Chapter 1.2: Paulo Freire and the Politics of Disposability: Creating Critical Dissent Dialogue

Margaret Ledwith

Paulo Freire's (1972) ideas radicalised my occupation, community development, when *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was first published in English and became widely available, from 1972 onwards. This provided practitioners and activists with a theory of liberation based on analyses of power, *conscientization* and action for change, a critical pedagogy. One of the central tenets of critical pedagogy is contextualising personal lives in their political times; the bigger picture is key to understanding the changing nature of power relations. Here, I look at stories, from dominant narratives to counter-narratives, to explore Freire's claim that stories of everyday life contain both theory and action for change, and how, in changing the story, we change the course of history. Little stories become counter-narratives that challenge dominant narratives, those big stories that persuade us to accept that some lives are more important than others, and point the way forward to a more equal, fair and just future. 'Creating critical dissent dialogue' captures Freire's pivotal emphasis on dialogue and dissent as central to the process of critical consciousness, the basis of collective action for change.

M. Ledwith (✉)
University of Cumbria, Carlisle, UK

Stuart Hall, before his death in 2014, alerted us to a major conjuncture, a point at which social, political, economic and ideological contradictions are condensed into a historical moment created by market fundamentalism being sold as 'common sense', presenting a crisis, but also an opportunity for change. Stuart Hall's point is that effective interventions need to 'see' the forces of power critically. This involves 're-experiencing the ordinary as extraordinary' (Shor 1992: 122). And, we find the 'extraordinary' in the stories of everyday life once we start to see in an unblinkered way that what we accept as normal is simply unacceptable. Becoming critical involves questioning everything; when we begin to see things differently, we act differently in the world. For these reasons, I am interested in stories of ordinary, everyday life.

Contextualising Practice

Community development is about social justice and environmental justice, about change for a more fair and sustainable world. Its process is popular education in community, connecting stories of everyday life to their political times. Discrepancies in life chances emerge depending on who we are – young/old, black/white, male/female, rich/poor, and the many **intersections**[1] of all these differences. We begin to question and expose the way that power works in society to privilege some people and disadvantage others. Once we see the story, with all its inherent contradictions, we can change the story. It involves critical consciousness: questioning the way things are, building new knowledge from new understanding and acting on that knowledge collectively to challenge unjust power relations and to bring about change. The key point I want to emphasise here is that for this to work we must keep our eye on the bigger picture and constantly work to understand how structural discrimination reaches into people's personal lives to create unjust life chances. This is why any practice claiming a social justice intention must be contextualised in its political times if it is has aspirations for social change.

In relation to this, let's now consider the story of the 'welfare scrounger' as a way of identifying how dominant ideologies become a 'truth' in public consciousness.

Dominant Narratives and the Politics of Disposability

The 1980s marked a sudden rise in neoliberalism, an ideology that was previously little known or understood. Its emphasis on free trade, elevating *profit* over *people* and *planet*, is justified by stories that demonise the poor. Thatcher in the UK, Reagan in the USA, Pinochet in Chile, the IMF, the World Bank, all played major roles in the rise of neoliberalism seizing the opportunity created by a recession as high unemployment stretched welfare budgets to capacity. In the UK, people on welfare became reviled as 'welfare scroungers'. Margaret Thatcher told poor people to tighten their belts, rich people need to get richer in order to create a trickle-down effect to the poor. This justified a massive transference of wealth from the *poor* to the *rich*, and nothing ever trickled down! Child poverty escalated from 1:10 in 1979 to 1:3 by 1997 at the end of Thatcherism.

Thatcherism's campaign to sell the idea of the 'public burden of welfare' was a spurious truth that legitimised targeting the poor to benefit the wealthy. From 1997 to 2010, the Labour government achieved 'a remarkable political coup' by gaining cross-party support for the Child Poverty Act 2010 which legalises the pledge to end child poverty by 2020 (Lansley 2013: 14–17). However, a failure to challenge thinking in two areas left the ideology of 'the welfare scrounger' intact: those of powerful vested interests; and failing to challenge public consciousness on issues of fairness and a common good (Walker and Walker 2011). By 2008, Killeen accused successive British governments of violating human rights by failing to change the hatred of the poor created by the 'welfare scrounger' image. This had become so entrenched in public consciousness, he claimed that 'povertyism' had become a form of structural discrimination, alongside racism and sexism, based on widespread belief that poor people are of less value (Killeen 2008).

On 12 May 2010, Cameron launched Britain's coalition government. His election campaign consisted of 'sprinkled speeches and photo opportunities with new flavourings – green trees, social enterprise, the "big society", free schools, hug-a-hoodie, vote-blue-go-green, the-NHS-is-safe-with-me' were distractions from the real business of the day: 'Deficit reduction takes

precedence over any of the other measures in this agreement' (Toynbee and Walker 2015). This smokescreen of 'deficit reduction' obscured Cameron's intentions to shrink the state. After the election, it became clear that whereas, 'Margaret Thatcher privatised state-run industries; Cameron's ambition was no less than to abolish the post-war welfare state itself' (Toynbee and Walker 2015). The coalition government ran with anti-welfare, dominance of the market and individualism, dismantling the public sector and much of what had been built to protect people in times of vulnerability at the same time as increasing vulnerability with a resurrected campaign based on hatred of the poor, reviling the stereotype of the welfare scrounger. On 7th May, 2015, Britain re-elected Cameron's Conservative government to continue their neoliberal agenda unabated. Individual greed prioritised over collective need creates a divided society, with a tier of super-rich at the top. The commitment to end child poverty by 2020, embedded in law in the Child Poverty Act 2010, has become undermined to such an extent that Child Poverty Action Group accuses the government of violating the policies it has a legal obligation to meet: 'The Government is turning its back on poor children… last week's child poverty statistics showed that absolute child poverty has risen by half a million since 2010' (Alison Garnham, 1st July, 2015 available at http://www.cpag.org.uk/content/government-turns-it-back-poor-children).

These trends are happening on a global scale. The World Economic Forum in Switzerland in January 2015 attracted the force of the anti-poverty charity Oxfam who are called for urgent action on narrowing the gap between rich and poor of the world. Oxfam's research shows that the share of the world's wealth owned by the wealthiest 1% has increased from 44% in 2009 to 48% in 2014, while the poorest 80% currently own just 5.5%. At this rate, in a year, 1% of the world's population will own more wealth than the other 99% (http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk). Their message is that global wealth is increasingly in the pockets of a small privileged elite who manage to generate wealth by focusing on a few economic sectors, such as finance and insurance, pharmaceuticals and healthcare, to lobby for policies that enhance their interests further: '85 billionaires have the same wealth as the bottom half of the world's population' (http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk). In the UK, the top 1% of the population now own about 14% of the national income compared

with just over 5% in the 1970s. This upper level concentration of wealth must be redistributed if child poverty is to be reduced (Lansley 2013).[2]

The story of the welfare scrounger has been so powerfully sold as common sense, we fail to see the contradictions, to recognise the consequences of its inhumanity. Paulo Freire named poverty on this scale as 'a crime against humanity' (Freire and Macedo 1995). So, the next question is what to do about it! Paulo Freire is celebrated for not only offering the tools to analyse oppression, but the tools to bring about change. Education is never neutral, he said, it is either domesticating or liberating. The central tenet of this thinking is that we are all intellectuals and activists capable of recreating the course of history, but while our minds are colonized with dominant narratives that justify unacceptable inequalities, we fail to see the inhuman contradictions that we live by.

Paulo Freire Creating Counter-narratives of Change

Stories that diminish people, dehumanize, rob people of dignity and self-respect, destroy aspirations, hope and potential, creating a *Culture of Silence.* But, the simple act of looking through a critical lens to question everyday life, brings a new perspective. We 'see' life with all its contradictions in stark relief, and are able to question its inhumanity. This, for Freire, is the beginning of becoming critical. The process of critical consciousness starts with creating the context for people to question their everyday experience in order to recognise oppression as a political injustice rather than a personal failing. In these ways, Freire put the emphasis on teaching 'to question answers rather than answer questions'! (Shor, quoted in McLaren and Leonard 1993: 26).

Freire offers practical tools to help this process. Using a problematising method, we capture a scene typical of everyday life in the community as a photograph, drawing, play, poem or song, 'known in Frearean terms as a codification'. In a culture group, this is decoded simply by posing questions:

Who do you see here?
Where is it?

What's going on?
Who is involved?
Why is it happening?
What can be done about it?

By asking questions, dialogue is ignited. The group begins to pose its own questions, turning away from the codification to deepen dialogue. And, as dialogue deepens it moves into a process of *conscientization*, people 'see' more critically, and the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life is replaced with a greater awareness of the contradictions we live by. In this way, we bridge the gap between thinking and doing: seeing more critically, we act more critically in the world.

Problematising Katrina

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the Black communities of New Orleans. Images of dead and abandoned people in the floodwaters as the ill-maintained levees gave way were beamed around a shocked world which looked on in horror., These people were largely black, often old or very young, female, ill or disabled, some dead, others clinging to submerging rooftops appealed for help, while the rest of the USA, the most powerful country in the world, carried on with business as usual. The following year, Henry Giroux challenged us for failing to critique President Bush's non-response to the emergency (Giroux 2006a). A television documentary on Hurricane Katrina presented the story of a young man who, anguished by seeing his people abandoned, acted on his own initiative. As chaos and death surrounded him, he happened to pass a yard full of yellow school buses. "Aha, I know how I can help!" He leapt over the fence and hotwired one of the buses. Then, heading for the women and children of his community in particular, he ferried busloads to the relative safety of the dome that had been set up for temporary shelter. Many people were frozen with fear, but he had the presence of mind to act, saving the lives of some of the most vulnerable in his community. What would be done to honour his integrity and ingenuity? Would the story end with him getting the freedom of the city of New Orleans? Perhaps a

medal of honour? How could he ever be repaid for such selflessness? No such honour for him: he was charged with the theft of a school bus!

Henry Giroux, as we progressively treat some social groups as human detritus, says that poor young people no longer hold societies' dreams, but have become societies' nightmares in a culture of cruelty (Giroux 2013). Neoliberal narratives have defined youth, rather than having problems, as *the* problem. And that this assault on our children indicates a deep moral and political crisis. A year after Katrina struck, the victims were not only deemed unworthy of state protection, but labelled dangerous and treated as disposable. Why, asks Giroux, did the government focus on rumours of crime and lawlessness rather than treating the situation as a national emergency?

'A new politics now governs American policy, one that I call the politics of disposability. It is a politics in which the unproductive (the poor, weak and racially marginalized) are considered useless and therefore expendable; a politics in which entire populations are considered disposable, unnecessary burdens on state coffers, and consigned to fend for themselves. Katrina laid bare what many people in the United States do not want to see: large numbers of poor black and brown people struggling to make ends meet within a social system that makes it difficult to obtain health insurance, child care, social assistance, savings, and even minimum-wage jobs….

The tragedy of both gulf crises must do more than provoke despair or cynicism, it must spark a politics in which the images of those floating bodies in New Orleans and the endless parade of death in Iraq serve as a reminder of what it means when justice, as the lifeblood of democracy, becomes cold and indifferent in the face of death' (Giroux 2006b).

Theorising the 'Welfare Scrounger'

In relation to this, I would like to introduce the thinking of Imogen Tyler (2013) on social abjection theory. In line with Henry Giroux, she warns that neoliberalism is much more than free-market rule, it is a form of social and cultural control in which state power is constantly producing relations of subject-object as relations of power and disgust. To maintain

power, it is essential to convince people that the object of derision is an unworthy form of human detritus. This hardens public opinion against those held up as undeserving, undesirable and disposable, and is reinforced by media stigmatisation. This paves the way for policies that punish the poor, blaming the victims of injustice for the structural disadvantages that create their reality. The consequence is escalating inequalities. In Gramscian terms, dominant hegemony internalised as 'common sense' gains public consent, and neoliberal policies continue to govern for the market against the people!

One significant illustration from Tyler is the way that class politics have been reformulated in the caricature of the 'chav'. By 2002, 'chav' had become a common disparaging term for disadvantaged young people, reinforced by Vicky Pollard, the comic creation of Matt Lucas, as typical of poor young women as feckless scroungers. This helped me to see how, since the first introduction of the 'welfare scrounger' as a benefit rip-off, this image has now been embedded in dominant ideology, reinforced by comic humour in the media, to harden public opinion against poor people. This dehumanisation of poor people has resulted in what Lansley calls 'anti-poor' rather than 'anti-poverty' (Lansley 2013), with the result that income inequalities are escalating, creating a crisis of child poverty with the 5th richest country in the world choosing not to feed its poorest children!

My main point here is that any practice for social justice has to bridge the gap between thinking and doing in this rapidly changing world. I have explored some ideas about the way that neoliberalism, an ideology based on maximizing profit, uses derision to label those in poverty as unworthy in order to justify privileging the privileged. This, in turn, gains popular support for dismantling welfare. This is what Henry Giroux calls the 'politics of disposability'. The consequences are escalating social divisions, leading to not only nations but a global super-rich who have more in common than with those of their own culture. At the same time, thinkers, such as Wilkinson and Pickett, offer evidence that the future lies in community, how we treat each other, not in profit (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). Trends indicate that profit is not being equally distributed to alleviate inequality, but is widening inequalities by being directed upwards to the already privileged. This is an enormous problem. The rich have accumulated too much of the available resources, so the challenge is to lower this ceiling, not raise the floor, if we want a future based on social justice and sustainability.

When you combine these theories with the evidence on growing up poor statistically presented by Child Poverty Action Group, it is clear that risks of child poverty are not equally distributed, they are linked to forces of power and disempowerment. Building on new ideas, like those of Imogen Tyler and Henry Giroux, extends a Freirean approach to practice, giving us the tools to 'see' power in action in the context of current political times. It is only by contextualising practice in its times that we can develop action capable of challenge and change for a social justice outcome.

Freire and Participatory Action Research: Seeking a Critical Living Praxis

I have mentioned the impact of Paulo Freire's ideas on community development. Freire also had a huge impact on the participatory action research movement, which challenged the dominant assumptions of traditional research. Identifying power by asking, (a) whose ideas are informing the research questions and in whose interests is it taking place, (b) who is controlling the research process, and (c) who decides on the results and outcomes of the research for whose benefit. Participatory action researchers increasingly called for a new worldview, suggesting that 'the modernist worldview or paradigm of Western civilisation is reaching the end of its useful life … that there is a fundamental shift occurring in our understanding of the universe and our place in it, that new patterns of thought and belief are emerging that will transform our experience, and our action' (Reason and Bradbury 2001: 4). A participatory paradigm for research, one based on participatory democracy, aims to give autonomy to the voices of subordinated groups. It elevates the diversity of human experience over the imperative of economic 'progress', and locates social and environmental justice at its heart.

In the early 1980s, I came across Reason and Rowan's (1981) *Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research.* 'This book is about human inquiry … about people exploring and making sense of human action and experience … ways of going about research which [offer] *alternatives* to orthodox approaches, alternatives which [would] do justice to the humanness of all those involved in the research endeavour' (1981:

xi). Reason and Rowan (1981) changed my understanding of research. They gave me insight into *participatory action research* as a liberating practice consonant with the value base of community development practice, offering an *integrated praxis*, or a *unity of praxis,* a way of building knowledge in action and acting on that knowledge in iterative cycles that go ever deeper and broader into understanding and change.

Influenced by Paulo Freire, here was research based on working *with* people in reciprocal, mutual relationships to co-create knowledge in cycles of action and reflection, and acting together on that knowledge to transform social injustice by:

• Rejecting the alienating methods of scientific research
• Emphasising connection, healing injustices
• Bridging gaps between thinking and doing
• Co-creating new knowledge, new truths, counter-narratives

Developing a *critical living praxis* that is capable of weaving theory and practice together bridges the gap between *knowing* and *doing*, to move nearer to praxis as an ethical way of *being* in the world. With this in mind, my purpose is to identify a way of co-creating new knowledge mutually with marginalised groups, relevant to the changing political context. For this, I choose to use the term *emancipatory action research* because it overtly states its purpose to bring about social change as part of its process.

Stephen Kemmis (2010) talks about a *unitary praxis* as an approach to life in which we 'aim to live well by speaking and thinking well, and relating well to others in the world …If we accept this view, then we might say that action research should aim not just at achieving knowledge of the world, but achieving a better world'. Emancipatory action research includes all people involved as co-participants in a process of education for critical consciousness, with the intention of informing action for social change. Co-participants are equals, as with Freire's notion of co-learners and co-teachers, a spirit of mutuality in which everyone is prepared to teach, listen and learn. Creating critical dissent dialogue is important, involving all co-participants in co-creating knowledge for our times. These are counter-hegemonic critical spaces in which power relationships are investigated and deconstructed in order to reconstruct democratic relations with new possibilities for a world that is fair and just.

This concept of a democratic public space is a vital context for community development as a site for critical dialogue and participation in the process of participatory democracy (Habermas 1989). We need to find new ideas for spaces where we can get involved in critique and dissent, identifying new truths, and developing the courage to 'tell unwelcome truths' in the wider world as part of our action (Kemmis 2006).

Critique and dissent are the processes that Freire had in mind when he talked about denunciation and annunciation: critiquing the *status quo* opens the space to transform the present into a better future. In these ways, emancipatory action research contextualises personal lives within the political, social and economic structures of our times by:

- equalising power in its process by working *with* not *on* people
- using methods that liberate not control so the traditional *objects* of research become *subjects* co-creating new knowledge from lived experience as a valuable truth
- co-creating new knowledge that is beyond the written word through story, dialogue, photographs, music, poetry, drama, drawings
- contextualising personal lives within the political, social and economic structures that discriminate
- demonstrating an ideology of equality in action using demonstrable skills of mutual respect, dignity, trust, reciprocity
- dislocating the researcher as external expert to become a co-participant
- co-participants becoming co-researchers in mutual inquiry
- creating the research process as a participatory experience for all involved
- creating a research process that becomes empowering in its own right
- creating a social/environmental justice outcome through collective action for change based on new understandings of the world

These, says Stephen Kemmis (2010), are the criteria against which to judge the contribution of emancipatory action research initiatives to social justice if they are to change history not just theory!

- **Discursively unsustainable:** is it based on any false, misleading or contradictory ideas?
- **Morally/socially unsustainable:** are there aspects of the process or outcome that are excluding, unjust, oppressive or dominating?

- **Ecologically/materially unsustainable:** do aspects of the process or outcome involve excess of either natural resources or degradation of the environment?
- **Economically unsustainable:** do aspects of the process or outcome fail to address costs and benefits to people or expose power relations between privilege and poverty?
- **Personally unsustainable:** is any physical, intellectual or emotional harm or suffering a consequence of the process or outcome?

One simple way to lay the foundations for creating critical dissent dialogue as a precursor of an emancipatory action research project is to keep a reflexive journal. *Writing* in a journal can raise questions in the process of becoming critical. By questioning, contradictions are exposed that interrupt the taken-for-grantedness of life. This links knowledge and experience, theory and action, and values and practice. Connections are made with the bigger political picture that is the root source of structural discrimination that manifests itself in local lives. Each week, on the left hand page record critical incidents and on the right hand side link these experiences with theories and statistical evidence. I am calling this a reflexive journal because it suggests going ever deeper by reflecting on reflections. This makes links between knowledge and experience and exposes issues that can be used to stimulate dialogue in a community group. In these ways, we begin to understand power in order to denounce it, and by denouncing it we create an interruption in the *status quo,* a space in which to build *counter-narratives* of human flourishing, *annunciation* as Freire would term it. Because, if stories go unchallenged they silently seep into the public mind (McNiff 2012).

When Stuart Hall identified this current historical conjuncture as a point at which social, political, economic and ideological contradictions have become condensed in a crisis of market fundamentalism, and ideology sold as global common sense, but making no sense at all, his challenge was that crisis is an opportunity for change, a crack where the light shines in!

The last word goes to Naomi Klein:

"History knocked on your door, did you answer?" That's a good question, for all of us. (Klein 2015: 466)

(Ideas in this chapter are developed from Ledwith, M (2016) *Community Development in Action: putting Freire into practice*, Bristol: Policy Press)

Notes

1. Editor's note: Intersectionality as a sociological model evolved during the 1980s and can be attributed to the work of sociologist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). Traditional feminist sociology has been criticised by black and ethnic minority academics for its focus exclusively on gender without taking into account of other factors; in this case, race. Intersectionality acknowledges that people are multifaceted and that factors such as race, culture, social background have an impact over and above simply gender.

2. 'Since this was written, the phenomenon of a global superrich funded by austerity measures that target the poorest of the world has escalated. We have witnessed the referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union (EU), in June 2016, promised by prime minister David Cameron as a vote winning strategy, create his downfall. He failed to recognise the levels of disillusionment in white, working-class voters prepared to risk a new future on the insincere promises of the likes of right wing activists like Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage; votes that appeal to the working class Right, notions of fortress Britain, of walls that keep out migrants and asylum seekers, illusions of a return to when Britain was Great. The referendum resulted in a close 52:48 win for Brexit, the withdrawal of Britain from the EU, and the consequence has been political uncertainty for Britain ever since. By November 2016, we witnessed the USA elect Donald Trump based on very similar promises with similar political uncertainty as a consequence. At the same time, neoliberalism as a political project continues to create widening divisions between poverty and privilege in most countries of the word as it careers towards uncertain, unsustainable futures for both people and planet.

References

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum: Vol. 1989, Article 8. Available at: https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. P. (1995). A dialogue: Culture, language, and race. *Harvard Educational Review, 65*(3), 377–403.

Giroux, H. (2006a). *Stormy weather: Katrina and the politics of disposability*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.

Giroux, H. (2006b, September 14). Katrina and the politics of disposability. *These Times.* www.inthesetimes.com/article/2822. Accessed 2 Feb 2015.

Giroux, H. (2013). *America's education deficit and the war on youth*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Kemmis, S. (2006). Participatory action research and the public sphere. *Educational Action Research, 14*(4), 459–476.

Kemmis. (2010). What is to be done? The place of action research. *Educational Action Research, 14*(4), 459–476.

Killeen. (2008). *Is poverty in the UK a denial of people's human rights?* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Klein, N. (2015). *This changes everything: Capitalism vs The climate*. London: Allen Lane.

Lansley, S. (2013). Poverty minus a pound: How the poverty consensus unravelled. *Poverty: Journal of the Child Poverty Action Group*, *145*, 14–17.

Ledwith, M. (2016) *Community Development in Action: putting Freire into practice, Bristol*: Policy Press.

McLaren, P., & Leonard, P. (1993). *Paulo Freire: A critical encounter*. London: Routledge.

McNiff, J. (2012). Travels round identity: Transforming cultures of learned colonisation. *Educational Action Research, 20*(1), 129–146.

Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (Eds.). (2001). *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. London: Sage Publications.

Reason, P., & Rowan, J. (1981). *Human inquiry, a sourcebook of new paradigm research*. New York: Wiley.

Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change*. London/Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Toynbee, P., & Walker, D. (2015). *Cameron's coup: How the Tories took Britain to the brink*. London: Guardian Faber Publishing.

Tyler, I. (2013). *Revolting subjects: Social abjection and resistance in Neoliberal Britain*. London: Zed.

Walker, A., Sinfield, A., & Walker, C. (Eds.). (2011). *Fighting poverty, inequality and injustice*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2010). *The spirit level: Why equality is better for everyone*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.