

## Old Masters, New Meanings

### Is there a need to reconceptualize emancipation?

*Introduction by Danny Wildemeersch (editor)*

In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire speaks about 'the banking concept' as follows:

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. (1972, p. 46)

It's good to remind ourselves from time to time of the words of Paulo Freire in connection with current developments. Freire's notion of the banking concept was mainly related to classroom practices where the student was considered to be unknowing, and the teacher was expected to 'deposit' his knowledge into what were considered 'empty vessels'. In the banking concept, the knowledge and practices that participants brought to the classroom was of little or no relevance. Relevant however was the teacher's definition of what was to be learned and how this should be done (in that context then by memorizing). Today, things have changed. In many cases, the teacher is no longer the depositor and the student the empty vessel. In neoliberal times, the students are supposed to become self-bankers, making sure that their (human) capital grows and guarantees them a 'competitive advantage' in the struggle for the survival of the fittest. The teacher has become the facilitator and controller of that process which is organized and standardized from above. Whatever the differences between the practices then and now, there are definitely still important similarities. The correspondence is that in both contexts, the definitions and decisions on what are valuable educational practices and how to acquire relevant knowledge and skills, are constructed at great distance from concrete, familiar practices, with alienating effects for the participants. That was the case in the Brazilian classroom contexts. That tends to be the case in present-day classroom contexts, be it for children or for adults, where globalized measurements give direction to standardized practices of teaching and learning, whereby the role of teachers is reduced to that of operators of standard



procedures, and the role of students is to learn to become active and agile competitors in a globalized and marketized world. Those who fail to do that are increasingly considered as 'losers' or 'drop outs'.

This reflection made me think that it could be relevant to revisit, not only Paulo Freire, but other 'old masters' who have in one way or another referred to 'emancipation' as an important notion in their work. Many of them are still influential today, yet, maybe not in the same way as in their original writings. Are their concepts still valid? Is there a need to reconsider them? What elements of their work are useful in the present-day context, and what elements are outdated? This special issue explores how present-day scholars who have explored emancipatory education in their own work, currently answer these questions. Various authors have responded positively to this invitation. We have selected six of them for the current issue. Each of them has questioned the work of one particular 'master' and considered his (!) relevance in connection with present-day societal challenges such as (in)equality, emancipation, sustainability, recognition, democracy, etc.. They all have responded to the question 'Is there a need to reconsider emancipation' in a positive way. In their view, emancipation as conceived before by many scholars and practitioners, no longer does justice to the educational reality today. Most of them argue that emancipation should, in the first place, be inspired by the recognition of the interdependence of human beings and nature, rather than by the striving for independence of individuals and collectivities from others and from nature.

Tristan Gleason, in his contribution on 'Liberation as Dependence' explores the work of the French anthropologist and philosopher of science Bruno Latour, who has in recent years become an important voice in the academic and political debate on societal and ecological transitions. In Latour's view, many of the major problems we encounter today are the consequence of the overall attitude of humans vis-à-vis nature, considering nature as a resource to be mastered for their own prosperity and well-being. The new climatic conditions we experience today, should make us reconsider the relationship between humans and nature as a relationship of interdependence rather than as a relationship of dominance. Using Latour's theory, Tristan Gleason points to some of the limits of Paulo Freire's education for liberation. A central question for emancipatory education today is 'who are we dependent upon', rather than 'who should we free ourselves from'.

Gisselle Tur Porres, Danny Wildemeersch and Maarten Simons, in their contribution 'Revisiting Rancière's Concept of Intellectual Emancipation in Vocational Education and Training Practices', explore the possibility to use the theory of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière as a lens to consider the emancipatory potential of VET-practices in a new way. Traditionally VET-practices were conceived to be emancipatory when they supported individuals to acquire competences necessary to enter the labour market and hence, be included in society. Rancière's concept of emancipation is not linked to such a goal. He directs attention to concrete (educational) practices where the traditional hierarchies between educators and students are questioned and revised. His view on emancipation is based on the assumption of 'equality of intelligence'. Taking this assumption as a starting point in educational practice, rather than as a goal to be achieved in the end, creates unexpected opportunities for emancipatory practices. Tur Porres et al. document these opportunities with the analysis of empirical observations in VET-practices, both with youngsters and adults, in Uruguay.

In his contribution, John Baldacchino questions the relevance of Dewey's educational philosophy in times of manifest anti-politics threatening liberal-democratic



traditions, as exemplified in Trumpism, Brexit and extreme right movements both in the US and in Europe. While looking for answers Baldacchino explores Dewey's notion of pragmatism and with the help of Maxine Greene's understanding of Dewey. In line with this he also investigates what dispositions are needed for the democratic teacher to find educational answers to the anti-political tendencies in our societies today.

The current Covid-19 pandemic has brought Tara Bartlett and Daniel Schugurensky to revisit Illich's ideas about 'Deschooling Society'. Illich was, in the 60's and 70's, sceptical about the schooling system. Schools were, in his view, places of alienation that isolated students from the real world. As an alternative, he suggested to embed the learning of the young in convivial community networks. Bartlett and Schugurensky explore different ways in which our societies today, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, reorganize schooling. They investigate to what extent these ways are similar to Illich's initial ideas and alternatives, and in what ways they do justice to values in education like equality, democracy, critical reflectivity and emancipation.

In her contribution on 'Ecological Solidarity', Astrid von Kotze revisits "Master Freire's" ideas in the light of present-day challenges, particularly the challenge of climate change which she personally experiences strongly, while living and working in South-Africa. She describes the major environmental transformations in her country and elsewhere. When reconsidering Freire's insights on liberation, solidarity, dialogue and humanization that have inspired her for many years, she argues that his critical, humanist pedagogy today fails to engage with the major ecological challenges we currently cope with. Many of Freire's principles and values are, in her view, still valuable today for educational practices, yet, they should be framed in a new kind of relationship of interdependence with nature, rather than in a relationship of dominance of humans on their environment.

In a final contribution Krassimir Stojanov meets Axel Honneth asking him, at the occasion of an interview, how he thinks about emancipation and education. Axel Honneth has become influential in recent decades among academics and beyond with his theory of recognition, in which he relates the tendency to consider humans as 'autonomous' subjects, emancipating themselves from different kinds of dependence. Contrary to this dominant understanding, he emphasizes the interdependency of humans. When emancipation is understood as a way of freeing oneself from the dependencies of others, this creates an illusion that neglects how much individuals need the recognition by others for their own development. With his theory of recognition he counters neoliberal tendencies in education that have inspired major policy measures in recent decades.

*Danny Wildemeersch*

\*

**Received:** October 20, 2020

**Published online:** October 30, 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25749/sis.21258>

