 Freire used the term “pedagogy of the oppressed” to refer to a model of education that is needed by the oppressed to triumph over the situation of oppression and regain their humanity. According to Freire, “pedagogy of the oppressed” must overcome the duality of the oppressed. Although the oppressed’s freedom is restrained by the existence of the oppressor, the oppressed also has the tendency to take the role of the oppressor as soon as they regain freedom. This is because they are used to the situation of oppression. Thus, “pedagogy of the oppressed” was against any violent way to recuperate freedom. On the contrary, it required a dialogue between the educators and the students to
transformation appear to be influenced by Marxism and liberation theology. Freire’s separation between the oppressed and the oppressor reflects a typical Marxist analysis of class. The way liberalist theology is intertwined with Freire’s Marxist view is illustrated in at least two ways. First, by his focus on marginalized groups in society. Second, by his acknowledgement towards the need to liberate and regain the humanity of these groups through “pedagogy of the oppressed”. Consistent to these two points, liberation theology argued for an act of empowerment to liberate the marginalized from oppression within a particular structure; which is based on the biblical interpretation of an option for the poor (Moerman 2006:173).

Freire operationalized his philosophy into a practical method by proposing the “problem-posing method” as an antithesis for the “banking concept of education”. The “problem-posing method” put teachers and students in an equal relationship; both as suppliers of knowledge. In this context, teachers and students avoided one-way processes of transmitting and receiving knowledge. Conversely, teachers and students discussed a specific knowledge together and added a critical component to the discussion (p. 66-68). The role of educators was not to transmit a particular knowledge to their students, but to facilitate students’ capacity to look beyond a particular knowledge they perceive as objective through a dialogue process (p. 71). “The problem-posing education” is a process of raising conscientização, a critical awareness, through which the oppressed can critically unveil their reality of oppression and progress by engaging in the process of transforming the oppressive reality.  

4 The practicality of Freire’s methodology can be located in his concept of generative themes, a general theme of people’s experience, as well as the socio, political and historical context they live (p. 83-86). In a practical sense, the educators translate generative themes in key words to generate a discussion in “problem-posing education” after previously researching generative themes in a particular community. Generative terms are commonly used in children, youth and adult literacy teaching, not only to educate the students to be literate, but also to raise their awareness on particular issues. One example of generative words is “pocket”. In most of the slum areas, people relate pocket with “pick pocket”, thus revealing further debates on the level of criminality in those particular areas. Educators in literacy training can use the word “pocket” as it is a familiar term commonly used in everyday settings. The educators divide the key word into syllables and combine it with other words that emerge in the discussion. In most cases, this method is proven to be effective in literacy
CONCLUSION

Although Grandhi and Freire wrote their books in different historical contexts and geographical locations, both put emphasis on the interest of the dominant group that is reflected in the education system as well as the political biases of education. Gandhi criticized Western education as a tool to maintain colonialism, while Freire highlighted the use of education to serve the interest of the oppressor. Another contribution from these two authors was their acknowledgment of education as a means for social transformation. Gandhi proposed the concept of the national school to achieve Indian swaraj, while Freire proposed a problem-posing method as a way to raise critical awareness.

As mentioned above, Gandhi and Freire’s critiques and methods of alternative education remain relevant to the contemporary critical perspectives in education. Acknowledging the political nature of education is important to recognize the interest education is serving. At the same time, recognizing the capacity of education as a medium for social transformation is also important in any struggle against domination and oppression.

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