



OPPRESSOR AND OPPRESSED: LOGICAL DIALECTICAL CATEGORIES? TRIBUTE TO PAULO FREIRE¹

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One of the eccentricities of the historical profession is its tradition of explaining very complicated events by means of very simple formulas

David Gilmour

I have read in detail the exchange via email among many of you regarding the categories of oppressor and oppressed and its currency today. Let me say a few things in this discussion.

There is no question in my mind that oppression, exploitation, discrimination and domination are common features of human life, and that indeed we experience them, one way or another, almost daily. Likewise, it will be too simplistic to resort to Manichean distinctions that obscure more than clarify the issues. It is true that we hold notions like truth and falsehood, as antinomian terms. Yet, at the same time, it is very difficult to define exactly, and then to verify with complete accuracy, what is truthful and what isn't in virtually every narrative or every act. This is the basis that allows us to talk about representations, and this is the basic premise of reality as a social construction —hence the linguistic turn in contemporary philosophy.

One may conclude, however, that the only choice would be, again in what seems to be a Manichean way, to define truthfulness as merely having a level of verisimilitude, and to define falseness as something that could be proven conclusively that is not truthful. The problem with this strategy is that we may prove that something is false but we cannot really know if it is true. Consider the statement «James doesn't have any children». Anybody who knows that James has three children, having met them at a family party, could definitely reject the first statement as false. Yet, one may argue that we don't really know how many (other) children James may have. We don't really know if we have meet all his children, or how many children he has fathered in his lifetime, because we may not know everything about him (e.g. he might have had a child in his teens and walked away from the baby and the mother, and we simply weren't aware of that part of the story). So it is verisimilar to argue that James has 'at least three children'.

Hence, Karl Popper tried to deal with this complex epistemological problem arguing that we may be able to disconfirm what is not truthful as a scientific proposition, and uphold one that seems to be truthful (because at least it is verisimilar) as long as we don't disconfirm that one with another one which is more evidently verisimilar, or given the fact that we have found proof that the original,

¹ Original text from an Open Letter to my students in Education and Politics, fall 2006.

seemingly truthful proposition is not really so truthful, and hence we can provide firm arguments against it. Therefore, in the Poppertian argumentation there is a perpetual cycle of affirmation of a truthful proposition, challenge and invalidation, and starting again with a better proposition and so on.

While these issues of logic and philosophy are too complex to being summarized here, and I know that I am not doing justice to them, they remain pertinent to the question at hand.

Categories are at the service of analysis, but they should be reasonably logical, reasonably distinct (e.g. discrete, that is one category that is identical to itself and different from any other), non-contradictory among themselves (e.g. one may not really argue that one is an oppressor but also a semi-oppressor in the same domain of human experience) and reasonably probable (e.g. they can be confirmed and disconfirmed as well).

Since I started with the premise that the categories should not be Manichean, that is, either black or white, when one address Freire's choice of oppressor/oppressed, one may be tempted to think that they are Manichean and hence dismiss them as such. Of course here I don't want to spend time in attacking Manichaeism because with the exception (a big exception) of religious thought, very few people in science will defend that the only possible option to analyze reality is through Manichean categories. I should also point out that religious experience can be analyzed scientifically, and hence my book and many other books on the sociology of religion. Alas, actual religious beliefs are not scientific themselves, they are just beliefs. The fact that we all need beliefs, doesn't by itself justify the fact that some beliefs take over and guide social life or spiritual life without virtually any concern for evidence about what are the actual dynamics, roots, directions of social or spiritual life. One may argue, as Freud did, that some (maybe all) forms of religiosity are nothing but obsessive neuroses.

To argue that Freire's categories are Manichean could be fundamentally wrong because these categories lend themselves to a dialectical analysis, since they turn into each other in the analysis of the moral, ethical, and cognitive experience of individuals, collectivities, and cultures, etc., even if these individuals do not recognize this fact. Praxis is the one thing that exemplifies the truth of the proposition, and not simply the perception of the praxis, or the analysis of the praxis as different from the experience itself. Of course, next we encounter the dilemma of what is actual praxis, and how to analyze praxis.

Having said this, I come back to the basic premise of my analysis. We all experience, one way or another, a sense of injustice, a sense of maltreatment in the hands of someone else, even if subtle oppressions or plain, open and objective oppression (the battered women syndrome, the innocent man fired from his job falsely accused of stealing, the good driver given a ticket by a mistaken policeman). There is however a challenge of scale built into the analysis, from the single case (one unjust traffic ticket) to the collective case (police in certain cities writing as many tickets as they can as a way to cash in taxes from inexperienced visitors to that city), or the difference between a crime of hate and the Holocaust, or 'ethnic cleansing' and mass murder in Bosnia or Dunfor.

While the challenge of scale cannot undermine the gravity of the morally contingent action, massive contingent actions that harm a great number of people call for more urgent responses to prevent them from happening. This sense of ur-

gency cannot provide us relief from the moral explanations of immoral acts of the past—which has been one of the tenets of this analysis. I am really haunted by the images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki's deaths by the explosion of atomic weapons on the mornings of August 6, and August 9, 1945 respectively. The uranium device bomb used in Hiroshima, and the plutonium implosion type of bomb used in Nagasaki, immediately killed between 100,000 to 200,000 individuals, and many more suffered and died as a result of the radiation in the following decades.

How could a seemingly civilized country justify the mass murder of innocent civilians (who may not be readily identified as combatants) as a legitimate act of war? I still wonder whether it wouldn't have been equally effective to invite the leadership of Japan to witness a display of the destructive nature of these new weapons of mass destruction by detonating them on a deserted island in the Pacific, which could have put an end to the war immediately.

Again, we cannot claim the *quid pro quo* as an explanation absolving Al Qaida from using civilian planes on September 11, 2001 as bombs to attack the United States seeking to destroy the symbols of USA power (the market, in the figure of the Trade Center, the Armed Forces, in the figure of the Pentagon, and the target of the only plane that fell short of its destination, the political power exemplified in the figure of the White House).

What is more, we do not hesitate to clearly recognize certain acts as oppressive, exploitative, etc., by comparing them to other acts that, once their occurrence can be firmly demonstrated, could be condoned from an epistemological, cultural and moral perspective. For instance this guy who killed four members of a family in Florida few weeks ago to kidnap the two younger children to have sex with them is plainly evil. These are the instances that the Bible talks of 'an eye for an eye', addressing the level of infractions to conviviality that amount to actual evil behavior and are irredeemable from a Biblical perspective, hence the eye for an eye proposal as a way to achieve justice.

Having experienced forms of discrimination, oppression, exploitation, and domination, or at least having the conceptual understanding (which is usually very different but indeed related to the practical experience of a given form of the above-mentioned unethical practices) we understand that all of them show at least of lack of love and compassion, and the pursuit of individual interest (or self-perceived collective interest) at the peril of conviviality and essentially basic human decency. In terms of *coda*, the development since WWI of the notion of human rights, is a basic threshold, yet perfectible and hence ever evolving, that is, a set of minimum principles to uphold human dignity transcending national, ethnic, and cultural boundaries. Thus, human rights become a cosmopolitan international moral *coda*.

One may indeed speak of the notion of oppressor/oppressed as valid 'markers' to identify the actual normativity involved in the analysis. We should avoid being oppressors, we should avoid dominating other people in virtue of several attributes such as physical strength, manipulation of narratives, positions of authority, etc., and we should avoid of course to oppress, to exploit, to dominate or to discriminate people. These are the normative underpinnings of the Freirian proposition.

This normative proposition of course opens a second round of ethical discussion about what it is to dominate or oppress other people, for instance what is the fair salary that should be paid to a domestic worker in California, or what is it to argue that a State built by and on behalf of descendants of people who have been

severely persecuted historically or made subject to Holocaust, such as the Jewish State, has consistently and demonstrably acted unlawfully in international terms and certainly immorally in ethical terms with the Palestinian or Lebanese people.

The most recent episode in Lebanon shows how the State of Israel's Army virtually treated all Lebanese citizens and residents as enemy combatants, without discriminating between combatants and non-combatants factions. One could not however argue that since Hezbollah fired missiles against the populations of Northern Israel, there should be a *quid pro quo* treatment. Hezbollah is not a Nation-State, and therefore it is important to distinguish between Hezbollah combatants, Hezbollah sympathizers, and innocent bystanders. Most of the resolutions of these moral questions are answered, and should be answered, through a contractual model of exchanges or through domestic and international laws—which also represent a contractual model of sorts.

I don't want to argue about the fact that this question of oppression is indeed a choice and a very complex one, because in the pursuit of self-interest, people have tried to justify that some morally unacceptable practices or policies for me (e.g. slavery, segregation, apartheid) are appropriated from the perspective of capital accumulation. Or that are appropriated from the perspective of religious orientation (remember that in the end the epistemological bases of apartheid was that the Afrikaans people were chosen by God to lead South Africa, and the fact that they fought with the British and won was an indication of being the chosen people). Thus as long as the people who are made slaves are considered lesser human beings, it makes a lot of sense to have slaves to work in our plantations, so we can become richer, produce more affordable goods for society, help our children to be better persons, etc. It is worthwhile here to remember the discussion in medieval Spanish theology apropos of the use of indigenous people in the American colonies as servants and semi-slaves. The theological logical debate was about whether Indians had or didn't have souls and, as such, whether they were subject to God's grace or simply animals.

One of the advantages of civilized forms of conviviality is to settle disputes through rational forms of engagement and to feel the need to avoid those obscene and perverse forms of social relationships, which still exist today: of oppressing people by practicing neocolonial forms of slavery (e.g. plain slavery, selling children as beggars, trafficking women as prostitutes, etc.).

Yet, we all know that these atrocities have been part of human history, that they continue to be part of human history, and that the implications are not only immediate and individual to the people concerned, but will also alter in the long run the social and even moral fabric of societies involved even if one may choose to ignore that they happened.

Examples of this kind of historical amnesia abound; think for instance of the lack of interest in Japan to discuss Japanese soldiers using Korean women as sexual slaves in WWII, or the fact that in the United States the richest men managed to create foundations to cleanse their names and their sins in the process of their capital accumulation. For me, there is no question that Andrew Mellon and his operating partner in the steel industry, Henry Clay Frick, brutally repressed and had many workers killed in breaking the strike by steel workers at the Homestead Mill, yet even progressive scholars continue the pilgrimage to the Mellon Foundation for research money.

The analytical underpinning of the proposition in Freire, Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon, Erich Fromm, etc. is that the oppressor/oppressed dialectic 'marks' poten-

tial points of inflection which are deeply built into our unconscious. We can move back and forth between 'experiencing' and using these two categories, because they reflect both the strictures of social structures and the possibilities and limitations of social agency. Anybody who has gone through systematic psychoanalysis knows that each of us is a long way from understanding or controlling his or her desires, fears, entrenched childhood traumas, etc. Not surprisingly, Freire speaks of an Oppressor inside the Oppressed, or what I have termed the 'dual consciousness' in my own Freirian writings.

It is exactly the fluidity of these two categories, their adaptability, the normative and analytical nature of their strengths, and their psychoanalytical underpinnings that make them so durable. Freire was very intuitive, and that is a fundamental value in social analysis. His originality is predominately in his 'insights' and in the synthesis that provides us a template to guide our analysis. This partially explains why a book like *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was and continues to be so important today.

Freire was also an avid reader of the classics and a great observer, with tremendous imaginative persistence and a poetic sense of his own reality. These factors help to explain his ability to harness his intelligence and intuition to delve into one of the most difficult and contested areas of social science: what constitutes an authoritarian personality (or its practical extension, banking education), and to provide us with categories of analysis, an epistemology of curiosity and a spiritual goad to struggle. All of these have lasted long enough to serve as very useful starting points and guides to analysis.