

**IN  
OUR  
SYSTEM,  
COERCION IS  
ACCEPTED.**

**WHY?**

*“Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is ‘in power’ we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with... disappears, ‘his power’ also vanishes.”*

– Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (1970)

*“Nearly every social movement begins in the absence of might, and that’s one view of history: all these great social changes begin with people who have little opportunity... power exists in the smallest human relations.”*

– Dacher Keltner, *The Power Paradox* (2017)

Perhaps you too are mad. [pissed off? fed up? hōhā as hell?] Frustrated with the way the world is organized, our hierarchical system and the concentration of power it permits, casting hurt and division among us. Need I list the ills? Exploitation, indifference, discrimination and profiteering, the destruction that underlies unjust accumulation, the violence<sup>1</sup> (and silence)<sup>2</sup> that protects its gains. In our fighting to get near the top – in the very race that establishes the top as a goal – we are distracted, drawn into conflict that misdirects our pain, preserving the power that causes it.

There are no revelations here. The issues are systemic, a collectively known, lived-with failing, called out again and again. But who is listening? Not those in power.<sup>3</sup> Why? The reason is *their power*: “In order to have the continued opportunity to express their ‘generosity’, the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this ‘generosity’”<sup>4</sup> – and with it, the denial of our agency. How else could they claim to speak (but not listen)?

For this, I am angry. [still / the rages burns<sup>5</sup>] Angry at an order that I didn’t (we didn’t) consent to, a political system that claims neutrality at odds with its practice. What do I mean by this? That “the assumption of a view from Nowhere is the projection of local values as neutrally universal ones”.<sup>6</sup> Something/someone is always obscured; other ways wait to be found (again).<sup>7</sup>

This ‘neutrality’ is the work of empire. Fuelled by felt superiority, it is an arrogance that denies the diversity of the world, enforcing a single mode of being as valid – that held by those in power.<sup>8</sup> In the process, we witness (and have witnessed) attempts at erasure both violent and clumsy, resisted by all who hold their own ways as true. The struggle knows many names, but is united in this: an insistence on self-determination, the right to make one’s own (collective) decisions.

<sup>1</sup> “Analysis of existential situations of oppression reveals that their inception lay in an act of violence—initiated by those with power. This violence, as a process, is perpetuated from generation to generation of oppressors, who become its heirs and are shaped in its climate.” Paulo Freire *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Continuum, New York, 1970) 58.

<sup>2</sup> “The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them.” Edward Said *Culture and Imperialism* (Knopf, New York, 1993), xiii.

<sup>3</sup> In quick rebuttal to red: Labour signing the TPP. I evoke the (out of context) tweet/poetry of Hera Lindsay Bird: “This government announcement feels like one of those zen koans where the master pushes his student into a bush, for enlightenment reasons”. [oh, did u think / you were safe?]

<sup>4</sup> Freire, 44.

<sup>5</sup> “how could you become new, if you had not first become ashes?” Friedrich Nietzsche *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Professor David Theo Goldberg, quoted in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 24. Readers, please note, your awareness of multiple (and infinite) ways of being is assumed; as is the status of all knowledge(s) as partial and fragmentary. [gaps left / that we might grow]

<sup>7</sup> “after the critical dismantling, there has to be something more: a restoration of meaning, a process which cannot avoid being interpretative and imaginative... an original recovery of what was previously self-evident.” Paul Carter *The Road to Botany Bay* (Faber and Faber, Sydney, 1987) 349-351.

<sup>8</sup> “‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it.” Michel Foucault “Truth and Power” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (Pantheon Books, New York, 1980) 133.

Our first task is one of framing. Despite their myriad differences (and making no attempt to conflate them), all oppressions share the same root. In the words of revolutionary educator Paulo Freire: “the imposition of one individual’s choice upon another”.<sup>9</sup>

What does this mean? In Freire’s take, it is choice that makes us human:<sup>10</sup> our “ontological vocation... is to be a subject who acts upon and transforms [the] world, and in doing so moves towards ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life, individually and collectively.”<sup>11</sup> The struggle, then, is concerned with freedom – not that of Ayn Rand (to ignore or oppress), but one limited by what it asks for itself: an application of the Golden Rule.<sup>12</sup> Only that which makes space for agency is sufficient. There is no struggle that does not contain and uplift all others – to be otherwise is to sit outside the word, to continue the very oppression you claim to resist. So it is that Freire reveals “the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well.”<sup>13</sup>

Why does this fall to the oppressed (and those who would stand with them)? Because anything less, any “false generosity”, only continues their oppression. In seeking to execute the transformation for another, their voice is silenced, their agency denied. It is only the oppressed who can free themselves, and, in doing so – in extending the same freedom they would seek to others – they also free their oppressor. Thus framed, the struggle is an act of love “opposing the lovelessness which lies at the heart of the oppressors’ violence.”<sup>14</sup>

However, in this we should note the temptation to silence, to *re-act* – for the list of hurts is long. As Freire explains: “almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors... their perception of themselves as opposites of the oppressor does not yet signify engagement in a struggle to overcome the contradiction; the one pole aspires not to liberation, but to identification with its opposite pole.”<sup>15</sup>

Instead, true liberation “would require them to eject this image [of dominating those who had dominated] and replace it with autonomy and responsibility.”<sup>16</sup> In their struggle towards agency, the oppressed remove their oppressors’ power to dominate and supress, not only emancipating themselves but also restoring to the oppressors “the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression.”<sup>17</sup>

How might such transformation be effected? The task is, in essence, personal: “while no one liberates [them]self by [their] own efforts alone, neither are [they] liberated by others”.<sup>18</sup> As the process of being/becoming more fully human, liberation requires a full acknowledgement of agency,<sup>19</sup> hence: “The correct method lies in dialogue.”<sup>20</sup>

It is for this reason that Freire focuses on pedagogy, the process of learning necessary to come to a critical awareness of the world. Once established, this criticality empowers its holders to engage in praxis (lived theory): repeated cycles of reflection and action, eroding the systems that oppress.

However, here too risks exist. For the pedagogy – this process of transformation – to be effective, any who would ‘teach’ must also ‘learn’.<sup>21</sup> It is the *dialogue* that matters, a relationship that’s never still. The students must come to knowledge themselves, unveiling the world of oppression and, in doing so, revealing it as constructed, fragile, and limiting – and therefore *capable of change*: “Problem-posing education affirms [people] as beings in the process of becoming – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality.”<sup>22</sup>

What then, of our (constructed) reality? Of our suffering climate and peoples, the denial, discrimination and hurt that centralized power produces?

The centre cannot hold – *because it has never held*.<sup>23</sup> To the degree ‘we’ are Western, our received narratives (of history/progress/value) reflect a certain, limited outlook, the same arrogant, power-preserving worldview that gives us our hierarchical, centralized system. Is the world mere object, fixed and awaiting domination? Is inequality necessary? How else might we start to live?

Conventional wisdom tells, in what will come to be revealed as a typically Biblical narrative, of egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies giving way to those organized around farming and its accumulation, leading to our distinctly flawed hierarchical system and all the inequality and oppression it casts.<sup>24</sup> And so it is that projections of a “Fall” from Eden give rise to the resignation of modern humans as doomed and thus, somehow, deserving of oppression.<sup>25</sup> Must we be coerced?

<sup>[9]</sup> An act is oppressive only when it prevents people from being “more fully human”, i.e. when it dehumanizes, objectifies, removes a person’s/peoples’ agency, replacing their consciousness with that of the oppressors. Freire, 47.

<sup>[10]</sup> Readers please note, it’s not just individual autonomy that matters, but the network within which it takes place, our context and the reflectiveness that casts us as engaged, relational beings, defined by our power to choose [to consent].

<sup>[11]</sup> This is crucially content-neutral; each group must come to their own decisions. Richard Shaull, from the forward to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 32.

<sup>[12]</sup> “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” (See also: the principle of reciprocity; countless ethical traditions). In acknowledgement of agency, the inquiry shifts from one of object-possession to subject-relation – a fluid, ongoing task, defined by the space between: dialogue between (equal) autonomous agents.

<sup>[13]</sup> In no way does this absolve the oppressors; many can (and do) come to side with the oppressed. Freire, 44.

<sup>[14]</sup> Ibid, 45. See also François Juilien (Purple Magazine, summer/spring 2015, issue 23): “The great theme of intimacy is meeting... The gap sets in tension what has separated, and that tension renders operative the in-between, where commonality arises.”

<sup>[15]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[16]</sup> Ibid, 47, 56. In dehumanizing others, the oppressors are themselves dehumanized. [as above / so below] See also Gael Garcia Marquez (“The Solitude of Latin America” 1982): “to oppression, plundering and abandonment, we respond with life.”

<sup>[17]</sup> Ibid, 56-57. That the oppressors will themselves feel oppressed by this change means little: “An act is oppressive only when it prevents people from being more fully human.”

<sup>[18]</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>[19]</sup> See, for example, Eric Fromm *The Heart of Man* (1966) [with apologies for the gendered pronoun] 52-53: “Such freedom requires that the individual be active and responsible, not a slave or a well-fed cog in the machine... It is not enough that [humans] are not slaves; if social conditions further the existence of automatons, the result will not be love of life, but love of death.”

<sup>[20]</sup> Freire, 66.

<sup>[21]</sup> For those who side with the oppressed, “as they cease to be exploiters or indifferent spectators or simply the heirs of exploitation and move to the side of the exploited, they almost always bring with them the marks of their origin: their prejudices and their deformations, which include a lack of confidence in the people’s ability to think, to want, and to know.” Ibid, 60.

<sup>[22]</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>[23]</sup> See, for example, Timothy Morton “Stuff Can Happen” (Miracle Marathons, 8 October 2016, Serpentine Galleries): “stillness isn’t static... Time and space are nothing other than the way a thing slips and slides around itself, its appearance curling around its essence, like a snake swallowing its own tail... The slip-y, slide-y quality of things, like liquid merangues, provides so much wiggle room in which different stuff can happen, new stuff can happen.”

<sup>[24]</sup> “How to change the course of human history (at least, the part that’s already happened)” David Graeber, David Wengrow (Eurozine, 2 March 2018).

<sup>[25]</sup> See for example, John 15: 18-19 “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world... the world hates you.” [Fucking ga-mmon]

As anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow explain, a closer analysis of prehistory suggests otherwise – revealing a “shifting back and forth between alternative social arrangements, permitting the rise of authoritarian structures during certain times of the year, on the proviso they could not last; on the understanding that no particular social order was ever fixed or immutable.”<sup>26</sup>

At this point, it should be noted that while a process of revolutionary pedagogy *requires autonomy* – in that it is only revolutionary where it returns / makes space for agency (and thus is conducive to an expansive humanity) – such process doesn’t exclude a later ceding of autonomy, *providing that it is consented*. That is, once a subject has the tools necessary for critical reflection/action upon the world, and so can be said to be ‘aware’, it is fully within their right to consent to or delegate certain functions to others.<sup>27</sup> As Graeber and Wengrow write: “There is no reason to believe that small scale groups are especially likely to be egalitarian, or that large ones must necessarily have kings, presidents, or bureaucracies. These are just prejudices stated as facts.”<sup>28</sup>

When looking at alternative structures, it is perhaps useful to illuminate the difference between inequality in its accepted form (i.e. “those for whom one can naturally be a ‘fan.’”)<sup>29</sup> and inequality as it jars, where the advantages held are not warranted by effort, talent and risk, but the product of gaming the system (e.g. rent seekers, those who insist on systemic privilege, Mike Hosking, Max Key etc).<sup>30</sup> Consider too the difference between ‘authority’ in its earned, risk-carrying sense – that which you respect by virtue of the experience/knowledge there carried – and that formally imposed by technocrats, in absence of consent: repugnant for all it does to deny your humanity/agency.

The key difference, explained at length by Nassim Nicholas Taleb, is that those we accept have skin in the game – they don’t just get benefits from their risk (\*cough\* bankers), but wear the losses too. It should also be noted that this isn’t just a question of respect; lived accountability actively improves the strength of the overall system, making it more resilient and responsive to change. “Systems don’t learn because people learn individually – that’s the myth of modernity. Systems learn at the collective level by the mechanism of selection: by eliminating those elements that reduce the fitness of the whole, provided these have skin in the game.”<sup>31</sup>

What does this mean for revolution? The combination of accountability and autonomy provide us with a bigger picture: decentralization of power, so that actions are both local and visible, and so that people get more say in the shape of their lives. Call it consent-based politics, if you like.<sup>32</sup>

As Graeber and Wengrow end, “Egalitarian cities, even regional confederacies, are historically quite commonplace. Egalitarian families and households are not. Once the historical verdict is in, we will see that the most painful loss of human freedoms began at the small scale – the level of gender relations, age groups, and domestic servitude – the kind of relationships that contain at once the greatest intimacy and the deepest forms of structural violence. If we really want to understand how it first became acceptable for some to turn wealth into power, and for others to end up being told their needs and lives don’t count, it is here that we should look. Here too, we predict, is where the most difficult work of creating a free society will have to take place.”<sup>33</sup>

Once again, we return to the personal, not cast in isolation, but that which is shared, the *inter-personal*, and the ways in which we make space for autonomy there. So it is that our love must begin.<sup>34</sup>

In the pedagogy of dialogue – the practice of relationality, what Freire calls “reflective participation” – the oppressed come to an increased awareness and criticality of their place, catalyzing into action and reasserting their agency in the world: “For apart from the inquiry; apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.”<sup>35</sup>

So it is that our politics returns to its roots, the interpersonal base from which we might, by way of consent and our own volition, build structures to elevate and express our rich diversity – not oppressing and silencing in service of a fixed, “winner takes all” worldview, but one that engages an expansive fluidity, embedding us all in infinite play.

<sup>[26]</sup> Graeber and Wengrow, supra. For example: “Even in Cortés’ day, Central Mexico was still home to cities like Tlaxcala, run by an elected council whose members were periodically whipped by their constituents to remind them who was ultimately in charge.”

<sup>[27]</sup> This is the essence of anarchy properly defined. Not ‘chaos’, an absence of control, but anarchy in its (chosen) human sense: where our duty of care isn’t to some abstract, coercive entity, but to each other, the lives, both human and non-human, that make up the space we share.

<sup>[28]</sup> Graeber and Wengrow, supra. Note that this mirrors Graeber’s earlier work in *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Melville House, London, 2011), in which debt jubilees (the forgiving of debt) are revealed as historically commonplace, a fluidity at odds with current economic policy. [Sensing a trend?]

<sup>[29]</sup> “You may like to imitate them, you may aspire to be like them; but you don’t resent them”. Nassim Nicholas Taleb “Inequality and Skin in the Game” (Medium, 28 December 2016).

<sup>[30]</sup> “There may be something dissonant in the spectacle of a rich slave.” Taleb, ibid.

<sup>[31]</sup> See also Nassim Nicholas Taleb “Skin in the Game” (Medium, 28 December 2016).

<sup>[32]</sup> That our current system is struggling needs little elaboration. [climatechangechild-povertyincarcerationrattesystemicracism-biodiversitylossfracturedcommunitie-swealthinequalitysexualviolencesuicidedomesticabusewhitecollarcrimetheeffectsof-pcrueltygangwarfarebullyingsexismmental-illnessabuseofelderslossoffmeaninglossof-purposelossofplaceetcetcetc “draws breath\*] Nassim Nicholas Taleb “What do I mean by Skin in the Game? My own version” (Medium, 6 March 2018).

<sup>[33]</sup> At this point, the overlap with claims for tino rangatiratanga should be painfully obvious, as should the case for economic reform. [Worker-owned co-ops, anyone?] Also worth noting are parallels with food and energy sovereignty – for agency isn’t limited to the human; our task is a relational, embedded mode with(in) the broader world. For an example of formal steps being taken towards this, see Joris Leverink “Murray Bookchin and the Kurdish resistance” (Roar Magazine, August 9 2015).

<sup>[34]</sup> Graeber and Wengrow, supra. In the preface to Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972), Foucault warns not just of historical fascism, “but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behaviour, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us.” See also Dacher Keltner *The Power Paradox* (Penguin, London, 2017).

<sup>[35]</sup> See, for example, Italo Calvino *Invisible Cities* (Guilio Einaudi, Italy, 1972): “The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.”

<sup>[36]</sup> Freire, 72.

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*consent-based politics, please*