

Designs of the Oppressed

Lecture 1 - Pedagogy of the Oppressed

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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 the 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 robbery of the humanity of the oppressed.

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.

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.

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.

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 is a historical commitment and a commitment to political action.

In this sense, we need to create structural conditions so 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" ones. This highlights a structural recognition of design as a very narrow and often conservative field of practice, that domesticates other ways of creating, using, and 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 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 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 merely intellectual level, it is 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 or herself 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? How can we bring to the center of our design actions, relationships that are oriented to consciousness for the emancipation of all?