# Emancipatory Resistance & Radicalization: Indispensable to The Formation of Democratic Citizens

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*What is essential is that [the formation of democratic citizens]…maintain alive the flame of resistance that sharpens their curiosity and stimulates their capacity to risk…*

**—Paulo Freire (1998)**

In his introduction to *Pedagogy of Freedom,* Stanley Aronowitz (1989) writes that "Freire holds that a humanized society requires cultural freedom, the ability of the individual to choose values and rules of conduct that violate conventional social norms, and. In political and civil society, requires the full participation of *all* of its inhabitants in every aspect of public life (p. 19). Paulo Freire's dialogical approach sought to actively challenge debilitating dualisms and untenable binaries that negate, polarize, and limit life choices within an ostensibly democratic society. Moreover, he recognized that the impact of the authoritarian state on its citizens and the invisible power of its alienating domestication upon their lives—a domestication that aimed to incapacitate the power of democratic citizenship and conserve the social and material inequalities of the capitalist state.

However, Freire also recognized that to violate conventional social norms requires by necessity that resistance and dissent exist as part of a praxis of citizenship within any democratic society. Hence, resistance in the classroom and community merits critical engagement, in that it plays an important role the process of problematization and social struggle. In fact, rather than adversarial or troublesome to the critical construction of knowledge and democratic formation of citizenship, resistance, as an indispensable quality, serves as a meaningful antecedent to the evolution of critical consciousness.

## Resistance and Political Consciousness

In engaging with the pedagogical indispensability of resistance, Freire (1983)


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argued that no problem or act of resistance could ever be resolved by simply ignoring, dismissing, or trying to eliminate the resistance or opposition, without falling into authoritarianism. Instead, what teachers must learn to do is to cultivate and nurture dialogue in ways that create new fields of possibility large enough to welcome the tensions generated by resistance. This enhances the field from which students can launch their energies into emancipatory directions of democratic inquiry, through critique and thoughtful engagement. It is this pedagogical response to resistance that most supports the communal evolution of political consciousness, in that transformation is made possible through a collective democratic process of participation, voice, solidarity, and action that forges new possibilities.

Accordingly, an important aim of Freire's emancipatory pedagogy is to override preconditioned or hegemonic patterns in how we name the world, by providing a demythologizing context in which teachers and students can consider the political consequences of particular ways of thinking and their consequences. In the process, Freire asked us to move away from fixed or prescribed notions of life and toward a relational and contextual understanding of knowledge, history, and community. This idea is also relevant to Freire's notion of a critical (Freire & Macedo 1987), informed by his teaching of literacy as a decolonizing practice, which for him was "above all, a social and political commitment (Freire 1993, 114). In the process of *reading of the word and the world*, Freire (2002) also sought to explore "the relationship prevailing between political lucidity…and the various levels of engagement in the process of mobilization and organization for struggle—for the defense of rights, for laying claim to justice" (40). Hence, the capacity to read the word and the world is fundamentally linked to a larger political struggle against hegemony, which entails a critical literacy that prepares students toward a more just life.

A problem-posing pedagogy of resistance, with Freire's concept of critical literacy as its compass, is meant to support students in becoming consciously aware of their context and their conditions of life; whereby they become more consciously aware of their options and their emancipatory right to both resist and challenge oppression, as empowered democratic subjects of their own destinies. It is at that point that Freire considered students to become politicized, in that they gained a sense of critical awareness about how power relations impact them and their communities. To become politicized then implies entering into an evolutionary process of consciousness, by which individuals and social movements become critically aware that their civic participation in the historical process is directly linked to their capacities to denounce injustice and announce a more just world.


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Resistance, in this instance, is firmly anchored to a dialectical process, by which students and communities struggle to contend with the consequences of particular values, policies, and practices that threaten their right to be. Hence, resistance is often the precursor to becoming more critically conscious and, as such, must also be linked to the emancipatory right to participate in individual and collective choice.

Freire's pedagogy of love encompasses conditions of resistance that support teachers, students, and communities to enter more fully into an intentionally lived historical process of their own making. Within a pedagogy that supports the development of critical consciousness are also the underlying purposes of empowerment and self-determination, which enable students to reflect on their lives and the world around them. Freire (1983) believed that as teachers and students grow in the power of reflection and social agency, we also develop "an increased capacity for choice" (16). This increased capacity for choice is a fundamental prerequisite, as oppressed communities move to liberate ourselves from old prescribed choices that have been handed down to us by the powerful. It is, moreover, through the deepening of consciousness that we recuperate the possibilities for choice.

Freire also made a distinction between *integration* and *adaptation* in the formation of critical consciousness. This conceptual explanation is significant in that it hints to Freire's dislike for the term "marginalization," in that he did not believe that any of us, whether oppressed or not, could sit at the margins or outside the structures of power. Instead, he insisted that a significant aim of liberation had to be the full participation of the oppressed in the decision-making of communities and societies in which we reside. I offer this explanation in that the term "integration" has lost its progressive significance in places like the United States, where the term became more analogous to what Freire called adaptation (or in some circles co-optation). More specifically, Freire (1983) explains these terms with respect to the critical capacity to make choices and to act in the interest of transformation.

*Integration* with one's context, as distinguished from *adaptation*, is a distinctively human activity. Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality *plus* the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality. To the extent that man loses his ability to make choices and is subjected to the choices of others, to the extent that his decisions are no longer his own because they result from external prescriptions, he is no longer integrated. Rather, he is adapted. He has "adjusted" (p. 4)


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It is useful to note here that Freire (1983) elsewhere wrote: “to the extent that a person acts more on the basis of emotionality than reason, his behavior occurs adaptively and cannot result in commitment, for committed behavior has its roots in critical consciousness and capacity for genuine choice” (20). However, a similar epistemological concern can be raised to the extent that a person acts far more exclusively or exaggeratedly from the standpoints of pure reason, physicality, or even spirituality, without an integral understanding of the relationship of these human faculties to the formation of meaning and cultural worldviews. Moreover, depending on the cultural and historical milieu from which a basis for knowledge emerges and a particular focus of study evolves, the expression of these human faculties can also echo the cultural needs of students, within a pedagogical context, where the process of conscientization is considered paramount to teaching and learning.

## Pedagogy of Resistance

Within a Freirian approach to education, resistance then is not considered a problem to be defeated. Instead, a critical understanding of resistance is an essential component to the democratic process by which new knowledge emerges and political formation in the interest of justice evolves. For this reason, Freire (1983) considered the spirit of resistance “a symptom of advancement, an introduction to a more complete humanity [and an] attitude of rebellion as one of the most promising aspects of our political life” (36). However, he did not believe that genuine democratic life could be won by resistance or rebellion alone, in that the struggle for our liberation could not exist predominantly as dissent, but rather had to also move toward a constructive process of critical intervention and remaking of concrete situations. Dialogue, therefore, was for Freire the collective praxis by which we transform the power and promise of resistance into transformative action. So, rather than to shut down resistance by authoritarian means of control or manipulation, Freire urged us to appreciate that without resistance, transformative knowledge is impossible. This is to say, a pedagogy of resistance holds the key for unveiling, in more substantive ways, the asymmetrical relations of power within schools and society and the impact of oppressive consequences. In essence, resistance can be understood as a significant dialogical juncture, where limit situations can be more clearly identified and unveiled.

This pedagogical process, of course, can create enormous dissonance, ambiguity, and uncertainty, given that it signals the necessity for significant paradigmatic


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shifts away from values, structures, and traditions informed by fundamental human inequalities and the epistemological negation of indigenous of knowing (Paraskeva, 2011). The extent to which teachers can express a sense of faith, compassion, and love for their students as worthy and knowing human beings, as well as create the conditions for a pedagogical process of empowerment, will ultimately determine how students move through their resistance when asked to interrogate unjust systems of power and privilege that may implicate their own perspectives and past practices. This requires teachers be prepared to delve into the painful dimensions of personal and social oppression and to invite students to enter with them into more just ways of being, thinking, and acting. This pedagogical phenomenon of resistance may cause both teachers and students to undergo continual experiences of doubt and anxiety, as they come to learn from one another about that which must be interrogated in the moment. Moreover, it is important that teachers remain open minded and supple in our pedagogical approaches, in that our ideas too can too easily become reified and fixed, losing openness and flexibility in the hardening of our experience, given the frustrations and impatience we often undergo within mainstream educational settings.

It is worth noting here that the dialogical approach of Freire's pedagogy is meant to be as empowering a process for teachers as it is for students, in that it is also meant to prevent teachers from becoming fossilized in our ideas. This is best achieved when we recognize that teaching is as much a process of learning from our students, as it is a process of students learning from teachers. Thus, this radical suppleness is best cultivated, as we see in Freire's life, when we aspire persistently to learn with our students, express love and faith in their interactions, and yet, are not afraid to express that "fire in the belly" that is fueled by an uncompromising love for freedom, life, and the world. This process, however, can only proceed effectively, when radical educators have developed sufficient patience, confidence, faith, knowledge, and commitment to a humanizing vision of education. This moves us beyond absolute, reified, and fixed formulas of teaching and learning, toward a dialectical understanding and integral approach, which supports pedagogical practices that bring students and the world into constant relationship, in the interest of democratic life.

By embracing the indispensability of resistance, we come to recognize its relationship to how teachers and students participate either to open the field of rationality or to close it, depending upon ideological allegiances, cultural values, class privilege, or lived histories. An emancipatory response to resistance, through


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openness and acceptance, expands the field of rationality, in ways that invite students to look more critically at their own attitudes, how these came to be, the consequences of their actions, and new ways in which they might respond to the world, in both theory and practice. This demands a pedagogical process that shifts the focus away from trying to eliminate oppositionalities or resistance to ways that engage student resistance in meaningful ways and encourages greater inclusiveness and collaboration. Through this dialogical process, resistance to and problematization of oppression unfold, in ways that honor the dignity of our humanity and bring us into new relationships with one another. It is precisely within the context of a new critical understanding of the world, of others, and of the self that the process of emancipatory radicalization can evolve.

## Emancipatory Radicalization

Despite his overarching emphasis on the role of social relationships in the formation of critical consciousness, Freire recognized that each individual must also find within themselves and in communion with others that decisive point in their lived historical process that signals their radicalization as an imperative of emancipatory life. This to say, that political consciousness and a commitment to action cannot be transferred, in a banking mode, to students or communities, no matter how oppressed. Freire (1970) addressed this point in speaking to the question of liberation as a critical form of praxis.

> Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it. Those truly committed to the cause of liberation can accept neither the mechanistic concept of consciousness as an empty vessel to be filled, nor the use of banking methods of domination (propaganda, slogans—deposits) in the name of liberation. Those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world (79).

As such, the development of critical awareness requires a dialogical process whereby individuals, through their personal reflection, dialogue, solidarity, and actions over time, awaken to and evolve greater faith in their own social agency and capacity for integral formation.

To better comprehend the power and possibilities of emancipatory consciousness


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requires that we retain in place the dialectical qualities that underpin this process. More specifically, we radicalize and are radicalized, through relationships labor and struggle with one another. This, however, does not collapse the individual into the communal or the communal into the individual, in that each has a field of sovereignty and autonomy that is brought to bear, in the forging of critical consciousness. Rather than cogs in the great wheel of revolution or the historical process of evolution, we are, in fact, creators and co-creators of life—whether we participate passively through inaction and submission or bring forth critical impulses for liberation to bear upon the social and material structures that impact our existence.

An ever-present question, however, in the process of radicalization is how we make the radical option. Freire (1983) believed that the ethical man or woman "who makes a radical option" does not deny another the right to choose nor imposes that choice upon another. However, radicals do have "the duty, imposed by love, to react against the violence…in a situation in which the excessive power of a few leads to the dehumanization of all" (10-11). Unfortunately, it is precisely this human potential to know the world critically and to denounce injustice that is most corrupted by the lovelessness of oppression and the hostility of authoritarianism—hostility that disables the individual and collective participation and empowerment of those deemed renegades, within the existing regime.

Freire understood that if democratic life must encompass a journey or road toward an unknown future, then great courage, discipline, and commitment is required to denounce injustice and to remain ever present in the larger struggle for individual and social transformation. Rather than a perspective that objectifies the outcome of democratic struggle as some definitive endpoint or transcendent utopia, Freire understood, through his own life, that the struggle for liberation is an on-going revolutionary and human evolutionary process, driven by a dialogical praxis, where on-going reflection, voice, participation, action, and solidarity are key ingredients to forging culturally democratic possibilities.

Moreover, Freire considered this dialogical relationship essential to the process of radicalization and the formation of political clarity, in that critical dialogue provides a collective space in which our ambiguities and contradiction can be expressed, critiqued, and transformed, through a spirit of solidarity. As this process of radicalization implies, it requires a profound commitment to self-vigilance, particularly where ideological contradictions and historical privileges of liberal educators must be exposed; those "who proselytize about empowering minorities


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while refusing to divest from their class-and-whiteness privilege—a privilege that is often left unexamined and unproblematized and that is often accepted as divine right" (Macedo, 1989, p. xxx).

The radicalization of consciousness and sustained political struggle for democracy requires empowered citizens who, through their commitment, political clarity, and love for the world, are capable of containing their arrant impulses and desires associated with unjust privilege and the internalization of oppression, if we are to move away from self-destructive behaviors or deadening forms of resistance that betray our yearning for freedom. As such, Freire believed that both reason and human compassion must inform an emancipatory educational process; but this speaks to a reason and compassion born from an integral and coherent engagement with the world, rather than prescribed forms of sentimentalism. As such, students must find opportunities to better comprehend the emotional life and to practice engaging with one another in organic and creative ways, so not to become mired in unnecessary conflict and contradiction. With this in mind, Freire counseled radical educators to practice parsimony in our communication, particularly when mean-spirited opposition threatens to derail transformation possibilities.

Nevertheless, Freire's unrelenting focus on education as a political terrain of struggle was undoubtedly fueled by his indignation over oppressive structures and exclusionary conditions enacted through hegemonic belief systems, which systematically warp how oppressed populations view our lives and surrounding conditions. Hence, any pedagogy in the interest of liberation must be geared fundamentally toward the problematization of our domestication and the transformation of the myths that conserve the oppressed-oppressor contradiction. Recognizing the difficulty of such an effort, Freire (1970) liken it to childbirth; but implicitly linked it to the process of radicalization through his reference to the emergence of a *new being*.

Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one. The man or woman who emerges is a new person, viable only as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is superseded by the humanization of all people. Or to put it another way, the solution of this contradiction is born of our collective labor which brings into the world this new being: no longer oppressor no longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom (p. 49).


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Without a consciousness of radicalization to support us, as educators who continuously must contend with repressive forces of schooling, it is impossible to support the imagination, creativity and dreams of our students. In order to support the emancipatory dreams of others, we must believe in the possibility of our own dreams and cultivate a deeply embodied sense of how to move with an evolving consciousness of freedom through our lives. Freire (1983) also believed, drawing on the words of Karl Mannheim, that central to the process of radicalization is the need to develop “a frame of mind which can bear the burden of skepticism and which does not panic when many of the thought habits are doomed to vanish” (p. 33). What cannot be lost here is that social struggle in the midst of oppression requires that we be able to stand on our own two feet, if necessary.

Hence, the process of radicalization and, thus, critical education, must contend with both individual and social processes of transformation and the reinvention of democratic possibilities. In that the individual and society must be understood as dialectically indivisible in Freire’s conceptualization of emancipatory life. Moreover, this dialectical relationship of human beings *and* the world is fully in concert with Freire’s pedagogical vision of consciousness, as a powerful mediating political force in the classroom and out in the world.

## Ethical Principles of Struggle

From a Freirian perspective, emancipatory processes of resistance and radicalization must be founded upon ethical principles of struggle that support social transformation. Central among these principles are humility, faith, and hope, Humility, as an indispensable ethical principle of Freire’s pedagogy of love, is then also indispensable to the process of emancipatory resistance and radicalization. Freire (1983) linked this quality to the idea that radicalized individuals are Subjects and democratic citizens of the world to the degree that we are able to perceive with humility both historical and personal contradictions in an increasingly critical fashion. As such, we can never consider ourselves “the proprietors of history” but rather in a necessary communion with others “to participate creatively in the process by discerning transformations in order to aid and accelerate them” (12). By so doing, as Freire illustrated repeatedly, we can become living examples of ethical beings, by engaging our conflicts and contradictions in ways that allow us to grow in awareness and apply our critical consciousness toward collective action, for the betterment of the world.

Radical faith in self and others is another important aspect of Freire’s pedagogy,


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which impacts the processes of resistance and radicalization, in that such faith coupled with a deep abiding love for life, comprises also a significant precursor to the enactment of radical hope, in our teaching and living. This sense of radical faith is closely tied to our pedagogical and political capacities to believe in those social and material conditions of liberation that we are yet unable to see in the material realm. In essence, it is the political force generated through our collective efforts that provides us the impetus to fight for social justice in schools and society. It is this ethical humility, built through radical faith, which emerges through our critical belief in the radical possibilities of our collective reinvention.

Moreover, without a deep faith in what we can accomplish collectively, it is difficult to live with a critical sense of hope in the future. This understanding of radical hope, which must be anchored in concrete human possibilities, is a cornerstone of Freire's philosophy and way of life. And it is this critical ethics of hope and underlying faith in life that offers us an avenue by which we can live, dialectically, in what exists now *and* what might exist in the future to come simultaneously, through our consistent love, commitment, and labor. For Freire, an ethics of radical hope develops in conjunction with the formation of critical consciousness and our radicalization, as we push against debilitating ideologies and structures that attempt to squelch our emancipatory dreams. With each transformative moment in the classroom or out in the world, our liberatory pedagogical resolve becomes stronger, as our commitment to love deepens and our political grace matures, in the process of our on-going collective praxis, as radically ethical educators, activists, and community leaders for social justice.

Such an ethical foundation for resistance and emancipatory radicalization predisposes us to reevaluate constantly our lives, attitudes, behaviors, actions, decisions, and relationships in the world. It is through this dynamic process of change that conscientizaçao develops and evolves, as we come to engage courageously the social and material forces of oppression that impact our lives, intervening with greater political confidence and strength. By confronting together the risks inherent in our resistance and radicalization, we stop surrendering our lives, our children, and our communities to the interests of capital and the whims of the ruling class. Inseparable here is the political commitment and responsibility required to fight for liberation, so that our destinies rest squarely in our own hands—both as individuals and collective social beings committed to a more just world.


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## Power to Denounce and Announce

Overall, Freire (1985, 1995, 1998b) understood that although the power to denounce and announce is born of collective struggle, it also is the outcome of politically coherent and integral human beings, who must each come to a personal decision to struggle, given that each revolutionary woman or man must live with the great joys and hardships that such a commitment entails. Hence, revolutionaries or those who are radicalized are those who, unable to persist in the oppressive values, formations, and practices of the old era, commit their passion, reason, life energy, and physical fortitude to the long historical struggle for freedom and, thus, to self-determine their own destiny as authentic human beings—extricating themselves from the limited choices presented to them by the hegemonic apparatus of schooling.

Lastly, key to any emancipatory pedagogical project for democratic citizenship is the understanding that the transformation of material conditions cannot take place without also the transformation of consciousness, as both personal and social phenomena. Freire considered this to be so, in that the reproduction of material conditions, whether just or unjust, is inextricably linked to the collective beliefs and actions that fuel their perpetuation. If we seek to change the material conditions that oppress the majority of the world's population, then we must recognize the ultimate purpose of an emancipatory pedagogy to be nothing less than the radicalization of consciousness—where love and political commitment inform our underlying participation in communal life and our struggle against our disaffiliation and oppression.

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## Notes

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