

## **Lecture 1 - Pedagogy of the Oppressed**

**Bibiana Serpa and Marco Mazzarotto**

To the oppressed,  
and to those who suffer with them  
and fight at their side.

This is the opening sentence of the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. A short but powerful phrase for understanding central ideas in Paulo Freire's work. The first is that we need to recognize the existence of the oppressed, those who have their humanity stolen from them, prevented from being free to develop their full potential. To recognize this is also to recognize the existence of their opposite, the oppressors, those who live off the theft of the humanity of the oppressed.

The oppressed-oppressor contradiction can only be overcome through struggle, a struggle not only of the oppressed, but of those who stand in solidarity with them, and are willing to fight side by side with them. Oppressed and oppressors, a historical fact that imposes a decision: on which side are you going to fight?

We live in a social order that privileges oppressors. The oppressed-oppressors contradiction imposes on us an idea of success conditioned by power. So the oppressed believe that the way to liberation is to become the oppressor, because that is the order of things. For liberation to be real, the first step is to recognize and confront the oppressor within ourselves. And to combat not only this internal agent, but the structural situations that make the existence of oppressors and oppressed possible in the first place. Liberation from this contradictory condition is a collective achievement, not a gift. In this way, we cannot think of saving the other from his or her oppressed or oppressor condition.

In "*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*", Freire spoke of illiterate peasants, devalued and impoverished rural workers who were not considered citizens. In a global and contemporary perspective, unfortunately, this reality is even more widespread. Refugees, citizens considered illegal, fighters in urban and rural occupations, people whose bodies escape the normalized conformations, the exploited workers, just to name a few.

However, it is important to note that the categories of oppressors and oppressed are complex and multidimensional. Like the example of a black man who may be oppressed by racism and working force exploitation, while at the same time he may be a sexist oppressor.

The groups of oppressed people in our society have different positionalities. To help us in this visualization, we rescue a simplified version of the Domination Matrix, or Oppression Matrix, first proposed by black intellectual Patricia Hill Collins in 1990 and reformulated over the years. Her studies and those of other Black intellectuals of this period opened ways for us to think about how

social markers imply different relations of oppression, exploitation, and domination, where we can recognize ourselves as oppressed and as oppressors.

At this point we would like to rescue the thought of the black Brazilian intellectual and activist Lélia Gonzalez, who even before Patricia Hill Collins, in 1988, claimed an integrated perspective of oppressions by proposing analyses that relate gender, race, class and geopolitical territory in her elaborations on the positionality of Afro-Latin American feminism, moving away from essentialist notions of experiences.

Back to the matrix, it is possible that we identify ourselves in the upper part, in some axes of the dominant groups, and that in others we are in the lower part, of the oppressed groups.

Our capacity to compress these different positionalities and the recognition that we occupy different spaces helps us to become aware and to confront the oppressor-oppressed dichotomy. But awareness is not yet consciousness. For Freire, consciousness raising implies that "we go beyond the spontaneous sphere of apprehension of reality". Consciousness is a historical commitment and a commitment to political action.

Faced with all these issues in dialectical contradiction, people have contradictory positions; some work on maintaining the structures, and others on changing them. And the possibility of this work of change occurs to the extent that we have the material conditions to exercise our historical power.

In this sense, we need to create structural conditions so that oppressed groups can broaden their actions in the struggle for emancipation.

Are the design products and processes we propose reinforcing emancipatory struggles? Or are they domesticating oppressed groups?

Frederick Van Amstel recently published in his networks a reflection that fits here and that holds the different positions in which we also find ourselves in the exercise of our profession.

He proposes we ask ourselves:

From which resources and tools do I produce my existence? What is available or not available to me and to my social groups? What can I do and what can I not do that has been shaped or provided at the expense of others?

In this context, Frederick proposes that we can realize that designers are oppressed not only by their gender, race, labor relations, etc., but also by relations of use. Designers who inhabit spaces of underdevelopment are oppressed by merely being users of tools, methods and platforms created by the "developed". This highlights a structural recognition of design as a very narrow and often conservative field of practice, that domesticates other ways of creating, using, thinking.

These Different positionalities also define us as oppressed or oppressor designers. Oppressed when we are from the global south, when we are culturally invaded by the correct ways of doing

design, when we are forced to adopt foreign tools and methods and abandon our local practices. And we are the oppressor when we are conniving, when we perpetuate oppressive relations in our designs, when we culturally invade others in the same way we were invaded.

To prevent the unveiling of these relations, myths are created. The myth that it is not possible to practice design outside of capitalism. The myth that it is not possible to change the world, because it has always been this way. The myth of the designer as a solver of all problems. The designer as the savior.

The discovery about the oppressive situation and about the objective and subjective relationship of who we are and the social groups to which we belong, cannot be done on a mere intellectual level, it is a concrete and relational action.

This relationship is necessarily based on the recognition of the political potency of all subjects, without imposing "domestication". As Paulo Freire says: "Nobody liberates anybody, nobody liberates himself alone: people liberate themselves in communion".

So, here are some things for us to discuss:

How can we create spaces where we are both educators and learners? How can we promote spaces where designers and other creative subjects work together in the task of not only unveiling reality, but also recreating it? As permanent remakers of the reality that never is, but is always being?

How can we bring to the center of our design actions, relationships that are oriented to consciousness and to the engagement in the collective struggle for the emancipation of all?