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Article

## We are in need of each other. Paulo Freire and the role of conflicts in education

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### Abstract

This paper re-examines the key text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in order to gain an understanding of the nature, valuation and pedagogical use of conflict as perceived by Paulo Freire. I found that conflicts are at the very heart of Freire's educational philosophy and educational practice. Oppressive domination, whether through conquest, divide and rule, manipulation or cultural invasion, entails contradictions which are the core elements for understanding social injustice and inequality. Traditional (banking or deposit) education serves mainly as a continuation of this painful situation instead of helping to change it. Liberation through problem-posing education is able to change the oppressive situation towards a more humanised society. Struggle and fight are necessary to liberate and educate the people and change the oppressing reality. The concept of conflict is dialectical by nature and Freire recognises the importance and educational power of contradictions, yet strives to surmount the contradictions by changing the great power imbalance in social reality towards a more balanced, humanised reality. The valuation of conflict is such that it becomes the very content of liberating and transformative education in 'generative themes' uncovering 'limit-situations'. Limit situations always contain contradictions. The paper ends with a few lessons learned to reconsider and reinvent the teaching of the conflicts in education in a new way. Among these lessons is the awareness that contradictions are not incompatible incongruities

which are irreconcilable and mutually exclusive, but in need of each other (hence the title); that transformative changes create feelings of anxiety and fear in people; that people might not want to be liberated, and arguably not in the way educators want; that education has two contradictory tasks, that is socialisation and liberation at the same time; and finally that a transformative pedagogy needs to include the oppressor's voice and position, an oppressor that is seen not as an enemy but as an opponent. Together they form a unity.

**Keywords:** Paulo Freire; conflicts in education; teaching the conflicts; contradictions; socialisation and liberalisation

## **Introduction to conflicts and conflicts education**

Conflicts exist in abundance (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005; Glasl, 2015; Achterhuis and Koning, 2014; Dahrendorf, 1959) and give rise to numerous attempts to categorise them (cf. Glasl, 2015, pp. 55–92; Eberg, 2012, pp. 19–21): conflicts occur between individual people, between people and the world, between people and nature, between groups of people and even inside a person. Thematic categories like personal, political, military, religious and scientific conflicts are also broad attempts to understand inner, inter-social and intercultural conflicts. Scientists like Marx, Darwin and Freud made the power and presence of conflicts the ultimate core of their theories (Blok, 2013; Achterhuis and Koning, 2014). Without conflicts, no development! A substantial line of 'conflict-philosophers', with Socrates, Mill, Hegel and Dewey as prominent representatives, consider conflict as the 'motor' of life. Modern management literature argues that without conflicts good teams and effective organisations are impossible (Kloppenburger, 2008). It can be argued that without conflicts life would perish. 'A society without conflicts would not be a human society, but a cemetery or a wax museum' (Savater, 1998, p. 37).

Despite the excessive presence of conflicts in life, people are reluctant to consider or even to use the positive power of conflicts in parenting and education. Avoiding conflicting views and practices for their potentially destructive consequences seems to prevail even at schools (and at home?), which results in 'pedagogical embarrassment' (Pouwels, 2008) and a wish to avoid any educational risk. 'Children today are being brought up "in captivity" by their parents as a result of a risk averse approach to growing up' (Garner, 2013, n.p.). 'They [policy makers, politicians, the popular press, the public and international organisations – JP] want education to be strong, secure and predictable, and want it to be risk-free at all levels' (Biesta, 2014, p. 1). However, advocates of existing forms of 'teaching the conflicts' or 'teaching controversies' claim that teaching conflicts increases the 'quality' of education through a deeper understanding of knowledge of the subject, a positive impact on cognitive and moral reasoning, a stronger motivation for education, the capacity to stand in the shoes of others and more appropriate and 'right' solutions (Christie, 1977; Graff, 1993; Bowman, 2001; Jansen, 2009; Johnson and Johnson, 1985, 2009, Johnson, 2007, 2015; Jungst et al., 2003; Capobianco et al., 2005; Hess, 2009; Jacobs, 2010).

Conflicts are generally born from strongly opposing views and opinions, sometimes blunt contradictions, but if conflicts are to become active and overt then confrontation is required. Differences of opinion can live in separate worlds for a long time, but they will turn into conflicts the moment these differences are confronted and the opponents are ready and willing to engage in a struggle, a fight to argue in favour of their point of view, their actions. Conflicts are not just negative. They entail great power for change (Dewey), to articulate alternatives (Tagore) and to legitimate equality and diversity (Rousseau). How this power of conflicts can be used in education is the central question that runs through all my investigations. Conflict education aims at interrupting the common-sense, reflecting on dominant ways of seeing and doing; resisting the obvious and 'normal' way of doing; criticising power; inquiring and investigating existing reality; and finally at 'uncertaining' the learner and the teacher in order to get a better understanding of the world and a stronger motivation for improvement and change. Let us go to Paulo Freire now for his view on and use of conflicts in education.

### **Freire on conflicts**

The central conflict in the pedagogy of Paulo Freire is inequality, the power conflict between the oppressors and the oppressed: the domination by the oppressors. The result of the oppression is an alienation to humanity which affects both the oppressed and the oppressors. The task of a revolutionary pedagogy of the oppressed is to confront domination and dehumanisation (alienation) and fight for liberation and humanisation.

I consider the fundamental theme of our epoch to be that of domination – which implies its opposite, the theme of liberation, as the objective to be achieved (103)<sup>1</sup>.

In Freire's language, fundamental themes are 'generative themes' and these contain 'the nuclei of the principal and secondary contradictions' (112). True reality is synonymous with contradictions; reality always contains contradictions. These contradictions are prominent in 'limit-situations'. These are situations in which people learn to live with 'the dialectical relationship between the determination of limits and their own freedom' (99). The themes and situations '... are never isolated, independent, disconnected or static; they are always interacting dialectically with their opposites' (101).

The opposite of conflict according to Freire is not consensus (as many people may believe), but apathy! The result of a successful oppression establishes a 'culture of silence', of indifference and domestication. Oppression itself is realised by means of conquest, divide and rule, manipulation and cultural invasion, as Freire lays out in detail in Chapter 4. Education as 'banking or deposit' is a powerful agent of oppression since it inhibits creativity and promotes domestication (83). The answer against this oppressive form of education is liberating inquiry and problem-posing education, which is fundamentally dialogical in both reflection and action. Through an intelligent and carefully conducted teaching method (cf. Chapter 3), the 'limit situations' serve as the centre point of a revolutionary and transformative pedagogy: a pedagogy of the oppressed.

Freire translates the Portuguese term 'conquistadores' consistently as 'rulers and oppressors' instead of 'conquerors and winners'. The conquistador, after his act of conquest, becomes de facto a ruler and oppressor.<sup>2</sup>

Every act of conquest implies a conqueror and someone or something which is conquered. The conqueror imposes his objectives on the vanquished, and makes of them his possession. He imposes his own contours on the vanquished, who internalize this shape and become ambiguous beings 'housing' another. From the first, the act of conquest, which reduces persons to the status of things, is necrophilic (138).

The situation in which the people exist represents a social conflict of domination which leads to dehumanisation. Oppression is 'overwhelming control' (77) which domesticates and alienates people and disturbs the 'human equilibrium' (78). The oppressive injustice must be resolved. And that is the task of a pedagogy which therefore can never be politically neutral:

Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes 'the practice of freedom', the means by which man and woman deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world (34).

Freire not only confirms the major role of conflict in life and therefore in education, but also the importance of the human struggle, the fight to free oneself, society and the oppressors(!) from oppression. Education is not just an *ancilla* of the revolutionary act. It is, or should be, at the heart of revolutionary and transformative action for humanisation, '... dialogical from the outset' (86).

## **Struggle and fight**

Freire finds it self-evident that liberation from oppression, and thus the lifting of the alienation of both the oppressed and the oppressors, can be obtained only by struggle and fight. In fact, the words 'fight' and 'struggle' appear sixty times in this key text. Freire uses these words mostly in the context of liberation and the freeing of people. But he uses them also in the context of obtaining humanisation, regaining a stolen humanity, gaining redemption, overcoming the image imposed on the oppressors, surmounting the contradiction in which they are both caught and thereby transforming the unjust social situation. Furthermore, he uses it to develop a revolutionary pedagogy that seeks to resolve the contradiction between teacher and students and move towards an education in which struggle and fight are a praxis and the result of people's regained *conscientização*.<sup>3</sup> In other words, 'radical' education is a fight. Liberation and humanisation do not come easy. We have to struggle and fight for them.

This book will present some aspects of what the writer has termed the pedagogy of the oppressed, a pedagogy which must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in *the*

*incessant struggle* [emphasis added] to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in *the struggle* [emphasis added] for their liberation. And in *the struggle* [emphasis added] this pedagogy will be made and remade (48).

Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (51).

Neither in society nor education should such a struggle or fight be aimed at killing, conquering and oppressing others, but rather at changing a historical situation of oppression into a more just and human society, uplifting the alienation of both the oppressed and the oppressors. In other words, a fight for change, a transformative pedagogy.

The conviction of the oppressed that they must *fight* [emphasis added] for their liberation is not a gift bestowed by the revolutionary leadership, but the result of their own *conscientização*' (67)

### **Contradictions**

Contradictions are the principal dialectical means by which reality is formed. In a dialectical worldview, contradictions are not (logically) incompatible but are part of a unifying world. Contradictions define each other's existence, they are 'in need of each other'. The Hegelian example of 'the Master and the Slave' illustrates the interdependence of both positions in reality. To eradicate one of the opposing positions would bring an end to the world (see my quotation of Savater above). However, human action, including pedagogy, should be focused on 'surmounting' the contradictions and restoring or reinventing human relations between people.

Looking at the many ways Freire uses the concept 'contradiction', I discovered that Freire wants people to perceive – and understand – the social, economic and political contradictions through *conscientização*, so they can take action against the oppressive elements in their reality. Freire wants the people to understand that contradictions are part of the concrete existing situation and can make the oppressed in turn oppressors. The use of contradiction continues. Both oppressors and oppressed are caught in the oppressor–oppressed contradiction. There is a need to 'surmount' the contradiction between the two, to become 'beings for themselves' and to begin a 'true development' by which the oppressors will feel liberated and not oppressed when the contradiction is resolved. Furthermore, education should start with the resolution of the contradictory relation between teacher and students. The contradiction is also visible in the 'banking or deposit' form that education has taken. It is a powerful instrument in the hands of oppressors to stimulate and continue the contradiction of inequality and domination.

Biographers dispute about the origins of *conscientização* – attributing it either to Hegel or Febvre – but Freire credits both as inspiration (Schugurensky, 2014, p. 77). As we will see later, the central point of Freire's practical pedagogy is to identify the principal contradictions in the concrete life of people and to start dialogical educational processes using reflection and action together, 'to be used in thematic investigations' (114).

Dialogical social action does not have as its aim the disappearance of the permanence–change dialectic (an impossible aim, since disappearance of the dialectic would require the disappearance of the social structure itself and thus of men); it aims rather, at surmounting *the antagonistic contradictions* of the social structure, thereby achieving the liberation of human beings (179).

After this short but careful analysis of conflict, struggle and fight and contradictions in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* I will now focus on the valuation of conflicts.

### **The value of conflicts**

It won't come as a surprise that Freire values very highly conflicts and the contradictions which they contain. They're not just important, they are essential. The necessary struggle to perform reflection and

action is an act of love, since the oppressed should not wish to change seats with the oppressors; they should want to change the social reality in which they and the oppressors are trapped. The oppressed will have to overcome their fear of freedom, which comes with freedom, 'the tragic dilemma of the oppressed', and to acknowledge also the oppressor's contribution to the process of humanisation. It is inevitable to face the fundamental conflicts underlying the concrete social relation.

The pedagogy of the oppressed is an instrument for their critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization. Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one (48–9).

Several times Freire stresses the dialectical character of reality (99) and the connectedness of the subject with the world.

Subjectivity and objectivity thus join in a dialectical unity producing knowledge in solidarity with action, and vice versa (38).

In a small but essential paragraph Freire explains his anthropological view on humankind as compared to the animal world. Man,<sup>4</sup> quite different from the animal, is able to reflect on his own being and his actions; man is not just 'a being in itself', but an historical being. He creates history and reality.

Animals are not challenged by the configuration which confronts them; they are merely stimulated. Their life is not one of risk-taking, for they are not aware of taking risks. Risks are not challenges perceived upon reflection, but merely 'noted' by the signs which indicate them; they accordingly do not require decision-making responses (98).

Humans on the other hand can commit himself and take risks by trying to change opinions and structures in life.

Animals live out their lives on an atemporal, flat, uniform 'prop'; humans exist in a world which they are constantly re-creating and transforming. (...) Humans, however, because they are aware of themselves and thus of the world – because they are conscious beings – *exist in a dialectical relationship between the determination of limits and their own freedom* (99).

This creative tension transcends the adaption to and acceptance of the world as it is, and at the same time it challenges us to create and change life in situations that Freire earlier called 'limit-situations'. 'The prop world of animals contains no limit-situations, due to its ahistorical character' (100). And exactly there at the 'limit-situations', humans will investigate 'an untested feasibility' (102). In other words: the (social) conflict is deeply human, a necessary part of our nature and crucial for chancing reality.

### **The pedagogic and didactic power of conflicts**

Freire discusses the many possibilities in the hands of the oppressors to continue the existing reality, dominating the people and legitimising their own position. Apart from the already mentioned ways of conquest, divide and rule and cultural invasion, they put a lot of effort into isolating problems and denying the understanding of the connectedness of problems in reality through dialogue. Promoting a static instead of dynamic worldview and allowing social programmes to mitigate the effects of injustice are other ways of manipulating and preventing critical thinking.

This is because welfare programs as instruments of manipulation ultimately serve the end of conquest. They act as an anesthetic, distracting the oppressed from the true causes of their problems and from the concrete solution of these problems (152).

The dominant elites are so well aware of this fact that they instinctively use all means, including physical violence, to keep the people from thinking. They have a shrewd intuition of the ability of dialogue to develop a capacity for criticism. While some revolutionary leaders consider dialogue with the people a 'bourgeois and reactionary' activity, the bourgeoisie regard dialogue between the oppressed and the revolutionary leaders as a very real danger to be avoided (149).

Freire calls it anti-dialogical action directed to servitude, and conquest and denying the people to imagine the world as a problem. Presenting education in a ‘banking or deposit’ form serves the goals of the oppressors, Freire claims.

Freire presents a contrary view of dealing with education: dialogical action. It should be fundamentally problem-posing, dialogical and focussed on reflection and action simultaneously. His didactic approach is ingenious, careful and serious, taking into account the voice of the people when investigating meaningful themes. It departs radically from the social situation of the people (which is itself contradictory by nature, as we have seen); it problematises this reality in an attempt to surmount adaption, acceptance and enforcement of the status quo in order to change the oppressing reality to a more human reality. To summarise: it is a pedagogy that dares to question existing reality and explores a not-yet-visible world, an untested future. A pedagogy of transformation, of hope.

Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming* – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality. Indeed, in contrast to other animals who are unfinished, but not historical, people know themselves to be unfinished; they are aware of their incompleteness. In this incompleteness and this awareness lie the very roots of education as an exclusively human manifestation. The unfinished character of human beings and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education be an ongoing activity (84).

Education is thus constantly remade in the praxis. In order to *be*, it must *become*. Its ‘duration’ (in the Bergsonian meaning of the word) is found in the interplay of the opposites *permanence* and *change*. The banking method emphasizes permanence and becomes reactionary; problem-posing education – which accepts neither a ‘well-behaved’ present nor a predetermined future – roots itself in the dynamic present and becomes revolutionary (84).

Chapter 3 of the book is dedicated to the didactics of teaching. After discussing the importance of dialogue, trust in people, the role of radical leadership and the anthropological point of departure, which I explained briefly above, Freire presents five stages of ‘doing’ education. First comes a careful investigation of reality, second an understanding of the complexity of reality, third a coding and decoding of reality, fourth a breaking down into ‘hinged themes’ and finally a codification in didactical approaches and material for education (103–24).

According to Schugurensky, Freire kept faithful to five seminal ideas which he had conceived by 1955: (1) begin with the knowledge, the experience and the daily life of people, (2) literacy should also include the critical analysis of social reality: ‘reading the word and reading the world’, (3) the educational process should be horizontal and dialogical (listen to and learn also from the learners), (4) education is more than obtaining a diploma but should also nurture social-political consciousness and participation in public life, (5) adult learners should participate in selecting the content of their own learning (Schugurensky, 2014, p. 53). But, as described before, the thematic ‘limit-situations’, incorporating all the controversial and contradictory elements, are the true heart of inquiry and problem-posing education.

In the remainder of this paper I will use four instruments for analysis and comparison that will allow me to penetrate deeper into the views of Freire and his ideas and proposals for conflict education.

## Goals of education

According to Paulo Freire there is a power difference between social groups in which one group dominates and oppresses the other. This causes an appalling injustice in access to social, economic and cultural expression. The balance is excessively disrupted. The value of the oppressors is to own the people (through a kind of slavery, understood as necrophilic), to serve the interest of perpetuating the existing social reality, to keep the people silenced, without a voice. This is the hidden goal of education. The effort of a transformative pedagogy is to liberate the people from the alienating oppression and to emancipate them through education, towards a goal of liberation and humanisation that should – in the end – serve both parties involved for a more human, balanced life of values, interests and goals.

Reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, it is striking to find that Freire does not pay much attention to the *qualification function of education* as we understand that today (Biesta, 2014). We may assume

that Freire will not deny this function of education – drama, sports, music, mathematics and literacy, or more professional skills to get a job and earn a living – but he does not pay much attention to it. He does however pay a lot of attention to what we call generic skills like reading and writing (literacy), not only in a technical way but at the same time in a critical way: the reading of the word is meant to enable one to read the world. In fact this is the core of his practical pedagogical project, which is understandable considering the situation then in Latin America and Brazil. He is elaborate and creative in his didactics to teach these fundamental skills for an educational purpose and, according to Schugurensky (2015, pp. 210–1), the pedagogical interventions and methodological innovations are among Freire’s three major contributions to education. These skills are prominent as an instrument for people – common people, farm workers, women and children – to enter communication and dialogue aiming at problemising the oppressing social reality, understanding its elements and process, in order to change it. Freire does not speak about professional skills at all in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* can be regarded as an explicit accusation – Freire uses the substantive ‘denunciation’ – of the prevailing *socialisation function of education* in the Fifties and Sixties in Brazil. The explained banking or deposit way of teaching is a teaching to mystify social reality, aimed at domestication or taming of the individual and group. It is directed to permanence and submission. The oppressors want the people to adapt and change but only in their desired direction. Their ways of manipulating the lives and minds of people are thoroughly discussed and opposed by Freire. The opposing ‘problem-posing education’ advocated by Freire is directed to change social reality towards a humanised society.

Once again, the two educational concepts and practices under analysis come into conflict. Banking education (for obvious reasons) attempts, by mythicizing reality, to conceal certain facts which explain the way human beings exist in the world; problem-posing education sets itself the task of demythologizing. Banking education resists dialogue; problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality. Banking education treats students as objects of assistance; problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers. Banking education inhibits creativity and domesticates (although it cannot completely destroy) the intentionality of consciousness by isolating consciousness from the world, thereby denying people their ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human. Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation (83).

Finally, although Freire understands and confirms the important role of *subjectivity in education* this subjectivity is never individual or personal but always seen through the perspective of changing the oppressive social reality of a group. It stresses unity, solidarity and organisation. It is hard to imagine that Freire doesn’t see-or recognise individual diversity, excellence and creativity, yet these are not part of this influential pedagogical text.

### **Scientific traditions of reasoning and the nature of conflicts**

To understand human behaviour and human history, four branches of scientific reasoning are important in Western thinking: cultural-historical, sociological, biological and psychological ways of reasoning. For practical reasons I attach key figures to these approaches, respectively Herder, Marx, Darwin and Freud. Of course all four of them had precursors and followers who added or changed aspects of the overall line of reasoning. As for Marx, Darwin and Freud, I have already indicated that the presence of conflict in natural and human life is at the heart of their views and theories. I will not dwell further in this interesting field of scientific reasoning but apply it to a better understanding of Paulo Freire’s educational philosophy in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Without any doubt the sociological understanding of the world is dominant in the way Freire speaks about conflicts and education. The situation in which the people exist represents an appalling social conflict of domination which leads to dehumanisation of both parties. The oppressed become domesticated and turn to apathy, which is termed by Freire as a ‘culture of silence’. The oppressors (conquerors) regard the oppressed as ‘things’ to possess, as inferior and lazy, weak and despicable. Throughout the book, again



and again (and in Chapter 4 in particular), Freire explains the dominating character of the conquerors, the rulers and the means they use to oppress the people: conquest, divide and rule, manipulation and cultural invasion. However, both parties are caught in a trap. And this is where a psychological way of reasoning enters.

Freire is intrigued by the fact that people internalise the image of the mighty oppressor and regard this as a goal to achieve – that is, they wish to become as they are, shadows of the oppressors. Already the very first pages of Chapter 1 are dedicated to the problem that the ordinary people do not want to change the world they live in, but want to become like the oppressors! That is not a new man, a synthesis, but a role change. The oppressed become the new oppressors, just like the revolutionary leaders run the risk of becoming bourgeois and dictatorial rulers. To become aware of this identification with the oppressor, the discord in their own awareness, an educational process is necessary, a true *conscientização* to develop a new humanitarian goal.

The oppressed people, whose identity has been stolen and who are no more than a ‘thing’, identify themselves with the oppressors’ identity. To be human means to be an oppressor. They have no other imagination. That is why they have to liberate themselves not only literally from the oppressors but also mentally from the oppressors’ identity in themselves!

It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors. The latter, as an oppressive class, can free neither others nor themselves. It is therefore essential that the oppressed wage the struggle to resolve the contradiction in which they are caught; and the contradiction will be resolved by the appearance of the new man: neither oppressor nor oppressed, but man in the process of liberation. If the goal of the oppressed is to become fully human, they will not achieve their goal by merely reversing the terms of the contradiction, by simply changing poles (56).

Freire draws from the famous writings of Fanon (*Wretched of the Earth*, 1963), Memmi (*The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 1957) and Fromm, to understand this psychological phenomenon (Schugurensky 2014, p. 70) of how the oppressor colonises the body and the mind of the oppressed. Fromm in particular, in his book *Escape from Freedom or Fear of Freedom* (1941), as it was translated in Europe, distinguishes three ways of responding to the fear of freedom. After describing how difficult it is to deal with freedom, Fromm shows how authoritarian, destructive and conformity responses provide security. Dealing with freedom gets personal and difficult. Responsibility comes inevitably with freedom.

Freire does not approach the problem of conflict from a cultural point of view. Conflicts exist mainly between the classes in one culture: the oppressors and the oppressed, the Haves and Have Nots. Freire does not enter the long and violent discussion in Western history of nation, culture and race, which, to the ideologists of this line of thinking, determines the ‘soul’ of man in their unique geographical (often national) situation, language community and *Volksggeist* (Leerssen, 2010; Finkielkraut, 1988). Freire remains concentrated on the class conflict within a given historical society as the central conflict.

Neither does he engage in a biological explanation or understanding of the nature of conflict. On the contrary, Freire makes a very conscious attempt to distinguish man from the animal world by emphasising the uniqueness of man as an ‘uncomplete, historical being’ and the ability of man to reflect not only on his actions but also on himself. Animals cannot ‘set objectives’ nor ‘transform their world’. ‘They are fundamentally beings in themselves’ (97).

Therefore the struggle and fight for liberation and humanisation is not a cultural or biological one, but predominantly a social and psychological one. Freire tells us education as characteristic of humans should focus on psychological (awareness and reflection) and social aspects of life (action, cooperation and unity). Education if directed to liberation and further humanisation of mankind must be an essential and inalienable part of a revolutionary problem-posing education. It needs to be dynamic with, dialogical development through reflection and action. I read that Freire tells us that change in these social areas can be obtained only by collective struggle and that the answer to the oppressing instrument of conquest should be cooperation. The answer to divide and rule is unity for liberation and the right way to combat manipulation is organisation. These aspects are crucial elements of Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed.

## What does this mean for education and educators?

In the words of Freire, educators are radicals. The word ‘radicals’ is used as opposed to leftist or rightist sectarians. Radicals are critical and creative, able to engage in a dialogue, while sectarians are reactionary, since they have a false views of history, and ignore the freedom necessary to develop (38). Radicals want to change the world. They struggle side by side with the people for a risky future and they accept that a risk is necessary to create a new world. Freire quotes Hegel – ‘It is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained. . .’ (36) – when describing the role of education and the educator. Education is a risky business; we should face reality and its contradictions, enter the dialogue with the people. Such is the precondition for change: emerging and struggling in educational practice. Revolutionary pedagogy is the pedagogical and didactical articulation of contradictions in limit situations to unveil oppression. These daily life situations should be recognisable for the people and through codification in education, by means of a true dialogue in reflection and action. Such education will lead to change.

## Five concluding considerations

I have tried to give special attention to the concept of conflict, contradictions and struggle and the role it plays in the pedagogy of Paulo Freire as expressed in his key work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). I have come to understand that the conflict itself is at the heart of Freire’s theory as well as his educational practice. More than Rousseau, whom I regard as an ‘avoider’,<sup>5</sup> more than Tagore, who has beautiful and excellent ideas of creating alternatives and unity through education, and more than Dewey, who explicitly acknowledged the power of conflicts – ‘Conflict is the gadfly of thought’ (Pouwels and Biesta, 2017). Freire is the one who takes conflicts by the root and uses them very creatively to create transformative education through ‘problem-posing education’. As we have seen Freire describes education as a political fight or struggle between opposing social realities. The goal of education (liberation and humanisation – uplifting alienation) and the solution of the problem (inequality and oppression) can be obtained only through problem-posing education (reflection and action in a dialogue), while exploring the contradictions in generative themes.

In my search to understand the nature of conflicts and contradictions in education, I have turned, among others, to Paulo Freire for help. Re-reading his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I understand first that, in dialectical thinking, contradictions are not incompatible incongruities which are irreconcilable, mutually exclusive or contradictions in terms. Contradictions are ‘key elements’ of a whole, of a unity, like day and night, which have opposing expressions in light and dark, but together make up a day (24 hours). They are complementary, supplementing each other to form a unity, a harmony: ‘All concord’s born of contraries’. And in between there are mysterious times of transition named dawn and twilight. What would a day look like if we had 24 hours of bright sunlight or 24 hours of deep darkness? Would life be possible? And would not such a situation be a striking imbalance of reality, an imbalance that Freire was seeking to restore in social life? In defence of Freire’s theory and practice against a number of severe critics, Schugurensky nicely reminds us that ‘to some extent, Freire’s proclivity for oppositions can be explained by the particular context in which he lived and worked, characterised by severe inequalities and intense social conflicts’ (159). But I believe the meaning of conflicts in Freire’s work nevertheless runs deeper.

Oppositions can be considered as contradictions, that is, as mutually exclusive and incompatible, but that is thinking in dichotomies, black-and-white thinking. In such a case, there is little sensitivity for the dynamic tension between contradictions and the dependency of contradictions on each other (sickness and health, Hegel’s Master–Slave dialectic). There is little openness either to any shades of grey in reality if we think like this (‘if you are not with us, you’re against us’, as George W. Bush said in 2002)<sup>6</sup>. In dialectical thinking, contradictions are contemplated as necessary contrary parts of a whole. Or as Herakleitos puts it cryptically: ‘the road up and the road down is one and the same’ (Claes, 2014). I believe that contradictions are not incompatible incongruities which are irreconcilable and mutual exclusive, but are in need of each other to understand – and educate – the world we live in. Dialectical thinking helped Paulo Freire ‘to overcome false dichotomies’ (Schugurensky, 2015, p. 160) and to explore – educationally – ‘the tensions resulting from existing contradictions’ (Schugurensky, 2015, p. 159). Freire reserved for himself the right to be contradictory: ‘I am a totality and not a dichotomy’ (quoted in Schugurensky, 2015, p. 148).

Secondly I have learned, that we have to accept that change – whether small changes in daily life or big changes from severe oppression or violence – brings about feelings of insecurity. Freedom, obviously conditional for human development, as Freire explains in many ways, is itself a source for feelings of anxiety and fear.

Men and women rarely admit their fear of freedom openly, however, tending rather to camouflage it – sometimes unconsciously – by presenting themselves as defenders of freedom. They give their doubts and misgivings an air of profound sobriety, as befitting custodians of freedom. But they confuse freedom with the maintenance of the status quo; so that if conscientização threatens to place that status quo in question, it thereby seems to constitute a threat to freedom itself (36).

We have to acknowledge, to admit, the reality of this fear – that is, of the great difficulty in dealing with freedom. How much freedom can we bear? How much freedom is good for us? Do we teach children enough to learn to deal with freedom? We are social beings looking for confirmation and love, after all, much more than we would like to admit at times. In my reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* I confirm Schugurensky's refutation of those critics who read Freire as a promoter of individualism: '*... his theory of transformation is not individual but social and based on human collectives, and he recognizes a fluid, dialectical relationship between the individual and the world*' (Schugurensky, 2015, p. 166). Social acceptance and the desire to belong to a group are strong sentiments that can seriously impede the pursuit of freedom.

A third consideration concerns the problem that the people do not want to liberate or change the situation. How can we be democratic and liberating without being authoritarian in such occasions? Looking at my own wish to develop a culture of teaching the conflict in higher education, I worry about my own disposition to manipulation and about imposing my own ideas and experiences on my students and colleagues. Considering our own position as 'liberating radical educators' one may reflect on 'what are *my* class or "self-interests?"'.

I suspect that what the poor want for their children is affluence, status, and a house in the suburbs, rather than community, a guitar and soul. They may prefer schools that teach their children to read and write and cipher rather than to feel and to be. If this is the case, then an uncomfortable piece of reality must be confronted: educational radicalism is itself a species of class activity. It reflects an attempt at cultural imposition fully as much as the traditional educational emphasis on competition, restraint, and orderliness, whose bourgeois bias radicals are quick to excoriate. (Facundo, 1984, part 3).

It has been our field experience that, while we wanted to develop critical consciousness with learners, they wanted a high school diploma, or to learn English as a second language; and very rapidly, to get a job. They did not have the time or the inclination for other 'critical' subjects. And if you said that a diploma was 'not important', after silence was broken through trust, a learner would be quick to say: 'Not important for you. How many do you have?'. (Facundo, 1984, part 3).

In a reply to those who accused Freire of being antidialogical, manipulative and authoritarian himself – which are severe and slandering accusations – Freire argued, like he did in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that any education runs the risk of being manipulative, including transformative pedagogy. Freire warned the teachers and the revolutionary leaders not to fall into the same trap as their opponents. He acknowledged that every educational practice is always directive, that teachers should be directive and cannot be facilitators alone, that teachers need to be prepared and competent: 'if I don't know, I cannot be a teacher' (Schugurensky, 2014, p. 160) and that authoritarian or democratic education could become manipulative or authoritarian 'when it interfered with the creative and investigative capacity of the student ... In this context the ethical duty of the teachers is to express their respect for differences in ideas and positions, even those diametrically opposed to theirs' (Schugurensky, 2015, p. 161).

A fourth reflection concerns the conflicting role of teachers and students. As Freire painfully analysed, teachers can act as perfect instruments in the hands of banking education and so contribute to dehumanisation and alienation:

Those who use the banking approach, knowingly or unknowingly (for there are innumerable well-intentioned bank-clerk teachers who do not realize that they are serving only to dehumanize), fail to perceive that the deposits themselves contain contradictions about reality (75).

Because conflicts and contradictions are at the heart of my investigations the conflict that Freire addresses here is an inconvenient fact. Do we as teachers have to choose either banking or problem-posing education? Is there no other path to walk? Is it really either conformity or liberation that results from our teaching? The Dutch pedagogue Dasberg distinguishes between two rather antagonistic functions of education, which she calls 'socialisation' and 'education' (Dasberg, 1993). Socialisation can be summarised as: this is the way we do things here! And education as: why are we doing the things we do? She believed that education should serve both ends of the 'task'. Yet she acknowledges that both functions can and will contradict, which means that education as whole (socialisation and education) is an inherently conflictual activity. This also explains the difficulty we experience in levelling the teacher–student relation to serve a horizontal way of teaching. 'Socialisation' demands, in my opinion, a more vertical teacher–student relation fitting the transfer function of education, concerning what we as adults know, value and believe 'works'. The pupils and students have a right to be informed by responsible adults, who take responsibility for the world students will have to enter and have already entered. They have a right to be taught by us, to get to know the world as we believe it is, with all its bureaucratic and social orders. And if we look and listen carefully they 'demand' it from us. 'Education', on the other hand, is different from 'socialisation', and as Freire also rightly showed, 'Education' is probably much more in need of a horizontal teacher–student relation, one that is more equivalent and investigating. It fits the problem-posing nature of this type of education. Max Weber believed that we can overcome the conflict between bureaucratic education and charismatic education, as he called this tension, through an explication of 'self-clarification' and 'a sense of responsibility'. Recently John Fantuzzo has reminded us of the pedagogic ideas of Max Weber as part of his social theory, and as expressed in his famous lecture 'Science as a Vocation' (1917). I quote:

the primary task of a useful teacher is to teach his students inconvenient facts – I mean facts that are inconvenient for their party opinions. And for every party opinion there are facts that are extremely inconvenient, for my own opinion no less than others. I believe the teacher accomplishes more than a mere intellectual task if he compels his audience to accustom itself to the existence of such facts. I would be so immodest as even to apply the expression 'moral achievement'. (Fantuzzo, 2015, p. 54).<sup>7</sup>

Freire does not guide us through the minefield of conflicting educational goals which must on the one hand focus on 'transferring and banking', passing on the beautiful knowledge and creative skills previous generations have brought to life (the canons), and on the other hand raise critical questions and conduct joint research about what we are thinking exactly, why, and what impact this has on our doing, privately and socially. Education as a whole (both socialisation and education) is not neutral. Weber's credo supports Freire in stressing the importance of revealing the contradictions and different opinions in life, but states firmly that the 'inconvenient facts' apply to all party opinions. How on earth should a teacher navigate through these legitimate but conflicting claims concerning the purpose of life and society, and conduct this double 'art' of teaching?

Finally, my last reflection. In my provisional conception of *teaching the conflict*, I find it necessary to teach with the 'enemy' (Graff, 1993); that is, to include the 'enemy' (better: the opponent or antagonist) in teaching. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* I have found few to no signs of Freire including the 'enemy', the opponent in the teaching process – not in the preparation, the beginning, during or at the end of the process of teaching to liberate from alienation. On the contrary, the ingenious and novel teaching strategies developed by Freire have no room for the other party. In Freire's pedagogy the other party does not act as a 'human party', only as a countervailing abstract identity. This reminds me of a certain phrase in the chapter *On Liberty of Thought and Discussion* in John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*,

... only through diversity of opinion is there (...) a chance of fair play to all sides of the truth. When there are persons to be found who form an exception to the apparent unanimity of the

world on any subject, even if the world is in its right, it is always possible that dissentients have something worth hearing to say for themselves, *and that truth would lose something by their silence.* (Mill, 1956, pp. 58–9).

It seems to me that the voices of the ‘enemies’ (opponents or antagonists) are necessary to engage in a ‘true dialectical educational process’ aiming at transforming the world into a better place for all. How this can be done is another purpose of my research.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Re-reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I am referring to the English edition published 2005 (online version) with a foreword by Donald Macebo. <https://libcom.org/files/FreirePedagogyoftheOppressed.pdf> The English quotations here are from this edition. I first read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a student in 1975. The Dutch translation of 1972 is still in my possession (Freire, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> The ‘natural attitude’ of Western man to defeat and dominate nature and other people instead of cooperating with them is a central theme in the pedagogy of Rabindranath Tagore, which I will discuss in another paper.

<sup>3</sup> ‘*Conscientização* is the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence. Every thematic investigation which deepens historical awareness is thus really educational, while all authentic education investigates thinking’ (Freire, 2005, p. 109).

<sup>4</sup> After massive criticism for using sexist language in the term ‘man’, Freire changed this to ‘human being’ or ‘man and woman’ in all later editions and new writings (Schugurensky, 2015, p. 150).

<sup>5</sup> Van de Vliert and Euwema (1994) distinguish four typical responses in dealing with conflicts: forcing, avoiding, yielding and problem solving. Freire is an example of the latter and Rousseau a typical avoider, as I will highlight elsewhere.

<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You're\\_either\\_with\\_us,\\_or\\_against\\_us](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You're_either_with_us,_or_against_us).

<sup>7</sup> The original German text differs slightly from the English translation. Weber refers to the responsibility of an academic teacher, which I would like to translate to refer to teachers in high school, higher education and university: ‘Wenn jemand ein brauchbarer Lehrer ist, dann ist es seine erste Aufgabe, seine Schüler unbequeme Tatsachen anerkennen zu lehren, solche, meine ich, die für seine Parteimeinung unbequem sind; und es gibt für jede Parteimeinung – z. B. auch für die uneinige – solche äußerst unbequeme Tatsachen. Ich glaube, wenn der akademische Lehrer seine Zuhörer nötigt, sich daran zu gewöhnen, daß er dann mehr als eine nur intellektuelle Leistung vollbringt, ich würde so unbescheiden sein, sogar den Ausdruck -sittliche Leistung- darauf anzuwenden, wenn das auch vielleicht etwas zu pathetisch für eine so schlichte Selbstverständlichkeit klingen mag’. ([https://www.molnut.uni-kiel.de/pdfs/neues/2017/Max\\_Weber.pdf](https://www.molnut.uni-kiel.de/pdfs/neues/2017/Max_Weber.pdf)).

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## Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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