



Pedagogy in the ruins: Reclaiming Freirean practice against the logic of extraction

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Abstract

This article examines whether Paulo Freire's framework for liberation retains explanatory power when confronted with the dominant technological arrangements of the present moment. I contend that modern digital infrastructure, particularly the economic rationale that views human conduct as a source of profit, functions as a pedagogical tool engineered to generate specific subjectivities. Drawing upon ethnographic studies of digital resistance and critical analyses of Freire's foundational works, I propose that the behavioral modification techniques integrated into daily platforms act as a form of anti-dialogical action, a concept Freire deemed essential for sustaining oppression. This paper suggests three areas where Freirean practice could be applied: fostering critical awareness of how digital systems shape perception, reinterpreting data extraction as a collective circumstance rather than an individual decision, and promoting practices of withdrawal and alternative construction. These interventions, I argue, represent a crucial expansion of Freire's project into areas he could not have foreseen, yet whose underlying logic he anticipated with disconcerting accuracy.

Keywords: Digital infrastructure, behavioral modification, anti-dialogical action, critical awareness, digital resistance, pedagogy of liberation, Technological capitalism

Introduction

Beginning Again: Why Freire Still Disturbs

There is a particular moment in Freire's writing that continues to unsettle. It comes when he describes the moment an oppressed person begins to realize that the world they inhabit has been constructed to contain them. This realization, Freire insists, is not merely intellectual. It is existential. It carries the weight of recognizing that what seemed natural—the arrangements of work, authority, knowledge, and silence—is in fact the product of deliberate human action and therefore can be remade by deliberate human action.

I begin with this moment because it points to what remains vital in Freire's work and what requires extension. The realization he describes is still possible today, but the arrangements that work against it have shifted. They have become more distributed, more intimate, more embedded in the ordinary rhythms of daily life. They operate not primarily through explicit coercion or even through the formal institutions of schooling, but through the devices we carry in our pockets, the platforms that structure our social connections, and the systems that anticipate our desires before we fully form them.

This article proceeds from a simple proposition: if Freire's pedagogy of resistance is to mean anything in the present, it must grapple with the specific ways that contemporary technological systems condition human consciousness and constrain collective action. This is not to suggest that Freire's framework is outdated. Rather, it is to argue that his insights become most valuable when we apply his method of analysis—attending to the mechanisms by which domination becomes internalized and normalized—to conditions he did not live to see.

The argument unfolds in several movements. Initially, I will reconstruct Freire's conceptualization of oppression's mechanisms, emphasizing the "banking model" and its connection to anti-dialogical practices. Subsequently, I will

analyze the current digital platform environment, utilizing investigative journalism, user experiences, and critical technology studies to illustrate these systems' pedagogical roles. Finally, I will pinpoint areas of overlap between Freire's framework and present-day circumstances, demonstrating how the extraction of behavioral data exemplifies anti-dialogical action, thereby impeding the development of critical consciousness.

Finally, I outline what a Freirean practice might look like when directed toward these conditions, drawing on examples of collective resistance that have emerged in recent

Freire's Central Insight: Domination as Pedagogy

To understand what Freire offers, we must first understand what he opposed. His target was not simply authoritarian government or economic exploitation, though these were certainly part of his concern. His target was a particular way of organizing relationships that produced subjects who could not imagine themselves as agents of transformation.

Freire called this the "banking model" of education. In his account, traditional schooling operates by treating students as containers to be filled with knowledge chosen by authorities. The teacher speaks. The student listens. The teacher knows. The student absorbs. The teacher acts. The student adapts. This arrangement, Freire argued, was not merely inefficient pedagogy. It was a method of domination. By positioning students as passive recipients, it trained them to accept their position in a world where others made decisions and they followed instructions. The content of what was deposited mattered less than the structure of the relationship itself.

But Freire's analysis went deeper. He understood that the banking model was not confined to schools. It permeated relationships between the powerful and the powerless across society. The same structure—one who acts, one who adapts—reappeared in workplaces, in government agencies,

in the family, and in the unspoken assumptions that governed everyday life. Oppression, for Freire, was not primarily about physical constraint. It was about the systematic denial of people's capacity to engage critically with their conditions and to act collectively to transform them.

The alternative Freire proposed was built around three interconnected concepts. The first was *conscientização*, often translated as critical consciousness. This was the process by which people learned to perceive the social, political, and economic contradictions that shaped their lives. It was not simply becoming informed. It was learning to see the structures that had previously seemed natural and to recognize that these structures could be changed.

The second concept was dialogue. Freire insisted that genuine education—and genuine liberation—could only happen in relationship. The teacher-student relationship had to be inverted, with teacher and student learning from each other as they investigated the world together. Dialogue was not simply conversation. It was a practice of collective inquiry that broke down the distinction between those who know and those who are told.

The third concept was praxis: reflection and action directed at transforming the world. Freire rejected both activism without reflection, which he saw as mere activism, and reflection without action, which he saw as empty verbalism. True praxis required both: understanding the conditions that needed to change and engaging in collective efforts to change them.

These concepts formed a coherent framework. Oppression worked by preventing people from developing critical consciousness, from engaging in genuine dialogue, and from acting collectively. Liberation therefore required practices that cultivated consciousness, fostered dialogue, and linked reflection to action.

The Landscape of Extraction: How Platforms Operate

When Freire wrote in the 1960s, the mechanisms of domination he analyzed were relatively visible. The structures of authoritarian government, the hierarchies of the workplace, the architecture of traditional schooling—these were institutions one could point to and describe. The contemporary landscape is different. The mechanisms that shape consciousness today are often hidden; they appear neutral.

Over the past two decades, a particular logic has come to govern many of the digital platforms that structure everyday life. This logic, analyzed by a range of critics working outside the academy as well as within, treats human behavior as raw material to be extracted, processed, and sold. Every search, every scroll, every hesitation before clicking, every moment spent looking at a photograph—these become data points that feed systems designed to predict and shape future behavior.

The scale of this extraction is difficult to comprehend. Hundreds of millions of people participate in it daily, often without awareness that it is happening. The interfaces that facilitate it are designed to be seamless, to make the extraction invisible. The platforms present themselves as service providers, offering free communication, social interaction, and access to information, while also functioning as systems of extraction.

From a Freirean perspective, the importance of this situation goes beyond its size; it also involves its structure. The

relationship between the platform and the user is similar to the structure Freire described in the banking model. The platform collects data, processes it using algorithms, and then presents the user with a controlled environment designed to encourage specific reactions. The user sees this environment as a given, as the natural state of things.

The possibility of questioning the environment—of asking why this content rather than that content, why these suggestions rather than those suggestions—is systematically discouraged.

Consider how these platforms operate in practice. They do not ask users what they want to see. They observe users, build models of their preferences, and serve content optimized to keep them engaged. When users respond, the platforms learn. When users resist—by clicking away, by expressing frustration—the platforms also learn. Every action becomes data. Every reaction becomes information that refines the system's ability to anticipate and shape future actions.

This is not simply a matter of targeted advertising, though that is certainly part of it. It is a matter of how reality is presented. The content users see is filtered through systems whose primary goal is not truth, not education, not even entertainment in any straightforward sense, but engagement measured in time spent and actions taken. And engagement, for these platforms, translates directly to revenue.

The result is that users inhabit environments that have been optimized to elicit predictable responses. These environments learn their users' vulnerabilities—the topics that provoke outrage, the images that inspire longing, the arguments that confirm existing beliefs—and present content designed to activate those vulnerabilities. Users experience this as their own preferences, their own choices. They do not see the systems shaping those preferences and narrowing those choices.

Points of Convergence: What Freire Saw Coming

Freire never wrote about algorithms or data extraction. He died in 1997, before the platforms we now take for granted had emerged. Yet his analysis of how domination operates through the shaping of consciousness speaks directly to the conditions we face.

The first point of convergence concerns the structure of the relationship between those who act and those who adapt. For Freire, the banking model was defined by a relationship in which one party deposited knowledge and the other received it passively. The digital platforms of the present operate through a similar structure, though the deposit is not knowledge but behavioral stimuli designed to elicit predictable responses. The user is positioned as the recipient, the adapter, the one whose role is to respond rather than to question.

This structure is reinforced by the opacity of the systems that govern it. Users do not know what data has been collected about them. They do not know how algorithms have categorized them. They do not know why particular content appears and other content does not. They are told, if they bother to read the terms of service, that their data may be used to "improve their experience," a phrase that obscures the transformation of human experience into corporate asset.

The second point of convergence concerns the erosion of critical consciousness. Freire understood that domination succeeded when people could not perceive the

contradictions of their situation. The platforms of the present succeed by making contradictions invisible. The contradiction between free service and extracted data is hidden behind seamless interfaces. The contradiction between personalized content and algorithmic control is obscured by the language of choice and preference. The contradiction between social connection and corporate surveillance is normalized until it seems simply the cost of participating in modern life.

This normalization is not accidental. It is the result of deliberate design. Platforms invest enormous resources in creating interfaces that feel natural, that do not prompt questions, that make the underlying systems of extraction fade into the background. The user who questions why they see what they see, who wonders how their data is being used, who resists the passive consumption that the platform encourages—this user is a failure from the perspective of the platform's business model.

The third point of agreement concerns the fragmentation of collective action. Freire understood that liberation requires solidarity, which means recognizing that a person's situation is shared and can only be changed through collective effort. The platforms of the present, by contrast, address each user as an individual with unique preferences, unique vulnerabilities, unique behavioral patterns. They create personalized environments that isolate users from one another even as they facilitate the appearance of connection. This isolation is functional. Users who see themselves primarily as individuals making individual choices are less likely to recognize the structural conditions that shape their lives. They are less likely to act collectively to transform those conditions. They are more likely to accept the arrangements they inhabit as simply the way things are.

Sites of Resistance: Where Freirean Practice Might Intervene

If this analysis is accurate, then a Freirean response to contemporary conditions must be organized around three interconnected sites of intervention. These are not abstract possibilities. They emerge from practices that have already begun to take shape among those who have recognized the conditions they inhabit and begun to act against them.

1. Learning to See the System

The first site of intervention involves developing the capacity to perceive the systems that structure digital experience. This is not simply technical education—learning how algorithms work or how data is collected. It is closer to what Freire called *conscientização*: learning to see what has been rendered invisible, to question what has been presented as natural, to recognize the contradictions embedded in everyday experience.

This kind of learning happens in various settings. There are workshops where people learn to read the terms of service they have previously ignored. There are collective investigations where groups trace the data flows that connect their devices to corporate servers. There are practices of what might be called "interface literacy"—the ability to look at a screen and see not just content but the systems that selected that content, not just options but the choices that have been foreclosed.

What distinguishes this from conventional digital literacy is its orientation. The goal is not simply to navigate the digital environment more effectively. The goal is to develop critical

distance from that environment, to recognize it as a constructed space designed to produce particular outcomes, and to imagine alternative arrangements.

2. Reconceiving Extraction as a Shared Condition

The second area of intervention necessitates a shift in the prevailing understanding of data extraction. The prevailing narrative positions data privacy as an individual concern, a personal decision regarding the dissemination of information. This perspective, however, benefits the platforms by concealing the collective nature of the issue.

A Freirean approach would highlight that data extraction transcends individual privacy concerns, constituting a shared condition impacting all participants in the digital economy. It would acknowledge that the platforms' power stems from the aggregation of data across a vast user base, rather than from information pertaining to any single individual. Consequently, it would view resistance as necessitating collective action, rather than individual choice. This reframing is already evident in numerous movements. There are campaigns for data cooperatives that would allow users to own and manage their data collectively. There are efforts to establish data as a common that cannot be extracted without collective consent. There are practices of mutual support in which people help one another reduce their exposure to the most extractive platforms.

What these initiatives share is a recognition that the problem of data extraction cannot be solved by individual decisions. It requires collective organization, collective bargaining, collective construction of alternatives.

3. Building Alternatives and Withdrawing from Extraction

The third site of intervention involves concrete practices of building alternatives to the dominant platforms and withdrawing from participation in the most extractive systems. This is the moment of praxis—reflection that leads to action, action that informs further reflection.

These practices take various forms. There is the deliberate cultivation of what might be called "digital minimalism"—the intentional reduction of participation in extractive platforms. This is not simply about spending less time on devices. It is about refusing to provide the behavioral data that fuels the system. It is an act of withdrawal from relationships structured by extraction.

There is also the active construction of alternatives. People are building community networks that operate outside corporate infrastructure. They are developing open-source platforms governed by users rather than shareholders. They are creating spaces for dialogue and collective action that are not surveilled by platforms whose business model depends on extracting data from those interactions.

These practices are modest in scale compared to the reach of the dominant platforms. But they are significant as experiments in what Freire called "the pedagogy of the oppressed"—practices of collective action through which people learn to become subjects rather than objects, to act rather than merely adapt

Difficulties and Objections

Any proposal for Freirean practice in the digital age must confront significant difficulties. The first is the sheer scale of the systems that would need to be transformed. The platforms that extract behavioral data are among the largest

and most profitable corporations in human history. They have resources beyond anything Freire's peasant communities could have imagined.

The second difficulty is the integration of these systems into everyday life. It is not simply that people use platforms. It is that these platforms have become infrastructure—the means through which people communicate, find information, organize work, maintain relationships. Withdrawing from them carries real costs. It can mean losing access to communities, to opportunities, to the ordinary connections that make life possible.

The third difficulty is the invisibility of the systems that govern digital experience. Freire worked with people who could see their oppressors—the landowners, the bosses, the government officials who made decisions affecting their lives. The systems that shape digital experience have no visible face. There is no person to confront, no institution to occupy. The opacity of the system is itself a mechanism of domination.

These difficulties are real. They suggest that a Freirean approach in the digital age requires more than just using the same methods as earlier movements. Instead, it needs to create new ways of working together, suited to a world where power is spread out, hidden, and built into systems that seem unbiased.

But the difficulties do not invalidate the project. They simply indicate the scale of what is required. And they point to the necessity of the kind of critical consciousness that Freire described—the capacity to perceive contradictions, to recognize what has been rendered invisible, to imagine that the world as it is need not be the world as it will be.

Conclusion

1. The Unfinished Project

Freire concluded *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with a meditation on the unfinished character of liberation. He understood that the work of becoming fully human—of becoming subjects capable of acting on the world rather than merely adapting to it—is never complete. Each generation must take up the task anew, applying the insights of those who came before to conditions they could not have anticipated.

This is the task that faces those who would recover Freire's insights for the present moment. The conditions have changed. The mechanisms of domination have become more sophisticated, more intimate, more embedded in the ordinary practices of daily life. But the fundamental question remains the same: How do we cultivate the capacity to see the structures that shape our lives? How do we learn to recognize what has been presented as natural as the product of human action? How do we develop the collective practices through which we might act together to transform what we have learned to see?

These questions have no easy answers? They require the kind of sustained, collective inquiry that Freire called dialogue. They require the kind of patient, persistent work that Freire called praxis. They require the kind of hope that Freire insisted was not naive optimism but the recognition that the future is not predetermined, that it can be made by human action.

That hope is the ground on which a Freirean practice for the digital age must stand. Not the hope that the systems of extraction will collapse on their own. Not the hope that better platforms will emerge from the benevolence of

corporations. But the hope that people can learn to see what has been hidden from them, can learn to act together where they have been isolated, can learn to build alternatives where they have only consumed. This is the pedagogy of resistance.

It remains unfinished. It remains necessary.

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