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FREIRE AND SITUATIONISM – WHITHER THE PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED IN THE ERA OF THE CONTEMPORARY SPECTACLE?

INTRODUCTION

The concept of the ‘society of the spectacle’ was introduced by the French Situationist thinker Guy Debord¹ to describe how in late capitalist or postmodern society, human agency and freedom have become almost entirely commodified. While the rhetoric of ‘consumer choice’ claims to allow us endless freedoms, for Debord this is the pseudo-agency of advertising which is far removed from human reality. Debord’s own work went on to inspire the student and wider revolutions of May ’68 and thus, his deconstructionist critique inspired the protest movement to positive action.

Debord wrote between the 1960s and the 1980s, but in 2019 we can ask his philosophical and political question once again - is there any free space left in the Society of the Spectacle? Moreover, what can artists and educators do in such commodified times to re-engage and re-inspire human freedom and creativity?

When the Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire tells us that ‘education is never neutral’, he wants us as educators, and as artists, to realise that our work is always situated, that it always takes a stand (even if, or especially if, we deny this fact). Education and art are inherently political, even if we often run away from this responsibility and seek to hide behind excuses or alibis.

1 G. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Rebel Press, London 2000.

No pedagogy is ever innocent - Freire provokes us with these words, in 1968, in his text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. One of the posters of '68 stated that 'the lessons will not be forgotten in '69!'²

But what did such a 'not forgetting' mean in 1969 and what does it mean in 2019? This short paper will seek to explore the insights which Freire and Debord's work can bring to this contemporary debate of a crisis in education and politics. In 2019, the question is as acute and topical as ever: Whither the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in the era of the Spectacle?

FREIRE AND A SELF-CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Freire's most famous text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was published in English in 1968. The work had developed over a longer period of time, going back to Freire's original literacy work in Brazil and Latin America in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Here, the assumptions behind classical versions of development education had been put to the test and shown to come up radically short. While claiming to lead the poor and marginalised out of oppression, such pedagogies were shown by Freire to be rooted in a colonial mindset, which ultimately ended in a deeper oppression. Instead of a reinforcement of such hierarchical power dynamics, Freire instead advocated for a form of 'self-emancipation' for marginalised communities and marginalised subjects alike. This new form of radical 'problem-posing' education (which Freire opposed to what he termed 'sectarianism' on both Right and Left) came to full fruition in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* text from the late 1960s, the latter distilling a lot of this earlier educational and political experience. Of course, the challenge of the latter to the status quo in Brazil would lead to Freire's expulsion and exile from his own society for over 20 years. The subsequent publication of this seminal text (bringing Freire's message to a much wider global audience for the first time) was so close to the events of May '68 that Freire added a footnote on the first page, referencing the student riots and uprising. There is nothing coincidental

2 P. Vermès and J. Kugelberg [eds.], *La beauté est dans la rue. Beauty Is In The Street. A Visual Record of the May '68 Paris Uprising*, Four Corners Books, London 2011.

about this referencing; rather the book as a whole acts as a kind of anticipation of the social and political upheaval happening in France and all around Europe. One of Freire's main themes – the First World vs Third World conflict – already points to an unsustainability at the heart of Western politics and identity. Thus unsustainability is both pedagogical, but also more fundamentally, it is fatalism at the heart of the socio-political and inter-subjective human world of relationship.

This is what Freire refers to as the 'banking system', a mindset and power structure of organisation which connects education, society, economy and the realm of the inter-personal. One of Freire's most original contributions is in relation to the complexity and multi-layered aspect of his diagnostic framework. As the commentator John Elias³ notes, Freire is an 'eclectic' thinker, drawing on many different disciplines and ways of thinking to draw his insights together. This methodological eclecticism can be said to have advantages and disadvantages. From a negative perspective, it can lead to a certain confusion as to the status of some of Freire's claims. Here, for example, one can note the undermining of certain aspects of the claims of liberatory education. Whereas a more orthodox Marxist perspective might tend to assert the right of the liberatory educator to 'liberate' the oppressed (masses or students), instead in Freire we see a self-critique emerge.

In his text *Pedagogy of Hope* from 1992, which is sub-titled *Revisiting Pedagogy of the Oppressed*⁴, Freire challenges the conception of emancipation which often underpins a more naïve form of liberatory pedagogy. Freire quotes a letter: 'an excellent letter from a group of workers in São Paulo; "Paul" they said, "keep writing – but next time lay it on a little thicker when you come to those scholarly types that come to visit as if they had revolutionary truth by the tail. You know, the ones that come looking for us to teach us that we're oppressed and exploited and to tell us what to do"⁵.

Instead of what amounts to this reactive and suffocating form of pseudo-liberating education which puts teachers in control of passive students,

3 J. Elias, *Paulo Freire: Pedagogue of Liberation*, Teacher's College, New York 1994.

4 P. Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Translated by R. Barr, Continuum, London 1992.

5 P. Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, cit., p. 32.

Freire seeks a more authentically liberating form of problem-posing education. At the heart of the 1968 text is the specific critique of the university system which was also such a catalyst for the '68 movements in France (the latter deriving from an original critique of the university by student movements and the philosophers Henri Lefebvre and Jean-Francois Lyotard at Nanterre). Freire describes in the aforementioned footnote the affinity between his own philosophy of education and politics and the contemporary movement of the '68 students at Nanterre and beyond: '[the '68 students] as they place consumer civilisation in judgement, denounce all types of bureaucracy, demand the transformation of the universities [changing the rigid structure of the teacher-student relationship] and placing that relationship within the context of reality'⁶.

This brings Freire's work very much into connection with that of Lefebvre and Lyotard, both figures of the French Far-Left at this point (although Lyotard's later work will drift into a different direction). A little older than the great generation of Derrida et al, and studying at the Sorbonne rather than the ENS, Lyotard was always a philosophical outsider. A student of Merleau-Ponty (whose strong influence is clear), Lyotard initially worked as a secondary school teacher of philosophy in Algeria during turbulent times and also was a key political agitator for Algerian independence in various leftist groups through the late 50's and 60's (most notably, Socialism or Barbarism). Most importantly, during the 1960's, Lyotard takes up a position at the infamous University of Paris at Nanterre, where he is a lecturer in Philosophy, in the lead up to and during the May 1968 riots and disturbances. Alongside Henri Lefebvre,⁷ who was lecturing in Sociology at Nanterre, it is arguable that Lyotard is one of the central intellectual influences on and documenters of the May '68 student movement; again, his links to Situationism are very clear at this juncture and in these writings. Whereas other more fêted thinkers such as Louis Althusser are seen to fail miserably to deal with '68 (Derrida is also noticeably quiet, Foucault was actually abroad

6 P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, cit., p.25.

7 H. Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday Volume 2*, Verso, London 2002.

at the time) and while Althusser's famous students (such as Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière)⁸ only develop theories to engage '68 much later, Lyotard can be seen to be engaging the need for a revision of Marxist thought in relation to politics and education, right through the 1960's. As with Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Lyotard is arguing for a self-critique of liberatory education which still allows room for a more authentic form of pedagogical and political emancipation.

For Freire, such radical thinking and 'praxis' (involving a constant reviewing and renewal of the loop between theory and practice) involves both continuity and discontinuity with a Leftist (and Marxist) tradition. As Freire notes, 'If you were to ask me, "are you attempting to put into practice the concepts you described in your book [*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*]?", of course I am, but in a manner in keeping with the times'⁹ (Freire and Torres, 1994, p. 106). This 'in keeping with the times' can lead Freire's pedagogy and politics into some unexpected and heterodox spaces from a more orthodox Marxist perspective. Here, we can draw on a key distinction between 'dogmatic' and 'nondogmatic' forms of Marxism, first employed by the Belgrade and Zagreb based *Praxis* school of philosophy¹⁰ to distinguish between more humanist and scientific forms of Marxism. Freire is undoubtedly, as with Debord, on the side of the 'nondogmatic'.

DEBORD AND SITUATIONISM

As with Freire, Debord's work can be seen as remarkably prescient with regard to the events of '68. Debord's work in the earlier 1960s and the publication in 1967 of his seminal *Society of the Spectacle* doesn't only anticipate but also significantly influences the radical social movements in France and beyond. Several of the '68 slogans (anarchist and Marxist)

8 J. Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, translated with an introduction by Kristin Ross, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1991.

9 P. Freire and C.A. Torres, 'Twenty Years After *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: Paulo Freire in Conversation with Carlos Alberto Torres', in P. McLaren and C. Lankshear (eds.), *Politics of Liberation: Paths from Freire*, Routledge, London 1994.

10 H. Motoh, 'Punk is a Symptom': *Intersections of Philosophy and Alternative Culture in the '80s Slovenia*, in "SYNTHESIS PHILOSOPHICA" 53 (1/2012) 2012, pp. 285–296.

derive from Debord's writings and Situationist thought, either literally or in secondary terms. Debord also shares a certain critical distancing from what he regarded as more naïve forms of liberatory politics and education. Nonetheless he can also be seen as developing a specific form of revolutionary politics which is attuned to the complexities of the contemporary situation. In this, he continues to look back to Marx, most especially to the philosophy of the early Marx for inspiration. With regard to his critique of a more naïve Marxism, we can note his clear (if not vehement) disagreements with the Althusserianism of the time. Of course, here Debord fares better in the '68 moment, as it is Althusserianism which is shown to be very much out of step with the revolutionary and educational possibilities. For example, the *volte-face* of Badiou and Rancière (contra Althusser) after '68 is a clear example of a certain problematicity of the Althusserian Marxist framework becoming all too evident through the late sixties crisis in France and beyond. As Rancière notes, 'my book declared war on the theory of the inequality of intelligences at the heart of supposed critiques of domination. It held that all revolutionary thought must be founded on the inverse presupposition, that of the capacity of the dominated'¹¹.

It is this insight concerning the 'capacity of the dominated' which also drives Situationism. Debord extends the critique of ideology to late capitalism or the spectacular society. Against Althusser (but a good ten years earlier than Rancière's *volte-face*), he subverts the science/ideology distinction in favour of emergent revolutionary 'situations'. Such 'situations' are fragile and can become 'recuperated' and 'commodified', thus, we have the need for a constant vigilance and self-critique in the educational practice and a move away from the self-assuredness of the revolutionary pedagogue, associated especially with Althusserianism and orthodox forms of Marxism in the 1960s. So Debord asks, given the determinations and the obstacles to an authentic critique of ideology, 'is there any space left in the society of the spectacle for nonideology, for freedom?'

There is, of course, a clear inheritance from the early Marx here of the *1844 Paris Manuscripts*, as in 'the more the worker produces, the less he has to

11 Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, cit, p.xv.

consume; the more values he creates the more worthless and unworthy he becomes; the better shaped his products, the more misshapen he is'. But for Debord and the Situationists there is a need to supplement Marxism with a certain poetic symbolism. As with Henri Lefebvre, Debord also seeks to combine Marx's 'Change the world' with Arthur's existential cry of 'Change life' but, for the Situationists, these two watchwords are one. We can also see a more important continuity with Marx in the emphasis on 'praxis' (here there is also a strong connection between Freire and Debord). Both take their cue from Thesis 11 of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*: 'Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it'¹².

Their respective influence on '68 and their prescience with regard to a major period of social and political upheaval draws the philosophical and sociological work of Freire and Debord into close connection. But if there are affinities between Freire and Debord as described, there are also important disagreements. Certainly Debord takes the 'nondogmatic' aspects of Marxism further than does Freire or Critical Pedagogy more generally. At times, Situationism can appear unrecognizable as a Leftist politics, given its radical heterodoxy. Second, Debord's work tends towards a melancholy and even a pessimism which can seem paralysing whereas with Freire, there is an underlying optimism and hope (witnessed in his later text *Pedagogy of Hope*) despite the weighing up of realistic revolutionary possibilities and the at times vehement self-critique of liberatory education.

Both these affinities and disaffinities can be telling for us in relation to our attempt to size up our contemporary situation. Many commentators refer to the 'long '68', the afterlives of the events of May, and in some measure at least this long period of influence continues to today. If our time of 2019 also sees the emergence of very significant crises in the economic, social and values spheres (also in the education sphere), we can see strong analogies to some of the specific aspects of 1968. Nonetheless, over 50 years have passed, a whole half century since, and thus there are

12 Marx, K., 'The Theses on Feuerbach', in Karl Marx *Early Writings*, translated by R. Livingstone and G. Benton, pp. 421-423, London: Penguin, 1992. Marx, K., *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), in Karl Marx *Early Writings*, translated by R. Livingstone and G. Benton, London: Penguin, London, 1992.

new and particular dimensions of today's crisis which seem very different from the crisis which Freire and Debord faced.

CONCLUSION

To return to our original theme and question, whether the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in the era of the contemporary Spectacle? Certainly, if we look at Freire's later work in philosophy of education and his revisiting of his earlier thematics, we can see a certain change of emphasis. In Freire's 'reliving' and 'rethinking' *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in the wake of the failure of '68 and after (most notable in his 1992 text *Pedagogy of Hope*), there is a strong reemphasis on lived experience as an existential criterion. If this was already the case in the earlier *Pedagogy*, that pedagogy and politics dovetailed with personal and existential concerns, it becomes more of an emphasis in the later work. Not coincidentally, it is accompanied by a more radical critique of the authority of the teacher and of the 'emancipatory' educator/hidden power, which we saw outlined earlier in the critique of paternalism ('stop telling us we are oppressed').

This is a clear thematic in the '68 movements which both Debord and Freire anticipated and influenced. For example, in the famous poster 'Participation, all the better to eat you with my children'¹³. The dangers are clear here of a pseudo-revolution, a re-commodification of the potential of the revolution in false dawns and overly-hierarchical leadership, failing to see the self-emancipatory potential of the student or of the individual agent.

We see a similar theme emerge in Debord's later work¹⁴. In his earlier texts, Debord had spoken of a very real potential for the realisation of revolution. He speaks to the revolutionary project of a classless society which implies the withering away of the social measurement of time in favour of a *federation of independent times*' (Thesis 163) and the '*temporal realisation of authentic communism*'. But in the later work, the tonality has become somewhat more pessimistic and even satirical. 'It is certainly

13 P. Vermès and J. Kugelberg [eds.], *La beauté est dans la rue. Beauty Is In The Street. A Visual Record of the May '68 Paris Uprising*, cit., p.102.

14 G. Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Verso, London 1990.

not the spectacle's destiny to end up as enlightened despotism'¹⁵. At times in this later text, there is a near-sense that Debord has started to become fatalistic about the spectacularity of the Spectacle - "This form of barbaric grandeur"¹⁶. Here, we might see a distinction between Freire and the later Debord which carries significance. However self-critical and undermining of naïve liberatory education Freire's work becomes, under the complex conditions of late capitalism, his work never becomes attracted by fatalism. If there is a danger that 'participation' may only eat us up, there is still always and ever the real possibility of action which can transform our world, whether in education or in politics or both. 'In action, we have the source of our beauty'¹⁷. Fatalism only leads to Freire's much repeated warning that 'the oppressed becomes the oppressor'¹⁸. At times, the later Debord's work succumbs to such revolutionary pessimism under the conditions of late capitalism. Freire maintains the tension which instead keeps the possibility of revolution alive. It is thus Freire who maintains the possibilities of what we have termed 'nondogmatic Marxism' even under the most difficult contemporary conditions. Nonetheless, the Situationist texts of Debord in the early to late 1960s (culminating in the *Society of the Spectacle*) point towards the maintenance of this enigmatic Leftist (anti-capitalist) critique of ideology, even while they fail to provide the inspiration to maintain this vision throughout the chronology of his own work. In this, we might see Freire's later work as the true inheritor of the early Situationist legacy to the Left-wing tradition of politics and pedagogy and thus as the true inheritor of the May '68 counter-culture.

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16 G. Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, cit., p. 100.

17 P. Vermès and J. Kugelberg [eds.], *La beauté est dans la rue. Beauty Is In The Street. A Visual Record of the May '68 Paris Uprising*, cit., p.103.

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