

Failing to unveil Capitalism at Occupy

Paulo Freire's Theoretical Framework

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The Occupy movement may have come into our lives just over a year ago with a bang but it went out months later with a whimper. Cathal uses the benefit of hindsight to look at the phenomenon as it manifested itself on these shores and what anarchists could have done to make it work better. The difficulties as Cathal argues did not lie in making arguments for democracy has been the case in so many other campaigns but in that the occupiers “*didn’t see this conception extending to the realm of economic production*” and in developing the 99%/1% analysis into a deeper class analysis. Recognising problems with current modes of consciousness raising, he utilises Paulo Freire’s pedagogical framework in an attempt to subject “*our own political strategies, methodologies and theories to critical scrutiny*”.

If the normal way revolutionaries engage in politics is to go to people suffering a particular injustice or oppression, fight it alongside them, and raise their consciousness of the systemic change necessary to end all oppressions; then Occupy was a movement that seemed to be happening the wrong way around.

Occupy started with the broad systemic critique and desire to put it into action, but never made the critique more coherent, nor translated it into the political activity necessary to effect social change at anywhere close to the scale initially hoped for. Obviously the 99%/1% critique was quite vague and ambiguous, but the movement placed central importance in open discussions about big societal issues and its goals and strategies. Despite this being an ideal situation for revolutionaries, our radical analyses didn’t win many supporters. A year on from participating in Occupy Cork I ask why, and hope to aid the learning of theoretical and practical lessons for future social movement engagements.

The approaches to consciousness raising vary for revolutionaries of the Marxist-Leninist and anarchist-communist variety. For Leninists, the only correct analysis for overcoming the oppression of capitalism lies in their party, therefore recruitment is central. Once in the party, recruits didactically receive the party analysis, with those not agreeing with it presumed to be labouring under a false consciousness. Anarchists tend to be uncomfortable with such an infallible and hierarchical epistemology, and instead prefer to focus on empowering people to organise and think for themselves. This tends to work very well in aiding understanding of the interpersonal aspects of power relations, and the way oppressive power can manifest itself in groups and through gender, race and other privileges – areas where we have seen huge advances against oppressive power since Marxism lost its hegemonic position as the way to do oppositional politics in the sixties. But with the more impersonal oppression of contemporary capitalism in the West, we see both that less people have a critical understanding of it, and that the gains made by the workers’ movements of the post war era have been pushed back for several decades. The logic of the commodity has expanded its control over more of our lives, while its further reification¹ has immunised it from critical scrutiny.

Soon after Occupy Cork started it was noted in our local Workers Solidarity Movement branch discussions that the arguments for internal democracy we’re used to having in campaigns wouldn’t be as much of a preoccupation in this case. The Occupiers were, so to speak, “even more anarchist” than us in their conception of democracy; but the problem was that they didn’t see this conception extending to the realm of economic production. Consequently we saw as one of our key tasks the promotion of the communist part of anarchist-communism. Like

¹ Reification refers to how the constructed social relations of capitalism appear as objective natural laws of civilization.

other anti-capitalists at the camp, I tried this in various ways: doing some talks and articles, bringing trade unionists and various left-wing and anti-capitalist academics and activists to speak, and in general conversations and discussions making radical arguments and pushing for a further development of the 99%/1% analysis.

While the strategy did have some positive effects on the overall consciousness of the camp, it wasn't unproblematic, as radicals in many other camps have learned. Helena Sheehan in her essay, "Occupying Dublin: Considerations at a Crossroads", talked of the hostility against the "intellectual elite" of the camp, who she indicates were vaguely defined as "people who read books, write blogs, organise talks and articulate criticism"². Similarly, other Occupy writings have talked about the divide that developed between the experienced activists and the newcomers to social movements. Of course radicals could arrogantly discount this as a manifestation of bourgeois liberalism, but we could obviously learn a lot more by subjecting our own political strategies, methodologies and theories to critical scrutiny. In that spirit of revolutionary praxis being a constant process of action and reflection, it is to the work of the great Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, that we will now turn.

Paulo Freire's Theoretical Framework

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire expands a dialectical understanding of oppression, conscientização, and liberation. (Conscientização, sometimes translated as conscientization, refers, to quote Freire's translator, to "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality"³). Drawing on Marx's ontology of labour, Freire sees the ability to consciously and collectively shape one's environment and social relations as the defining feature of humanity⁴. Humankind has a vocation to become more fully human; oppression is what negates it. It is dehumanising for both oppressor and oppressed, but it is the oppressed that must engage in the revolutionary praxis or "gesture of love"⁵ necessary to return the humanity to both (although the oppressors are unlikely to see it that way).

On first glance some may feel the oppressor/ oppressed dichotomy is far too simplistic for the contemporary West and much more applicable to the conditions of mass poverty and illiteracy of the global south where Freire worked. But this objection misses the point. Freire isn't making an empirical observation that the world is unambiguously divided into two homogeneous groups; he is rather expanding a dialectical theoretical framework for understanding oppression. And neither is he projecting a total innocence onto the oppressed. Instead he talks of how the oppressed can become sub-oppressors, and of the need to eject the oppressor within because it is from them that we get our model of humanity. To see the contemporary relevance here one need only look back at the mawkish reaction to the recent death of Steve Jobs, a man who was

² Helana Sheehan, "Occupying Dublin: Considerations at a crossroads", www.irishleftreview.org/2012/01/19/occupying-dublin-consideration...

³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (Penguin, 1996) pp.17.

⁴ To quote Marx: 'A spider constructs operations that resemble that of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects in reality.'

⁵ Freire, pp.38.

responsible for factory conditions that have driven many workers to suicide⁶, and who, according to his biographer, was an all-round boorish bully (who even constantly parked in disabled parking spaces!).

Revolutionary leadership plays an important part in aiding conscientization; but how Freire defines the role of these revolutionaries has far more in common with the anarchist conception of the Leadership of Ideas than with the Leninist vanguard.⁷ Unlike Lenin's assertion that peasants can't be trusted and that workers by themselves can only develop a trade union consciousness; for Freire a lack of confidence in people's ability to think and reason is incompatible with mutually achieving liberation. Likewise, talk of winning the people over to our side "does not belong in the vocabulary of revolutionary leaders, but in that of the oppressor"⁸. Instead dialogical engagement is aimed at achieving their adherence to liberation – an important distinction for how we construct and adapt radical theoretical work and political strategies. In the praxis of liberation – "the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it"⁹ – arguments based on authority are no longer valid. Accordingly, that there are inherent contradictions to the capitalist mode of production is not asserted as correct because Marx has shown it to be so. Rather, through collective dialogue, we critically investigate the logic of capital and those contradictions (a process for which Marx's work could of course be utilised). Since social reality is not static, our theory shouldn't be either; using Freire's methods, those who wish to transform social realities become theory's permanent re-creators.

Freirean Practice

Dialogue happens through a problem-posing pedagogical process, which Freire contrasts with what he calls the banking method of education. We are probably all familiar with the latter from school; it is where educators see their role as making deposits of information into ostensibly empty receptacles. In this method the students' role is to receive, file and store information – a role which prevents the development of critical consciousness. It's therefore a great shame that "those who espouse the cause of liberation are themselves surrounded and influenced by the climate which generates the banking concept, and often do not perceive its true significance or its dehumanizing power. Paradoxically, then, they utilize this same instrument of alienation in what they consider an effort to liberate."¹⁰

For Freire the banking concept of education is, like sloganeering and propaganda, a tool of the oppressor. Liberatory education, on the other hand, is practiced through the problem-posing method. Instead of transferrals of information, it consists of acts of cognition between teacher/

⁶ After 19 suicide attempts in two years, one factory installed suicide nets to catch the jumpers. A former Apple executive has even admitted to the New York Times, 'most people would still be really disturbed if they say where their iPhone comes from'. www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2092277/Apple-Poor-working-conditions-inside-Chinese-factories-making-iPads.html

⁷ In fact, I don't see any practical incompatibility with the anarchist conception. In this Freire augments a major trend in Marxism which has seen several reformulations move the philosophy ever closer to anarchism. Todd May in chapter 2 of *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* details how this trend develops from Luxembourge to Lukacs, to the Frankfurt school critical theorists, to Althusser, to the autonomists, and finally to Cornelius Castoriadis.

⁸ Freire, pp.76.

⁹ Freire, pp.60.

¹⁰ Freire, pp.60.

students and student/teachers. Together the group “cognize cognizable objects” or “decode codifications” – both terms basically mean the teacher/student facilitates a group critical analysis of some aspect of social reality. The codifications or cognizable objects could be visual aids like pictures, or orally presented existential problems. Freire warns that overly explicit codifications risk degeneration into propaganda – so it’s best not to explore the capital-labour contradiction with an image of a capitalist with a cigar and a top hat. Conversely, if they’re too enigmatic the process may become a guessing game.

Before this happens, the teacher/students engage in “thematic investigation” – the process of understanding how people in a certain group look at the world and construct their thought. This is the section of the book that most strongly bears the imprint of the context in which it was written – the imagery is of white middle class Brazilians going to indigenous peasant communities with notebooks. Still, it is vitally important in all contexts of social change as “[o]ne cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding.”¹¹

Freire’s use of the word respect should not be interpreted as a form of cultural relativism, rather it means that the people’s thematic universe, their understanding of the social relations they live under, is the starting point in the problem-posing pedagogical process which aims to unveil the oppressive elements of those relations. Most radicals in their organising already apply some knowledge of their informal or subconscious thematic investigations – for example most of us would probably make arguments at a trade union meeting slightly differently than we would at a student council – but being more cognizant of what we’re doing here is vitally important as it helps us avoid the twin perils of either alienating people with metaphors and themes that don’t connect with their reality, or instead watering down our political arguments for fear of them being alienating.

Pedagogy of Postmodern Capitalism

And now to ask ourselves what a Freirean problem-posing workshop, aimed at beginning a process of understanding contemporary capitalism, would look like in an Occupy-type milieu. Even the most cursory thematic investigation would reveal that Marx’s factory metaphor¹² is not the smartest place to start. Neither, I would say, is the worker-boss relation put in a broader context. Firstly because there doesn’t exist anything close to a homogeneous experience of the production side of capitalism amongst the Occupy milieu, and secondly, and more generally, because of the changes in the surface appearance of capitalism in the last 4 decades – changes that far too many revolutionary groups seem to ignore in their literature.

That is not to claim that the laws of capital accumulation are now different than before, just that the surface appearances and contemporary forms of capitalism are important to take into account in order for our analysis to resonate – or, to put in Freirean terms, these appearances form part of the thematic universe of people’s understanding of the social relations they live under.

¹¹ Freire, pp.76.

¹² Meaning the way Marx saw the factory as the ideal metaphor for the social relations of capitalism.

The new spirit of capitalism, writes Slavoj Žižek, “triumphantly recuperated the egalitarian and anti-hierarchical rhetoric of 1968, presenting itself as a successful libertarian revolt against the oppressive social organizations characteristic of both corporate capitalism and Really Existing Socialism – a new libertarian spirit epitomized by dressed-down ‘cool’ capitalists such as Bill Gates and the founders of Ben and Jerry’s ice-cream.”¹³ This ostensibly non-exploitative capitalism is epitomized in such products as Fairtrade coffee. The Fairtrade epithet is a de facto admission that trade under the normal laws of capitalism is unfair. But in line with the “add more free market” genre of politics, “fairness” becomes a commodity that Western consumers can pay more for, if they so desire. Thus redemption for just being a consumer is found in the very act of commodity consumption. I see it as a postmodern example of how oppression is mythicized in order for it to be concealed. Given that “problem-posing pedagogy sets itself the task of demythologizing”¹⁴, and that the myths of ethical consumption are very much part of all our thematic universes, I would argue that a bag of fairtrade coffee is an ideal codification to start the conscientization process.

As the cognizing process is nothing if not a dialogical relation between co-investigators, it’s impossible to predict its course. Starting, for example, with a discussion of the “coffee karma” PR on the package may lead in any number of directions. However if the task is to unveil capitalist exploitation being masked with an ethical branding, the teacher/student needs to be prepared. Therefore here, from my solely literary interaction with Freire’s methods, are what I would see as some of the key problems to pose in order to aid the process:

Do all the workers involved in this coffee get ‘fairly traded’ with? What about the workers that made the plane that flew it over here? And the workers that made the shelf on which it sits in the supermarket? Aren’t they also subject to the same ‘normal trade’ or ‘unfair trade’ that ordinarily makes coffee pickers wages so low? What makes normal trade unfair? Are consumer choices a useful way to effect change? Is it a fair way?

If we’re voting with our euros, who gets more votes? Who gets more power? If our power isn’t in our pockets, where is it? If we can choose between fairly and unfairly traded coffee, why can’t we also choose chattel slave picked coffee? Should it be consumers’ responsibility to ensure coffee pickers get fairly paid? Do consumers have the information necessary to make such choices with everything they purchase? Would that ever be possible? What other products are also commonly labelled fairtrade? What do they all have in common? What are people usually doing when they consume these products? If there were fairtrade plain black socks, would anyone buy them? In the nineties there was lots of discussion of the sweatshop conditions runners were made under, why do you think there aren’t fairtrade versions of them sitting alongside the unfair trade ones in every sports shop? If you can’t afford fairtrade coffee, are you being unethical? What’s the emotional experience of seeing the smiling farmer on the package of coffee? Is it fair that this farmers’ livelihood and happiness depend on the whims of Western consumers? What would be a truly fair situation for the farmer?

Obviously such questions are only suggestions; it would be the dialogue that would guide the collective decoding. And the teachers are also students, so what is actually unveiled might be quite different to what was originally considered problematic. In any case it’s not difficult to see how such workshops would help develop better understandings of the reified capitalist mode of

¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (Verso 2009) pp.76. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴ Freire, pp.64.

production we live under. Freire's methods could be seen as a cognitive application of the "learn by doing" principal. Just as no one would feel they know how to brew beer until they actually use their homebrew kit, in the same way, we don't critically engage with ideas until we actually do the thinking that conceptualises them.

Conclusion

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire tells a story of a group of armed peasants who planned to take over a latifundium, but couldn't find a single volunteer to guard the owner they planned to keep hostage. It was an example of the magical beliefs in the invulnerability and power of the oppressor that Freire commonly found amongst the peasants of Brazil. At Occupy we witnessed similar magical beliefs in, for example, vast international conspiracies, spiritually transcending social reality, and the possibility of creating a local ethical capitalism. That many left Occupy with as fragmentary an understanding of capitalism that they entered with, and, sometimes, bad impressions of "know-it-all activists"¹⁵, shows the need for revolutionaries to alter their often ineffective approaches to conscientization. For this, Freire's dialogical pedagogy offers a robust and insightful framework from which to develop more attuned methods of engagement in social movements.

¹⁵ To quote a Facebook argument I had with an Occupy Cork friend who was quite taken by the prevalent and highly questionable Freeman of the Land ideas.

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