

Emancipation,

Knowledge

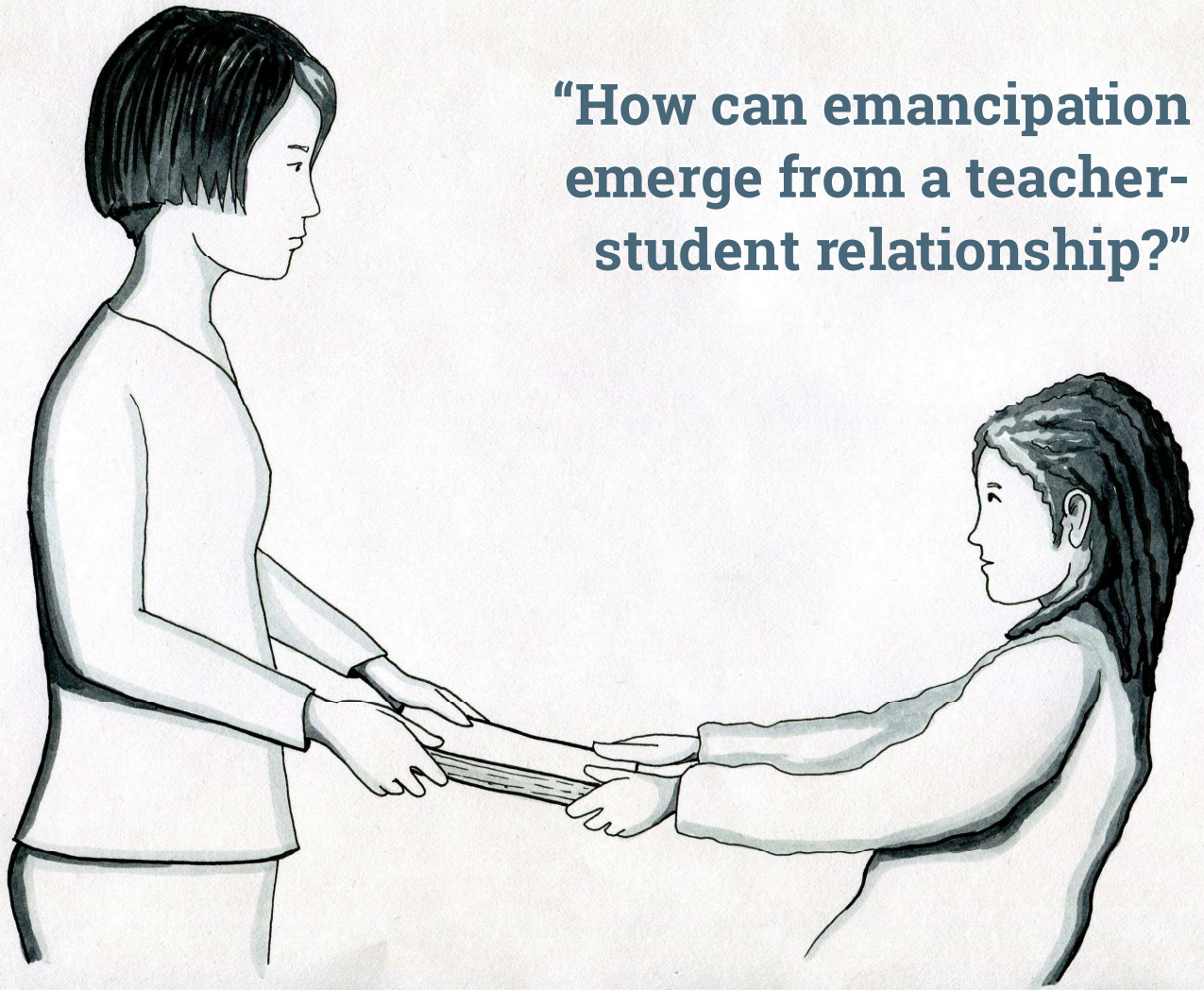
and Power

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Emancipation through education. The project seems legitimate. But is it actually possible to make someone free from a position of authority, or is it just a paradox? In the following, I examine two different visions of the method of emancipation: the one displayed by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), and the one proposed by Jacques Rancière in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991). More precisely, I ask the question: how can emancipation emerge from a teacher-student relationship? Emancipation can be defined as “the act of freeing somebody, especially from legal, political or social controls that limit what they can do” (Oxford learner’s Dictionary). In that sense, emancipation implies independence from exterior constraints. It indicates an enhanced capacity to exert agency. And, not only do the two authors have this theme in common, but they also view it from different perspectives, something which might help the comparison to be fruitful. While Rancière gives voice to the 19th century pedagogue Joseph Jacotot and narrates his story (Rancière, 1987, p. 7), Freire’s political approach is explicit: it is a matter of class struggle and overcoming oppression (Freire, 2000, p. 44).

1. Freire and Rancière; critical theory and poststructuralism

Hereafter, I give a short summary and a contextualization of the two works. On the one hand, Freire’s book elaborates the ins and outs of a liberating pedagogical method. For him, it is through dialogue that the oppressed can liberate both themselves and their oppressors from the present alienating situation. Freire defines dialogue as “the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. [...] If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings.” (Freire, 2000, p. 88). Thus, a liberating pedagogy is one where men, through dialogue, become conscious of the totality of the situation they are in and thereby become able to actualize their historicity, that is to say, their potential to change the world they inhabit (Freire, 2000, pp. 99-102). This book could be placed in the tradition of critical theory where the emphasis is put on “the analysis of oppressive structures, practices and theories” and where the “key idea is that emancipation can be brought about if people gain an adequate insight into the power relations that constitute their situation - which is why the notion of



“How can emancipation emerge from a teacher-student relationship?”

demystification plays a central role in critical pedagogies.” (Biesta, 2010, p. 43). Moreover, Giroux (2010, p. 715) considers Freire as one of the founders of critical pedagogy, where education is seen as “a practice of freedom [that] must expand the capacity necessary for human agency” (Giroux, 2010, p. 718).

On the other hand, Rancière’s book reconstitutes a so-called “method of equality” used by the 19th century pedagogue Joseph Jacotot. From his reading of Jacotot, Rancière develops a method that goes beyond the pedagogical relationship; a political way of being in relation to each other in which equality of intelligence is taken as a necessary assumption that renders emancipation possible (Rancière, 1991, pp. 46, 138). This book can be placed in the poststructuralist tradition insofar that it approaches knowledge and truth as out of the human reach as well as inextricably linked to power structures and relations (Bowman, 2016, pp. 2-3). In the words of Rancière: “each one of us describes our parabola around the truth. No two orbits are alike. And this is why the explicators endanger

our revolution. [...] [The] coincidence of orbits is what we called stultification” (Rancière, 1991, p. 57). In other words, everyone has a unique position in regard to truth, and stating that one position toward truth is the one to adopt is related to power relations, since it would be stultifying. Hence, emancipation cannot mean being enlightened in this tradition, because being enlightened would have to coincide with an externally given set of knowledge.

Ultimately, Freire and Rancière come from two different traditions: critical theory and poststructuralism. These two traditions reveal two different perspectives on knowledge and power relations. From the angle of critical theory, knowledge is the key to demystify the ideology used by those in power, while from a poststructuralist stance, knowledge and power are entangled. From the latter perspective, no one can have an objective point of view freed from power relations. In this sense, knowledge cannot be the instrument of liberation.

2. The myth of pedagogy

Despite coming from different traditions, what both authors

appear to have in common is that they understand pedagogy as something that goes beyond the classroom, a phenomenon reflecting and engendering a particular societal order. For Freire, what he calls the “banking concept of education” (Freire, 2000, p. 72) creates oppression “by mythicizing reality” (Freire, 2000, p. 83). In this model, the oppressed are not perceived as subjects capable of action but rather as passive and adaptable objects to be filled up with knowledge because, in the words of Freire (2000, p. 74), “the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated.” Thus, this pedagogy is what engenders and maintains one class as the oppressors and another as the oppressed by preventing the oppressed from being conscious of their capacity to act, to transform the reality which oppresses them (Freire, 2000, p. 73).

Similarly, there is a myth of pedagogy according to Rancière, the myth of the explicatory regime. In this regime, “the explicator is the sole judge of the point when the explication is itself explicated” (Rancière, 1991, p. 4). The schoolmaster alone decides what is worth learning, and when and how this should be learned (Rancière, 1991, pp. 5-6). For Rancière, it is the very fiction of inequality that maintains this order of things. In other words, it is because everyone believes to be superior to someone else that they accept others as superior to them. What is at the core of the creation and maintenance of this fictional narrative is explication. It is the teachers that need explanations in order to maintain their status, not the learners.

Summing up, both Freire and Rancière agree that a pedagogy implying an all-knowing teacher and an ignorant student is either oppressive or stultifying. They both disagree with this extreme polarization of the teacher-student relationship where the teacher is active and the student is a passive recipient of knowledge. Moreover, they agree that this unequal state has a fictional character. However, even if the two authors seem to agree on what a non-emancipatory relationship is, they propose two different methods to remedy it.

3. Mediation in the emancipatory relationship

Contrary to the oppressive or stultifying pedagogy, an emancipatory relationship is anchored in communication for both the authors. It requires activity from both sides: from the emancipated party as well as from the not yet emancipated one.

In order for the people to liberate themselves and become more human, Freire emphasizes the “pedagogical character of the revolution” (Freire, 2000, p. 67). What hinders the liberation of the oppressed has two sources: they are submerged

by their oppressive situation, and they have internalized the image of the oppressors within them (Freire, 2000, pp. 54, 62). Consequently, the oppressed have to gain consciousness of their oppressive situation in order to stop being submerged by it. Freire conceptualizes liberation as a “praxis”, as “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, 2000, p. 79). And the “correct method [of liberation] lies in dialogue” (Freire, 2000, p. 67). Indeed, Freire develops, in contradiction to the banking model of education, “problem-posing education”, where “[p]eople teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are ‘owned’ by the teacher” (Freire, 2000, pp. 79-80). In this conception of pedagogy, Freire claims that the antagonism between students and teachers must be overcome in order to make dialogue and co-investigation of the world possible (Freire, 2000, pp. 80, 88, 106). Gaining knowledge about one’s own situation is key to emancipation. It is through an analysis of the world done together that one can become aware of ways in which the world can be transformed. Hence, the liberation of the people must be done with the people and not for them. It is a matter of giving the people their agency back.

For Rancière, language is the primary artifact that mediates the pedagogical relationship. It is through the desire to communicate from both sides that emancipation can occur. And to that end, the object that the book constitutes stands as a very important tool in the method of equality, insofar that it is used to verify the equality of intelligence, asserting the superfluousness of explanations. As Rancière puts it: “The materiality of the book keeps two minds at an equal distance, whereas explication is the annihilation of one mind by another. [...] The thing, the book, prevents cheating by both the ignorant and the learned” (Rancière, 1991, p. 32). In other words, the book gives itself to the reader as a whole, without either establishing a hierarchy in knowledge nor explaining how the content of the book should be understood.

In sum, both authors place communication at the heart of the pedagogical relationship. However, while language allows for a co-investigation of the world according to Freire, Rancière’s appeal to its written form emphasizes the irreducible distance between human beings: language reflects a desire of togetherness, not its actuality. Thereby, what appears to be of particular importance here is whether autonomy is given a priori to the non-emancipated subject. For Freire, the people need a hand in order to become independent. They are submerged in an oppressive situation

and need someone in order to initiate their liberation (Freire, 2000, p. 169). The emphasis is put on dialogue, being together in the world. On the contrary, Rancière refuses inequality as a starting point and rejects all explanations as stultifying. The method of Jacotot relies on living under the presupposition of the equality of intelligences. Therefore, autonomy is given a priori to every human being.

4. Emancipation: a goal or an assumption?

For Freire (2000, p. 83), it is clear that liberation is the end game of the revolution. At that time, the contradiction between oppressors and oppressed would be overcome through continuous dialogue. Emancipation is the goal of the transformative action of human beings, for whom emancipation means being more fully human.

For Rancière (1991, p. 138), being emancipated means living under the presupposition of the equality of intelligence. The idea is not to prove equality among all human beings, but to see what can be done under the presupposition of equality. In an essay, Rancière shows why he means that the traditional view on emancipation is incompatible with equality. In his words:

The Marxist tradition and all the tradition of social science distinguishes two kinds of words: there are the words in which people express a situation as they feel it, and there are the words by which science accounts for a situation and for the ways in which those who are part of it can feel it and express their feelings. (Rancière, (2009, p. 117).

This critique could be addressed to Freire to some extent. In the words of Freire, the revolutionary leaders “may legitimately recognize themselves as having, due to their revolutionary consciousness, a level of revolutionary knowledge different from the level held by the people” (Freire, 2000, p. 134). And, even if Freire insists that the knowledge of the leaders should not be imposed upon the people, and that “no one can [...] unveil the world for another. [...] The adherence of the people is made possible by this unveiling of the world and of themselves, in authentic praxis” (Freire, 2000, p. 169), the role of the leaders is to make people conscious of the real “causes of reality” (Freire, 2000, p. 134). Therefore one could agree with Rancière that here, people are perceived as in need of an explanation of their own reality. And thus, one could argue that the relationship between emancipators and those not yet emancipated is based on inequality, and one could ask, as does Biesta (2010, p. 45): “when this inequality will actually disappear”.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, to the question: how can emancipation emerge from an asymmetrical relationship, two possible answers have been outlined. On the one hand, Freire proposes that the asymmetry is necessary to the relationship in order to initiate a conscientization of the not yet emancipated individuals. He emphasizes the role of collective human agency in order to construct a better society. Emancipation means being able to transform the world together. On the other hand, Rancière refutes this proposition and asserts that no emancipation can emerge from an asymmetrical relationship. On the contrary, it is by presupposing equality between the two parties that one individual can emancipate another. The difference between the two contributions could be understood in the light of their stance as authors. With his book, Freire is constructing a theory, a critical pedagogy that could be seen as a tool for teachers to make societal changes (Giroux, 2010, p. 717). In contrast, Rancière states that “his books are always forms of interventions in specific contexts. He never intended to produce a theory of politics, aesthetics [...] or anything else” (Rancière, 2009, p. 114). In other words, it may be significant that the substance of Rancière’s writing lies in the past. Rancière does not write about how to change the world, he writes about how the world changes.

SOURCES:

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