Education, Development, and Capabilities:
Appropriating Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to Challenge Contemporary Assumptions

Rajesh Sampath, PhD
Assistant Professor
Brandeis University

Abstract

This paper argues that a deeper appreciation of the philosophical nature of oppression is required in our age of globalization, science and technology, particularly for rethinking educational systems aimed at social justice, equality and liberation in developing countries. It draws on the inspiring concepts of Paolo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, which itself is indebted to the philosophical innovation of the philosopher Hegel. The aim of the article is to outline various ways to analyze the requirements for critical consciousness to rise given the dialectical contradiction of scientific and technological progress on the one hand and new forms of alienation that arise from anonymity and the dissolution of the self on the other. At stake is how we understand the process and ends of 'sustainable development' to achieve greater inclusion and social justice in a multicultural, pluralistic and intrinsically heterogeneous globalized world.

Text:

The growing interest in the sub-discipline of education and development in recent times is gaining greater recognition by scholars and policymakers across a wide spectrum of fields and disciplines and their intersections. This should come as no surprise given some prehistory. Education became a central indicator in the wider conception of human development born in the 1990s with the UN Human Development Reports and the Human Development Index. The 'brain drain' syndrome, or the flight of talent and skills in developing countries, has been reported for many years now.[1] Education studies as a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary field, involving the social sciences, humanities and natural sciences, has become increasingly specialized as has development studies. But today we are witnessing an extraordinary convergence: we discover the intersection of education and development with regard to questions of defining human development (beyond mere Gross National Income per capita) in the broadest possible terms and ethical appraisals of the processes and goals of development. Such goals involve the creation of greater inclusion and equity, which has emerged at the forefront of many discussions in development studies and policy. The basic assumption of radical human diversity means that we must consider the following issues: minority cultural rights, bi-lingual and even tri-lingual education, intersectional identity formation, indigenous and other non-mainstream forms of knowledge and learning, particularly in post-colonial contexts, in relation to poverty reduction, environmental and natural resource concerns and questions of social justice form a complex nucleus of the future.[2] This is where education,

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[1] Although, these days there are arguments for and against the idea of brain draining affecting developing countries in a negative way. See this article from the *Economist* magazine- http://www.economist.com/node/18741763. Regardless of whether migration helps or hurts developing countries, which is probably country-specific, the issue pivots around the question of the importance of education for development.

[2] For more on the link of social justice in international higher education and development, see Joan Dassin, "Higher Education as a Vehicle for Social Justice: Possibilities and Constraints" in Toby Alice Volkman, Joan Dassin and Mary Zurbachen, eds., *Origins, Journeys and Returns: Social Justice in International Higher Education* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2009), pp. 19-38.

development and the capabilities[3] approach intersect in arguably one of the greatest challenges facing sustainable development in the coming years and decades: how do we think about the content and goals of education in developing countries to create a more equitable and inclusive global society whose goals are to promote universal human rights, achieve environment and economic sustainability and respect the fundamental human diversity within national populations, and hence concerns of racial, ethnic, religious, cultural and sexual minorities, and between nation-states, or between developed and developing countries? This paper will explore issues of globalization, social justice and international education.   By appropriating certain insights in Paolo Freire's classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) we can attempt to understand some of the most pressing concerns facing sustainable development today.[4]

My thesis is that a radical philosophical reinterpretation of the relationship between knowledge generation and overcoming ideological oppression must be advanced prior to social and economic discussions of the relation between education and human development understood in terms of the "capabilities approach."[5] The paper concludes with certain philosophical explorations of the nature of education and critical thinking when it comes to multicultural and diverse dialogues on universal human rights, particularly for cultural, religious and sexual minorities in developing countries and the mainstream cultures of many developing countries that contest Western impositions of universal rights. The phenomenon of globalization, underway for a few decades now, has introduced the urgent need to reassess the role of education in development so that we can create greater inclusion and equity while addressing global justice issues in complex, multinational and multicultural dialogues about the means and ends of sustainable development.[6]

As early as the 1970s Freire's voice was recognized as original and quite revolutionary, particularly from what was dubbed a "Third World" perspective during that time.[7]   In the 2009 publisher's forward to the revised thirtieth-anniversary edition of *Pedagogy of Oppressed*, Freire's work is recognized as relevant now as it was in its original appearance in 1970.[8]   In a complex world of globalization, technology via cyberspace, and increasing multinational and multicultural societies, our need for understanding how knowledge is created,

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[3] The human development approach was shaped to a large extent by the Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen and his "capabilities approach." For more on the impact of the capabilities approach on education, see Madoka Saito, "Amartya Sen's Capability Approach to Education: A Critical Exploration," *Journal of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2003): 17-33. Saito's article was published in 2003 and since then there has been substantial work on the relation between capabilities and education. For analysis of Martha Nussbaum's contributions to the capabilities approach applied to education and development, see Elaine Unterhalter, "Educating Capabilities," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, Vol. 14:1 (2013): 185-188. For general works on education and development see E. Unterhalter and M. Walker, eds., *Sen's Capabilities Approach and Social Justice in Education* (London: Palgrave, 2007); H. Otto and H. Ziegler, eds, *Education, Welfare and the Capabilities Approach: A European Perspective* (Opladen: Barbara Budruch Publishers, 2010).

[4] The UN System Task Team on the post-2015 UN Development agenda report to the Secretary-General- "Realizing the World We Want for All"- puts 'rights, equality and sustainability' at the heart of the post-2015 MDG agenda. See the UN System Task Team, "Realizing the World We Want for All" (New York: UN, 2012), p. 24.

[5] Unterhalter argues that there needs to be a more concerted effort to understand how the capabilities approach can inform a much broader and multidimensional approach to measuring how education can be used to promote equity and equality. Furthermore, we need to discover ways to expand the analysis of the value and utility of education for development beyond a strictly economic analysis of its role in society. See "Educating Capabilities," p. 187.

[6] For more on the larger debates and issues surrounding the concept of globalization, see Manuel Castells 2010 Preface to the 2nd Edition of his classic work, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) and David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt and Jonathan Perraton, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[7] See his "The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom" in the *Harvard Educational Review* 4:2 (1970): 205-225. The brief introduction of Freire's thought in the abstract of the article serves as very succinct testament to his achievement in helping revolutionize the entire field of education and development.

[8] Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 30th Anniversary Edition (New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 9.

transmitted, and absorbed in the educational process for developed and developing countries alike is pressing all around us. It would be hard to dispute, particularly in higher education, that critical thinking, the politics of skepticism and resistance towards grand narratives and ideologies and modes of essentializing identities from the local to national to global levels based on a deepening pluralism, occurs at an increasing dizzying pace. No institution can claim to be purely homogenous today without concealing the fact that it has some minority, dissenting orientations. It is hard to decipher sometimes that one person's view (be it teacher or student) is another person's falsehood and vice-versa. Hence there is a definite need for critical philosophical reflection of when knowledge—created and absorbed—in the educational process serves the undying quest for liberation, equality and human dignity everywhere and when it detracts from such an overarching goal by and for humanity. Living in a world of increasing difference and multiplicity while promoting tolerance is no easy feat, no matter where one looks—North or South, West or East, developed or developing, democratic or non-democratic societies. Rethinking Freire's specification of the concept of *conscientização* is a good starting point to analyze our current global complexity of incommensurable ideologies, doctrines, world-views, sets of values, frameworks of analysis and socio-political-cultural lens.

In the Preface to *Pedagogy* Freire states in the first footnote of the text, "The term *conscientização* refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against oppressive elements or reality."[9] To unpack that term today while acknowledging the complexity of a globalized, multicultural, multi-religious and multinational world is to enter in to the set of presuppositions buried deep within certain philosophical traditions: and this can be achieved prior to the adoption of certain categories, such as 'education measured in terms of literacy and enrollment' in say the Human Development Index. From Kant to Dewey to Gramsci to the present one can argue that thinking means to think freely: that is to free oneself from dogmatic thinking, particularly when collective thought is manufactured by larger social structures, institutions, ideologies and world-views that seem innocuous but in truth are one-sided and hence oppressive. Freire asks to examine the contradictions that belie everything. In the Preface to the *Pedagogy* Freire no doubt quotes the preeminent philosopher who did more to analyze contradiction prior to anyone before him in the Western philosophical canon. That would be Hegel. Freire quotes from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

It is solely by risking his life that freedom is obtained;…the individual who has not staked his or her life may, no doubt, be recognized as a Person; but he or she has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness.[10]

We cannot attempt a close reading of the entire *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* from beginning to end while trying to unpack the depths of this quote from Hegel. Needless to say one can pause for a moment and plumb the depths of this passage and return to Freire's notion of *conscientização*. The idea is to expand on this notion while challenging some of the assumptions that surround the idea of education as a fundamental capability for development and for some, capabilities are rights.[11] Before proceeding to a deconstruction of the idea of capabilities as described by two of its original architects, namely Sen and Nussbaum, we can return to the Hegel passage to deepen the idea of *conscientização*. And with this refurbished idea of critical consciousness as liberation from oppression the analysis of contemporary forms of globalized inequality and contradiction can evolve in creative directions.

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[9] *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 35.

[10] Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Mind* (New York, 1967), p. 233 quoted in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 36.

[11] Sen defines capabilities as 'substantive process and opportunity freedoms,' which are the 'means and ends of development.' Voting would be a 'process freedom' and education a 'social opportunity.' See the introduction to *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), p. 10, 17. Nussbaum argues that basic capabilities, such as education, should be guaranteed as constitutional rights; but as to their form and content they should be interpreted freely within different cultures and their jurisprudential traditions. See Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 77.

We live in an age of increasing complexity due to scientific and technological changes, which are alternating the nature of the self and space-time.[12] To understand the nature of oppression today when it comes to the modes by which knowledge is generated, disseminated and internalized, we need deeper philosophical categories of analysis than what is commonly available in social policy arenas. If capabilities is the expansion of 'real choices and opportunities' against a background of various options to lead a life that one has 'reason to value' to use the language of Sen, the Hegel quote offers a deeper metaphysical view of the notion of sacrifice and risk that is the pre-condition of a truly free and independent consciousness. Freire back in 1970 picked up on this and applied it to the issue of liberation and development, particularly for the uneducated rural masses in poor, developing countries.

Turning to the quote by Hegel and linking it with an expanded version of Freire's *conscientização* is the precondition for analyzing the complexity of globalization, science and technology and new modes of oppression that are arising within developed and developing countries alike. For Freire, the liberation of consciousness requires us to inhabit from within the conditions of social, political and economic contradictions and 'learn to perceive' them as such. Learning to perceive a contradiction beneath a stable reality or identity is the birth of transcendental-critical thinking, an achievement which dates back to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). With Hegel, there is a distinction between an individual who sacrifices himself or herself in space-time as we know it, which means to truly lose one's identity: this is the only way to acquire truth of the recognition of one's independence as a "Person" or what Hegel calls self-consciousness. When others recognize somebody as a 'Person" that does not mean the truth of the recognition of oneself as a Person has been gained, namely 'independent self-consciousness' to use the Hegelian phrase. In other words self-consciousness is consciousness of oneself independent of how others recognize that self as a Person; and inversely the self is free because when one is conscious of one's own consciousness, then one is liberated from the strictures of social norms of a conventional life: one is free because one has shattered themselves against the simple notion of living and dying within a structure of oppression, or society writ large, and hence they have truly risked their own life. They are no longer beholden to how others recognize them as an independent person because independent thinking about being an independent self (beyond recognition by others) has begun. This is the beginning of liberation.

Conscientização, which tries to '*learn to perceive'* social, political, economic and to that we can add cultural and psychological contradictions, is how critical consciousness can arise out of ideological and institutional forms of oppression. Trying to understand how to relate the Hegelian self-consciousness (risking and sacrificing one's life) and the Freirean *conscientização* that inhabits contradictions of all social reality for critical consciousness of liberation to emerge is difficult. Attempting such liberation in an age of increasing interconnectedness due to globalization and the rapid acceleration of scientific and technological progress is no easy task. But we shall make that attempt. Understanding how this philosophical thinking impacts our understanding of the possibilities and limits of enhancing education in developing countries and minorities everywhere (in developed or developing countries) to overcome multifaceted, multidimensional and multicultural forms of oppression[13] is a prerequisite before beginning any talk about capabilities, rights and 'human development.'

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[12] See Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Vol. 1.

[13] By multicultural forms of oppression, we mean that in a radically pluralistic society in which identities are intrinsically intersectional and heterogeneous in addition to the intersectional and heterogeneous nature of relations between individuals certain people's norms, values or biases will be violated when culture moves in one direction over another. In a radically diverse society, someone is always offended by either the majoritarian culture's norms or the practices of certain minorities within that culture. And there are no easy ways to resolve such tensions even if one operates within a secular, democratic political process to generate new social values that are supposed to be beneficial for the whole. Hence we do not mean to suggest that multiculturalism is inherently bad. Rather, we adopt Kenneth Arrow's views on the violation of certain norms in any majoritarian democratic form of reasoning. The cost of living in a pluralistic society is that at any given time some individual or group may take offense at another's cultural views and practices and vice-versa.

Understanding the contradictions of globalization is where we must begin.   No doubt scientific and technological progress promises to solve current health and environmental problems that previous forms of knowledge could not tackle, say the prevention of malaria through the development of a vaccine. Yet the nature of the self is changing, the ability to create stable identities grounded in a physical geography based on a nation, language, a people, a myth of ethnic or racial lineage is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. New identities are created in polymorphous and heterogeneous ways through the Internet, and old ways of 'self-consciousness' are dying. Anonymity is the means and ends of all human development in the virtual age of cyberspace. To experience this epochal shift in human consciousness in the seemingly infinite variety of cultures and levels of development or lack of development in the world boggles a single mind. To inhabit the contradictions of increasing opportunity through technological liberation from old forms of labor and mechanization while advancing scientific breakthroughs and overcoming barriers that previously limited the human mind means that *conscientização* must analyze the dialectical interplay.   There is a reciprocal entwinement of new anonymous selves that are born and whose identities transcend traditional boundaries while anticipating new forms of alienation and oppression through such technical media of globalization and its impact on educational development.

A major hypothesis of this paper is that alienation is related to the incapacity to generate meaning presumably through the model of self-sacrifice and the risk of life unto death, which is demanded in the Hegelian model of self-consciousness-to recognize oneself as a truly independent living consciousness in the form of a Person. Achieving this kind of self-consciousness is not easy for many rural and poor people in developing countries given the legacy of colonialism on the educational systems in which the colonized were taught to feel inferior in light of their superior, civilized European colonial masters. Colonialism not only created the conditions for global poverty in which many are just trying to survive today given that legacy; it also created certain debilitating forms of cognition in which critical thinking as developed in the European West from the late 18th century to the present was truly stifled. The national movements of liberation after decolonization have since tried to respond to such colonial oppression.

To truly understand the depth of this oppression and what it takes to liberate oneself is a testament to the enduring achievement that Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* represents. And to continue the Freirean project of liberation in light of the problem of the self becoming an anonymous entity, the alteration of physical space-time into the void of virtual-electronic fiber, namely the limitless expanse of the Internet, and the incapacity to generate transcendental forms of meaning provided by physical rituals, practices and symbols poses a great challenge for understanding the prospects of education as a form of liberation for the poor in developing countries. With the dialectical promise of science and technology solving issues of sustainability and basic needs with regard to food security, water, sanitation, electricity and healthy environments and ecosystems comes the problem of liberation from a nihilistic ways of existence. This is the danger of technology that Heidegger spoke of and critics from the Frankfurt School alluded to in their devastating attacks of the modern age. (One can say those same critiques apply to the postmodern age in slightly modified form).[14]

The task at hand is to understand the prospects for Hegelian self-consciousness in which one recognizes oneself and one's consciousness as independent of another in attempt to recognize oneself as a Person in light of the educational task to perceive social, political and economic contradictions. And today, unlike 100 years ago, that has to take place in an age of rapidly accelerating globalization, science and technology, which are radically transforming human experience as it has been taken for granted since the birth of the first civilizations in antiquity. The poor in developing countries have to find those sparks of critical consciousness in attempts to

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[14] See Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" in David Farrell Krell, ed., *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), pp. 307-342. For one of the principle works on the dialectical critique of the Enlightenment, science, technology, progress, in short Reason and Civilization, see Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno's classic, *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

liberate their consciousness from the janus-faced physical poverty they face and the global behemoth of cyberspace where identities are truly lost but never recognized. Questions of solidarity and social movements hang in the balance when considering our contemporary complexity and hence ways to improve education in developing countries. In conclusion, this is why philosophical creativity inspired by the likes of Hegel in his time (at the dawn of European industrialization and democracy) and Freire in the 1970s will be required before we readily accept the heuristically practical tools of 'capabilities and rights' in the realm of education and development.