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'Freedom Is a Very Fine Thing': Individual and Collective Forms of Emancipation in Transformative Learning

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It is a foundational assumption of Mezirow's work that adult education which is democratic in aim and form has enormous emancipatory potential. This chapter will critically explore exactly how emancipation is envisaged by Mezirow and the strengths and lacunae of his theory in this regard. The first section of the chapter will consist of a detailed review of how Mezirow conceptualises freedom and autonomy. As noted in the second chapter of this book Mezirow's work is best understood as a theory which elaborates and develops ideas about emancipatory learning which have helped to define adult education as a whole. In order to situate and work through Mezirow's ideas, and in particular to think about emancipation on different 'levels'—namely the individual and the collective—I want to explore Mezirow and Freire's conceptions of emancipatory education alongside each other. This will be the focus of the second section of the chapter.

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I want to take a different tack from the two most common ways of working through these two philosophies of critical adult education though. Probably the most widespread approach—and certainly one that predominates in the Transformative Learning Conference proceedings over the past twenty years—is to assume that the 'family' resemblances between Mezirow and Freire's ideas are so strong that they can be treated as more or less complementary theories. I am not persuaded this is the case and I am convinced that this approach also skates over conceptual problems which need to work through for the development transformative learning theory. On the other hand, there is a well-established line of critique that takes Mezirow to task for not properly addressing issues of social emancipation (e.g., Cunningham, 1998; Hart, 1990; Inglis, 1997; Newman, 2012 inter alia). Although these critiques are rich interventions, they have rarely been built upon to reconstruct transformative learning theory (for an example of an exception, see especially the work of Fleming 2016). This 'stuckness' (Hoggan, Mällki, & Finnegan, 2017) reflects, amongst other things, just how deeply entrenched dichotomous ways of thinking of individual and collective emancipation are in adult education and further afield. Thus the overall purpose of the chapter, which is outlined in the last section, is to sketch out how these two traditions of emancipatory thought might begin to be usefully integrated together without conflating or overlooking important differences. This requires, I believe, conceptual bridging and to do this I will also draw on the British philosopher Roy Bhaskar's (1979) critical realist analysis of the meaning of emancipation alongside the work of Castoriadis (1987) on autonomy. In doing so, the chapter makes a case for working towards a more explicitly differentiated conception of transformative learning which distinguishes between, and theorises across, individual and collective forms of emancipation.

Mezirow's Conception of Emancipation

Mezirow's (1981, 1990, 1991, 2007) theory of transformative learning was developed over several decades and went through considerable elaboration and change (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Hoggan, 2016) but the core

proposition—the beating heart of the theory—which is directly related to his conception of emancipation has not changed. Put simply, it is this: deep critical reflection can lead to new forms of thinking and action which foster individual and social emancipation. Before I explore how exactly Mezirow understands emancipation, I think it is important in the context of this discussion to pause and note something about the overall of characteristics of Mezirow's theory. It is probably best described as a critical synthesis of radical, humanist and pragmatist educational ideas underpinned by the insights of developmental psychology which serves as a comprehensive theoretical framework for adult education within a North American context. I will argue below that the synthetic quality and the ambition to offer a comprehensive account of adult learning in this particular context are directly pertinent to the strengths and weaknesses of his understanding of emancipation.

Mezirow puts *meaning making and praxis* right at the centre of his learning theory and indeed human life more generally. Knowing and doing are viewed as contingent processes which need to be understood in relation to a given socio-historical context. The nature of modern society is such—fluid and complex—that to flourish we need to develop our capacities to make meaning, critically reflect and act in a flexible and open way (2007). This also means being able to critically handle the various forms of knowledge produced in society. Mezirow (1991), *pace* Habermas, identifies two different 'domains' of learning—the instrumental and communicative—which have different logics of use and modes of validation. Thus, according to Mezirow (1991, 2007), we need to develop forms of adult education which can adequately respond to these historical conditions and to deal with the variety, complexity, and in this virtual age, the volume of knowledge and information available to us. But—and this is both a challenge and opportunity for adult education—our capacity for critical learning is often 'stunted' (Mezirow, 1990, p. 359) through primary socialisation, (mis)education and ideological distortions.

Only through critical reflection, according to Mezirow, can we fully exploit the immanent potential of the knowledge and information at our disposal in an empowering and even emancipatory way. Specifically, Mezirow (1981, 1990, 1991, 2007)) maintains that it is through critical

reflection that we can begin to think more rationally and systematically about our own circumstances and self to grasp the reasons and causes behind things. This defence of critical rationality, of realism and shared procedures of validation as the basis of emancipatory knowledge is worth underlining—and defending—in a period in which 'alternative facts' have become acceptable and widely traded currency in public discourse. Mezirow (1991), p. 104 and all of Chap. 4) makes a further important distinction and argues that critical reflection can be carried out with varying degrees of intensity and depth and distinguishes between reflection on content, processes or fundamental premises.

Learning is truly transformative, and potentially emancipatory, when previously taken for granted assumptions and norms and roles are reflected upon and modified. This involves rethinking deeply held, and often distorted beliefs, about who we are and our lifeworld. Mezirow (1991, pp. 167–174) maintains this process of 'subjective reframing' follows identifiable phases in which the learner moves from a disorienting dilemma through to self-examination based on collaborative dialogue to a major rethinking of one's assumptions. If successful Mezirow (1991, p. 155) indicates that this can lead:

> toward a more inclusive, differentiated, permeable, and integrated perspective and that, insofar as it is possible, we all naturally move toward such an orientation […] It should be clear that a strong case can be made for calling perspective transformation the central process of adult development.

Tapping into this successfully also reconfigures relationships and results in novel courses of action (1991, p. 167).

Perspective transformation also makes us more capable of acting in a way that enhances personal and collective freedom. Freedom—as a value and a practice—is understood by Mezirow primarily, but not exclusively it should be said, as freedom *from* constraints on thought and action:

> Emancipation from libidinal, linguistic, epistemic, institutional, or environmental forces that limit our options and our rational control over our lives but have been taken for granted or seen beyond human control. (Mezirow, 1991, p. 87)

Emancipation comes from breaking free of the shackles of prejudice, the dead weight of tradition and unaccountable authority. By becoming more self-aware in pursuit of rational individual and social interests. Thus, fostering 'liberating conditions for making more autonomous and informed choices and developing a sense of self-empowerment is the cardinal goal of adult education' (Mezirow, 2000, p. 26).

This way of thinking about emancipation as the removal of constraints which enhance an *individual's capacity for autonomy* has a long history in Western philosophy which links Mezirow to the liberal tradition (especially Mill). This also reflects the debt Mezirow owes to psychological theories of development and learning—a discipline which remains, for the most part, very firmly bound to methodological individualism. Tellingly, if you examine carefully how learning and change is envisaged by Mezirow (1991, esp. Chap. 6) the pivot point, for analytical and practical purposes, is the individual's assumptive world. His explication of transformative learning, including the diagrams, directs the reader to focus on how individuals' 'meaning schemes' made up of specific beliefs, knowledge, value judgements and feelings are embedded in broader sets of socially constructed 'meaning perspectives' change (see 1991 esp. pp. 5–6 and pp. 154–156). The critically reflective and agentic individual is the wellspring of freedom, and this is reflected in the weight, care and attention given to topic in Mezirow's work. There is a real density, in the positive sense, in Mezirow's (1991) discussion of these issues.

It is important to note—despite what some critics of Mezirow have argued—that while his theory focuses on the individual, it is not irredeemably individualistic. The context for learning and the process of meaning making are very clearly depicted by Mezirow (1990, 1991, 2000, 2007, et cetera) as socialised processes and he repeatedly stresses the centrality of dialogue to transformative learning alongside the fundamentally intersubjective nature of critical reflection. The socio-cultural and sociological dimensions of learning *are* in view—Mezirow could not be clearer that he is interested in supporting democratic movements and progressive social change—but they are not foregrounded in a systematic way. Mezirow mainly uses his sociological imagination to frame the contours of his theory of learning—offering a type of bird's eye view of society—which the individual confronts and works within but it is the inner

mental world that is held in close view, and explored precisely and from multiple angles.

Furthermore, although Mezirow is concerned with advancing social emancipation it is usually described as one possible *subset* of transformative learning (1990, 1991, 2000). Transformative learning is always empowering (in the sense of strengthening individuals and communities' capacity to think and act rationally and justly) but it is not necessarily socially emancipatory in the way this has typically been described in radical adult education (i.e., resulting in social action which seeks to change social structures in an egalitarian way). We benefit by reshaping our assumptions through rational democratic deliberation but the precise relationship to broader social change is described as contingent on circumstances and needs of learners. Unreflective activism and political manipulation is strongly criticised (Mezirow, 1991, p. 204). Acting for social emancipation depends on individual free choice and Mezirow (1990) is at pains to stress that dogma, regardless of political hue, is the enemy of transformative learning and genuine autonomy. Consequently, the site of change—as well as agency—is envisaged primarily in terms of the transformation of the inner mental landscape of an individual learner which may, or may not, have broader social consequences.

Deep critical reflection is thus presented as the 'germ cell' of transformative learning. Mezirow explicitly presents this as the 'common ground' (1990, p. 363) of adult education, and social change adult education is described as one particular, albeit highly valued, branch of much larger field. As a basic empirical observation this is true and non-trivial but as a theoretical presentation of learning and emancipation is ambiguous and even problematic as it offers no clear evaluative framework from which to assess emancipatory claims. To return to a point made earlier, this reflects Mezirow's desire to offer comprehensive synthesis for North American adult education: it transcends andragogy, dovetails with progressive thought, and can be accepted by liberals as well as embraced by radicals.

Mezirow made an enormous contribution to adult education by developing a highly detailed, careful account of how deep critical reflection serves emancipatory ends. As a psychologically orientated conception of freedom which is especially alert to the undoing of constraints on the

individual it is valuable, even necessary but it offers no clear basis for understanding why collective activity is so important for advancing freedom.

Freire's Conception of Emancipation

Mezirow (1990, 1991) frequently acknowledged that Freire's understanding of learning and democratic praxis was a key influence on his work especially Freire's notion of conscientisation (see below). But a key argument of this chapter is that although they are certainly not incompatible perspectives, they are very distinct. As we have seen, Mezirow views freedom as a principle which is activated through critical reflection and realised through the exercise of autonomy. In various ways, directly and indirectly, reflective autonomy contributes to the vitality of democracy. But for Freire (1972, 1998) freedom is treated as something far more *ontologically basic* than this. Drawing on Erich Fromm's notion of biophilia—a love of life and living akin to a basic drive in the Freudian sense—Freire sees the need for freedom and the desire for autonomy as fundamental to human flourishing. Making sense of the world, deep curiosity and hopefulness are inextricably linked to this biophiliac desire by Freire. The practice of freedom is thus viewed as integral to rich learning, useful knowledge, psychic health and ultimately a humane society. Freire's (1972, p. 66) condemnation of banking education, oppression and domination—the dulling or blocking of the 'vocation to be human' are also rooted in this conception of human freedom. To be unfree is to be cut away from the power to explore, name and act in the world, locked into a 'culture of silence' (p. 116), resigned to pre-given fate and even to fear of freedom. While this might be overstated, or at least needs qualification and amendment, this is a very rich and suggestive proposal.

Freire (1972) is, like Mezirow, a humanist but his immersion in activism and his debt to Marxism and Fanon's postcolonial thinking means his conception of *freedom is relational, entirely social and largely collective.* Freedom and unfreedom may be ontologically basic but acts of freedom—even on the scale of an uttered word or a single gesture of an individual—are always framed by Freire within a wider power analysis of

social relations, institutions and history (Freire, 1970, 1972; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Freire & Shor, 1987; Freire, Giroux, & Macedo, 1985). Stark inequalities in ownership of, and access to, cultural and economic resources create a line of power between the oppressed and oppressors in which biophiliac and necrophilic tendencies can be discerned operating at societal and institutional levels as well in everyday encounters. Real freedom depends on the oppressed obtaining power and resources that have been withheld or denied to them in the current order. Expanding freedom requires breaking with—mentally and organisationally— oppressive and alienating social practices in a way that confronts domi- nant power and creates 'counter-power'. Thus, Freire offers a layered conception of freedom as a basic human capacity and need and as a his- torical practice based on collective solidarity. Notably, it is assumed that individual freedom is served through finding common cause with others. Emancipation is the recovery of inalienable human powers which leads to the *emergence* of new practices, ideas and values. In this respect there is a stronger emphasis on freedom *'to'* than Mezirow and this is articulated explicitly within a radical conception of what it means to make history from 'below' (Freire, 1972; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Freire et al., 1985).

For readers unfamiliar with the history of left-wing movements and cosmologies, the vision underpinning these arguments may not yet be entirely clear. It can be concretised by turning to Freire's notion of *consci- entisation*. This—the process of becoming critically aware and more agen- tic—according to Freire (1972), begins with dialogue and the exploration of shared problems and 'limit situations', that inhibit and block freedom and human flourishing. Such inquiry can lead to seek the reasons behind things—to make an epistemic break with the 'givenness' of the world— and to reconstruct our experience and assumptions in order to overcome limits and act for freedom. The similarities to Mezirow's conception of transformative are deep and not at all accidental. But Freire is explicit that the most important barrier to development is the way society is organised. We internalise social structures, according to Freire (1970, 1972) but external social relations are conceived as prior and distinct from reflexive agency. It follows that conscientisation depends on: 1) developing adequate socio-historical explanations of the genesis and reproduction of power structures; 2) identifying how limits on freedom

and equality lead to unnecessary suffering; 3) discovering immanent sources of collective agency with; 4) the explicit aim of the transforming structures. Consequently, Freire is far more concerned than Mezirow with the mediating value of political knowledge in 'naming our world' inside and outside adult education. Ultimately, *freedom depends on the work of emancipatory social movements* for the elaboration of analyses, stories, symbols, events and modes of action—organisational repertoires of resistance—to create and support political cultures which valorise certain ways of feeling, being and acting as emancipatory.

Freire sees freedom as ontologically basic, always social, primarily collective and advanced through social movements. These various foci lead Freire to a stronger concern with the emergence of new social practices which allow us to name, imagine, and act in emancipatory ways.

Beyond an 'Either/or' Approach to Emancipation

Reading Mezirow through Freire, we can see clear limitations in the way emancipation is understood in relation to how social structures enable and constrain various forms of autonomy. For example, one could mention Mezirow's discussion of issues of employment in *Transformative dimensions of adult learning* (Mezirow, 1991) or the way he approaches ethnocentrism (Mezirow, 2007) which he treats as questions of experience and belief with very little analysis of social structures. Freire's stress on the centrality of mass creativity and movements in advancing freedom also makes it clear what is missing from Mezirow's account and just how truncated and linear Mezirow's 'line of emancipation' is as well as shedding light on the problem with 'decoupling' questions of individual and collective emancipation.

On the other hand, when we read Mezirow against Freire we see other problems. Freire subsumes, and to a large extent disregards, distinct and important aspects of individual autonomy and biographical change in his theory. Along with this is a consistent exaggeration of the political and collective dimensions of freedom. There are innumerable phenomena—

vital to adult education and a flourishing life—which require deep critical reflection, which are in some respects political but are poorly grasped if treated primarily in terms of social power. For example, if we think about grief and bereavement or coping with serious illness of oneself or a loved one or the effect of living in a new country these experiences are often deeply transformative but served badly if placed on the grand stage of history. Can we say all these efforts to live in a more emancipatory way are marginal? I think not and my research (Finnegan, Merrill, & Thunborg, 2014; Fleming, Loxley, & Finnegan, 2017), mainly with non-traditional students in higher education, indicates that something akin to 'subjective reframing', often linked to major life transitions, leading to more integrated and inclusive ways of thinking and acting is a major phenomenon for which we need concepts and theories to effectively understand and foster.

Mezirow and Freire sensitise us to different forms of emancipation but for empirical and theoretical reason, I believe we need to build bridges between them. I think this requires an inclusive conception of freedom which builds on the distinct insights of Mezirow of Freire but also offers a clear normative and analytical framework for thinking *across* these approaches.

In some ways developing a conception of freedom drawing on Mezirow and Freire should be relatively straightforward. After all there are shared 'stem cell' ideas at the very heart of their work: both see emancipatory learning as emerging through egalitarian dialogue about limits and dilemmas encountered through lived experience and through enhancing reflexive agency. So why is this done so infrequently in a way that also acknowledges the very real differences between them? This is, I think and was mentioned earlier, because dichotomous ways of thinking about the individual and society are so deeply embedded in science, politics and everyday life. To address this fully we need to look beyond Freire and Mezirow and draw on theoretical resources 'external' to adult education which explicitly seek to address this problem of 'either/or' thinking. I want to turn to Roy Bhaskar's (1979, 2011) careful work on emancipatory knowledge and the Greek philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis' work on autonomy (Castoriadis, 1987, 1991) who both seek to theorise emancipation in a less 'one-sided' way.

This is not the place to offer an overview of each of these thinkers. Rather, I want to selectively draw on specific concepts in order to redescribe emancipatory transformative learning in a way that we can 'hold'

the insights of Freire and Mezirow together and also addresses some of the gaps identified in the critical review of their ideas. First, we can say with Bhaskar (2011) that emancipation is the movement from *unwanted to wanted determinations* in support of a flourishing life. This formulation overcomes the simplifying and flattening effect of a theory of freedom which stresses overcoming constraint over the importance of emergence, and vice versa. Second, and here we are not going beyond Mezirow and Freire at all in saying this, emancipation is a learning process in which we, as individual subjects, organisations or movements, become more *reflexively agentic*. The practice of critical reflexivity, vested in and towards freedom, entails a commitment to rational inquiry (Castoriadis, 1987) which leads to 'a stronger sense of being free, namely as knowing and possessing the power and disposition to act in or towards one's real interests' (Bhaskar, 2011, p. 178). Third, this allows one to elaborate *projects of autonomy*, which allow one to 'escape from the servitude of repetition, to reflect about oneself, about the reasons of one's thoughts and the motives of one's actions, guided by the intention of truth and the elucidation of one's desire' (Castoriadis, 1991, p. 165). Crucially, projects of autonomy are multiple in scale and direction and we should not, argues Castoriadis (1991, p. 165), dichotomise between the lucid and self-aware collective work needed to build a truly participatory society—a reflexive democracy—or the 'radical imagination of the singular human being as source of creation and alteration and allows this being to attain an effective freedom'.

In developing this sketch a little further, I want to turn to the intriguing proposal of Gregory Bateson (2000) who maintained that the most useful ways of differentiating between types of learning is the degree and extent to which a given type of learning is reflexive. If we approach Bateson's proposal historically and sociologically, the question becomes how reflexive learning and projects of autonomy maintain and/or transform human culture in emancipatory ways (Engeström, 1987). Logically this entails differentiating and evaluating learning processes according to and the extent to which various modes of reflexive activity enhance autonomy and allow us to reorganise social practices in an emancipatory way. More precisely, we need to look at: (1) scope and intensity of varied modes of reflexive agency; (2) the depth of the social structures that

reflexive agency seeks to act upon; (3) the extent to which this activity supports the creation of practices and institutions which are emancipatory and that can endure over time.

Within this framework, Mezirow's theory offers a way of thinking about how adult education can enhance reflexivity in a way that connects very directly with everyday challenges and transitions. It responds to the imperative to act and make sense of the world on a biographical level. It is 'narrow' in scope but effectively describes and supports deep personal change which is capable of altering the terms under which a person acts and interprets social relations. It also—through Mezirow's account of the layered and complex nature of knowledge domains—alerts us to how everyday collaboration and communication at work, via social media and in the family creates possibilities for emancipatory reflexive agency. This type of activity is crucial for developing a reflexive democracy (Honneth, 2011). Freire envisages reflexive agency in a collective and historical way— so he is concerned with broader scope and activity of varying intensities— and aims to transforms social structures and create new institutions. Without this explicitly political and movement orientated notion of emancipation, efforts to create a reflexive democracy will inevitably falter and fail. Contributing to, and linking with, emancipatory movements, to misquote Sartre, remains an 'unsurpassable horizon' for transformative educators and while we should certainly not seek to subordinate biographical exploration to political projects of autonomy we obviously cannot decouple questions of emancipation from questions of political power and participation and the issues of social recognition and redistribution.

From this perspective one of the main tasks of critical, educational research is to trace how collective forms of emancipatory activity are dialectically related to, or disconnected from, individuals' experiences of autonomy and freedom, including on a 'everyday' non-political level, and how this informs, or should inform learning and education (see also Alhadeff-Jones, 2017). This cannot be explored if we cleave to dualistic either/or thinking about individuals and society. Emancipation cannot, and should not, be traced in one direction as both Mezirow and Freire claim from different perspectives: the pulse of freedom can move from the questioning individual through to groups, movements and institutions; it can also be generated within movements and alternative institu-

tions as spaces of transformative learning in which freedom is expanded but which individuals often pass through without experiencing transformative learning as individuals. It can be supported through large-scale existing institutions which have learnt, in small and large matters, to be reflexive and democratic; and it can be elaborated in quite temporary ways in brief shared situations which leave only small but important residues. As is more commonly pointed out, and experienced on a daily basis there are also obvious conflicts and contradictions between projects of collective and individual autonomy. To make sense of this complexity is a matter of empirical research and practical experiment. The challenge, I think, is to develop a theory and practice of adult education, which is sensitive to the diversity and range of projects of autonomy but which remains strongly cognisant of the socio-political conditions for advancing freedom.

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