■ Roberto Mazzini

ONE COIN, TWO SIDES BOAL AND FREIRE: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Boal and Freire came from the same cultural background and lived in the same period in Brazil. The first was a theater activist, the second a popular educator.
For both their action was political, for both, dialogue was important, for both the idea of oppressed people was a key point. Here I try to draw a path among different concepts from the two authors, showing differences and similarities.
It is stated that congruences are more than differences: while Boal underlines more the importance of body and the transformative power of theater as a way to create more awareness, Freire focuses on "to say our own word on the world".
Finally, I hope that both can be more widely used through tracing their strong interconnections.

DISCUSSION

1) Political dimension: are we neutral?
2) Theoretical background: who are the references of both?
3) Aims: why did they create what they created?
4) Discipline area: in which discipline did they place themselves?
5) Language: what were the main means of communication they have been using?
6) Key concepts: what are the milestones of their approaches?
7) Method: how do they suggest to proceed in the process of conscientization?

8) Tools and mechanisms of raising awareness: how does the conscientization work in their view?
9) Techniques: which tools do they propose to get their objectives?

1) Theory
Boal refers himself to the Marxist approach even if he never says he himself is a Marxist.
The critical view about his society has evident influences from the Marxist perspective and analysis; as in social classes struggle, the dominant ideas are the ideas of dominant groups, giving back to people the means of theater production, etc.
Freire has a double influence; the Marxist one is explicit in his text where he analyses the domination of oppressors, but also Theology of Liberation and Catholic Personalism are evident in the concept of love revolution etc.

2) Political dimension
Both authors stress the political side of their action and their discipline.
So, for Boal theater should be political as for Freire education is political.
There is no chance for both to be neutral in a world that is not fair but contains structure of power, unbalance of possibilities, inequalities. But "politics" is used in the ancient Greek meaning as management of polis/community, not as an ideological approach.
Connected to the maieutic attitude, both authors underline the importance to have a political engagement, but not ideological, rather to realize that we always have a political standpoint and we have to be aware of that.

3) Aims
Theater of the Oppressed's aim is to support groups of oppressed to find a way of liberation from the oppression they suffer.
What Boal identifies as main objectives for Theater of the Oppressed, which specify the previous aim are two:
- to make active the oppressed people in the theater setting, in order to enable them in their real life (active citizenship);
- to give back to people the means of theater production.
Boal rejects a so called "ideological theater" which tells people how to think and which solution they must accept; rather, he talks about a "political

theater", in which to experiment for possible change.
The Freirian pedagogy is devoted to making people more aware about their conditions in order to enable them to "be more", to overcome the social conditions that push them down on the current life and its limitations, to break down the fatalism, the acceptance of daily life as "natural". While an illiterate person is learning writing and reading, one is also learning to read the world in which one is immersed.
In different words, both authors want to stimulate a liberation from the oppressive conditions, one more on the side of political theater, the other mainly on the side of political education; both permeate the two ways with the social and political activation of the oppressed.

4) Disciplinary area
Boal often stated that his theater is moving at the border among art, politics, pedagogy, social action and therapy.
He meant that Theater of the Oppressed is not closed within a disciplinary enclosure, but is a bridge.
It is theater for sure, but a special one, because it is a political one: it wants to change the oppression in the world and for this reason in art+social action. Sometimes it can deal with a psychological disease, as a consequence of a bad social context, so in this case can be art+therapy. But it is also a process of awareness raising where groups of oppressed people explore their own oppression and learn how to face it better; in this case it can be seen as art+pedagogy, etc.
In synthesis, Theater of the Oppressed has to do with human beings and the totality of their lives, so it is hardly narrowed in a discipline.
Freire thinks of his *praxis* as pedagogical, but remarks many times on the political essence of his research. Pedagogy, he stated, is not neutral, but is political, because it can be in favour of oppressed or in favour of oppressors, sustaining oppression or stimulating liberation. So an emphasis on interdisciplinarity is common to both authors.

5) Language
The means they use to convey their process of conscientization are different. Boal uses theater, because at the origin of his political engagement there was a renewal of theater approach in Brazil. He stated in the early time that

theater was the main language because it can include all the other forms of language (verbal as narrative and poetry, images, sounds, body, lights…); in the last part of his life he changed the perspective by saying that all arts should contribute to humankind's liberation; in his words the task of Theater of the Oppressed is "to humanize humankind".
Theater in his vision is a global approach, because it includes and affects body, thinking and emotion, all the main levels of human experience.
In Freire the emphasis is on dialogue and verbal communication since the beginning. But in the process of coding and decoding he also used images as a bridge language to communicate with illiterate people.
In the practices of Boal and Freire, they used different forms of language with a little overlapping, but this does not mean it is not possible to mix up the two approaches and use different languages in both fields.
The difference has to do with the personal background and education of the two authors.
The conclusion is that the synergy between the two approaches should be strengthened to have a better impact on society and improving the activists' actions.

6) Key Concepts
At the conceptual level, they use similar ideas such as dialogue, oppressed/oppressor/oppression, rise/conscientization and political standing.
But here some differences arise: Boal's "body thinks" instead of the verbal language as a tool for the Freirian "conscientization". The focus is on action/body in Boal (also spect-actor) and the focus is on reflection/word in Freire.

Among the several concepts they created, I focus on the following:
Dialogue: Here there is a big difference. In Boal's view, dialogue is the aim of Theater of the Oppressed; he would like that among social classes, genders, ages and cultures, there was a balance, a dialogue, where each part should respect the others' needs and ideas. With that, the ideal of Theater of the Oppressed is to balance the different powers among men and women, rich and poor, black and white, youngsters and adults, disabled and not disabled people, etc. Boal contrasts dialogue with monologue that he sees as an oppression. He uses dialogue as an alternative to oppression in several occasions.

According to Freire, dialogue is the *via maestra* to obtain the awareness raising.
Only in dialogue can human beings grow and know better their condition and discover how "to be more". Dialogue in the former author is between different ones, in Freire among peers. In both authors it is positive, but for different purposes.

Oppressed/oppressors: This dichotomy is common in both authors; these words recur many times in their books and are the key points of their approach and practice. Oppressed is the person who lives an oppression, sometimes without full awareness, but often with the willingness to change it. Theater of the Oppressed aims to provide such people with specific and powerful tools to overcome oppression, to find solutions.
The oppressor in Boal swings between a bad guy who wants to keep his privileges or a social actor who responds to role expectation, due to being immersed in so-called "rituals".
In our opinion, both concepts can live together but it is important to be clear about the social context in which an oppressor acts, the conditionings of his/her action and not only his/her will. Sometimes, as history has shown, people have done terribly oppressive things with good intentions and not only to keep their privileges. So, the analysis of the figure of the oppressor is crucial to find useful ways to liberate us from oppressions and avoiding stereotypes of the oppressor.
In Freire too there is a struggle between oppressors and oppressed. The oppression lived by the oppressed is a block of his/her development as a human being. The oppressor is the one who wants to keep the situation of oppression but, different from Boal, Freire speaks about a common liberation: the oppressed should be able to break down oppression and to free himself and also the oppressors.

Oppressed colonization: a key point in Freire's thinking: the oppressed are oppressed also internally, actually the oppressor is internalised and often the oppressed do not want simply to break down oppression, but to replace oppressors.
Therefore, the importance to fight also against the internal oppressor in order to not repeat oppression once liberated.

Boal uses different words and concepts: he talks about osmosis as a mechanism through which the dominant ideas and the oppression mechanisms act in the oppressed body/mind/emotion. Through osmosis, oppressors exercise their own power, from outside and from inside. Therefore, the oppressed are doubly weakened and have to fight against two fronts. Echoing Marx, Boal says that the dominant ideas of a society come from the dominant classes and therefore also the oppressed often have the same ideas and desires; moreover, ideas and oppressive mechanisms are disseminated in each small social daily interaction, like a medical visit, a school lesson, and any other social ritual. In this way the oppression is renovated day by day, both at the ideological level and on the practical body/emotional level.

Boal went deeper in this practice when he came to Europe and found more_psychological oppressions; so he asked himself "where are the oppressors when a person feels bad psychologically?". To answer, he and his group in Paris developed a two-year long research project which resulted in the set of techniques called "Cops in the head". In these techniques the hypothesis is that the oppressors were internalised by the person oppressed and are now acting from inside, without need to have an external oppressive role. This research translated practically Freire's concept of colonisation of the oppressed and seems to me a conjunction point between both authors.

Finally, at a cultural level, Boal developed a research called "Aesthetics of the oppressed" where he explored how to create a popular culture, freeing oneself from the dominant culture. So, with his group of CTO Rio de Janeiro he developed pathways and techniques to use several artistic languages (music, painting, dance, singing…) to create performance where the oppression is described also with original creations by the oppressed group; the idea behind this is to avoid using the dominant culture's artifacts and to create one's own vision/culture by the oppressed. Finally, Boal specified better the idea of dominant culture, developing also tools to struggle against the colonization of the oppressed.

Popular knowledge valorization: Boal in the classical book "Theater of the Oppressed" describes many ways to do popular culture or popular theater, some commercial or folkloric, some progressive. But the whole

Theater of the Oppressed is based (see the concept "maieutic") on the strong idea that oppressed people have a knowledge, they can know the oppression and how to solve it; the task of this theater is to create the better conditions for this exploration, not to teach them what to do. Even the last stage of "Aesthetics of the Oppressed" imagines that oppressed people can create their own culture and that the upper culture is not better than the lower, because both are expressions of different class interests. The idea in Boal is made extreme by the famous sentence "everybody can do theater, even actors". Of course, he does not mean that "immediately" everyone is a good actor, but that human beings have this potential inside and theater can create the conditions in which this potential emerges.
In Freire too, there is a big trust in the oppressed to be able to analyse their own situation and discover their possibility "to be more". In both, the starting point of their action is popular knowledge. Of course, both do not want to stop here, they aim to go deeper, questioning the "naive knowledge of the world", so for instance in Boal the Forum-Theater should show not only how the oppression appears, but also its hidden mechanisms (nonverbal communication, use of space, use of object, rituals, structural oppression, language oppression, cultural oppression, etc.).
Freire as well starts by questioning the popular naive knowledge when the attitude is passive, fatalist or negative.
The valorisation of popular knowledge goes together with its problematization, without judgment or imposing of any idea, but reflecting through action (Boal) or through dialogue (Freire).
In both, popular knowledge is the starting point of a research process.

Level of consciousness: Freire identifies different levels of consciousness in different periods of his practice; sometimes he spoke about "naive consciousness, semi-transitive and transitive or critical one".
In Boal there isn't such detailed division, but he is aware that people should be helped to reach a deeper awareness about the lows, the mechanism which rule the oppression, to discover the natural lows ruling the nature.
Some T.O. practitioners started to deepen the analysis of consciousness

in oppressed people, talking about alienates and victims. For instance, *Forn de Theater* Pa'tothom, a historical Barcelona based group of T.O., defines the alienated, the oppressed, and those who do not feel oppressed. As a victim, one is oppressed when one feels and thinks of him/herself as oppressed, but also powerless, and finally the oppressed is the person aware of oppression and willing to fight against it. This reflection reminds one in some ways of Freire's levels of consciousness.

Praxis: Both authors underline the connection between theory and practice that Freire, recalling Marx, calls *praxis*. Both want to know the world and to change it, to support the oppressed to know it and transform it.
Boal sees the praxis in the Forum play, where the audience is invited to come onto the stage, to replace the oppressed people in the story and to try to change the situation. But he also thinks that all Theater of the Oppressed techniques have to bring people to concrete social actions (a strike, a demonstration, a petition, an occupation, a sit-in, etc.).
The reflection in Boal is parallel to action on the stage or shortly after that but can be also in the preparation of the play, when the group chooses what to stage or not, or also after the Forum when the group decides how to proceed, and what concrete actions to carry out.
And in a cycle**,** the results of the Forum session can affect the structure of the play and the results of the concrete social action can affect the group strategy to fight oppression.
Freire thinks the union between action and reflection a *conditio sine qua non* for a popular educator: his/her practice without theory/reflection is empty activism, he said; a theory/reflection with no practice is empty intellectualism. Popular educators should reflect systematically on their practice so that they can draft a sort of systematization of the discoveries made during a period and to advance in the liberation. So, we need to join the two sides in our practice.
Similarly, Boal joins the two sides in the Forum play, in its construction and in the whole T.O. Process.

Human being: According to Boal, "the essence of human being is theater". But what is theater for Boal? Theater is a human natural feature, the skill

"to see oneself in action". When I think about what I'm doing/saying, I see myself in action. When I draw a hunting scene, I see myself in action. When I come onto the stage I am acting and at the same time I see myself in action; and the audience too, can see my action and, if they identify in myself, they can see them in action.
So, the essence of theater is not acting, but this ability to see me, to access another level of complexity.
In other words, Boal speaks about human beings as a box; "the person is a box", he says, in his workshops about "cops in the head", a box where each of us has his/her multiplicity, all the possibilities to be…courageous and timid, angel and devil, etc. The task of theater is to warm up this box and let other aspects of myself go out, in order to enrich my "simple" one-dimensional personality.
In Freire a key concept is "to be more", which sounds like Boal's box. During a process of conscientization, oppressed people discover the limits of their humanity, limits that are social and not natural, and which therefore can be changed. If the oppressed people perceive that, they can start to find strategies to transform both reality and themselves.

Globality of transformation: In both authors, when describing transformation, their attention is on both sides, external and internal. External because the role of oppressors is not vanished. They exist and exercise their own power and role.
They have to be tackled and effective strategies have to be found. At the same time the struggle is internal, because of the colonization of the oppressed (Freire) and osmosis (Boal).
So, both liberations should be pursued in parallel, perhaps with different accents according to the moment and the group.
In Boal there is also a special emphasis on another idea of "globality", the idea that body, mind and emotion are strictly entwined, so the change in one dimension can affect the other ones. This idea comes likely from the theater practice where it is clear that all the dimensions are affected and brings Boal to pay attention not only to the oppressive action and reaction, but also on the results of oppression in the mind/body/emotion of the oppressed.
Oppression in Boal's vision is embodied in the so called social masks,

conditioning the posture, gestures, voice, sight…mechanising body but also mind (way to think, key ideas, etc.) and emotion (which ones felt, which ones expressed, etc.).
This second "globality" is not clearly expressed in Freire's thinking, but seems to me crucial to better understand oppression and to overcome it.

7) *Method*
At the methodological level they both use a maieutic approach. As already noted, due to the trust they have in oppressed people and their knowledge, both see in a transmissive approach another way to oppress people. So after both having started in a passive way, they soon discovered the importance to change not only the content, but the relationship between "learners/oppressed" and "teachers/activists".
Boal provides the famous Virgilio anecdote, which happened in a small village of Northeast Brazil. To give questions is the key attitude of the Joker (Boal) and the Educator (Freire). The Socratic art of giving questions would deserve another article because it is not so automatic and requires attention from the practitioners in order to respect the other's culture, but also to be able to problematize it.
The second important methodological aspect is that for both, their approach is not a fixed method. Boal shows his approach as a tree, a living being, who grows, enriches in branches/techniques, etc. Freire advised, "do not copy me, re-invent the method". Also, this point seems to me an important similarity between the two researchers and a key point that is not easy to pursue, in balance between orthodoxy and innovation.
In fact, in Theater of the Oppressed world, there is sometimes confusion around dialogue, which is seen as simply starting talking, while dialogue means equal power, negotiating on the same basis.
Some theater group or professional is working in private enterprises without questioning how to stay in this structure of power without falling down in being manipulated or manipulating the oppressed. The same can happen in school, prison**,** wherever there is an imbalance of power and practitioners do not question power relations but rather perceive them to be neutral. Is this innovation? Re-invention? Or betrayal of principles? There is some more little shift from fighting oppression and starting dialogue? Of course dialogue is important

and, according to non-violent philosophy, first, one tries to dialogue and then to fight if dialogue is not possible. But behind this approach, sometimes, there is a misunderstanding about oppression that is not a simple misunderstanding in communication, because it has to do with different powers. So, communication is important if we also analyse the power relationship, otherwise to promote dialogue among groups with different power risks is to support manipulation from the most powerful side.

8) *Process of conscientization*

There is a sort of parallelism about the way oppressed people are brought to awareness in both authors.

In Boal's framework this is called ascesis/rise, which means in his words, "going from the phenomenon to the law behind"; or in Brecht's perspective, "to show not how true things are but how truly are things". The conscientization is enhanced thanks to theater mechanism of "distancing" (or Brecht's estrangement) that allows people to see the daily life in a deeper way (remember that theater for Boal is "to see oneself in action"). The ascesis/rise is facilitated by the joker with appropriate questions to the audience, promoting the investigation on rules behind the facts: why is this happening? What are the reasons for that? What are the structural and cultural elements affecting the story? Etc.

In Freire's view, conscientization emerges thanks to questions and dialogue within the oppressed group, mediated by the popular educator and by the techniques of coding/decoding.

The real world of oppressed people, collected by popular educators in the early experiences, was coded in visual drawings and then decoded through dialogue that allowed the group to go deeper into the situation, finding first the chance to change and then the reasons for oppression.

We could say that Freire's coding is similar to the staging in T.O. and decoding in the first analysis made by the audience in a Forum-Theater session, and later in the spect-actor's intervention according to Boal.

In both cases the joker/educator is not judging the group/public comments but simply organizing the debate, promoting a deeper thinking, the jump from "to see reality" to see "the chance of transforming it".

The big difference between the two is that for Boal the key point for

awareness raising is in the spect-actor's action while in Freire it chiefly in the dialogue among the oppressed.
In this sense it seems to me that Boal has a more comprehensive approach that takes account of the globality of human beings and reduces the gap between idea and practice.

9) *Techniques*
At a technical level**,** of course**,** the differences are more marked: Boal had been using/inventing theater tools while Freire used different languages and techniques coming from literacy, popular culture, etc.
Techniques reveal the focus on theater as a concept of the human being and also as a main tool for awareness raising (Boal), or in dialogue among the oppressed (Freire). However, nothing prevents popular educators from using body or theater techniques and many different arts are used daily (painting, music, graphics, puppets, etc.) depending on the specific educator's skills.
The common feature of all techniques is that they are nor too complex to be largely used, nor focused on right/wrong answers, but are tools to develop abilities, to open a space of research, to start a dialogue (both verbal and non-verbal). They all are ways to create a group and to support a research around oppression more than a way to learn a specific topic or skill, a way to specialise themselves and be evaluated.
So many times, there is not a wrong way to respond, but the techniques are more a research field and each answer/reaction is a piece of information about ourselves and our world.

CONCLUSION

I think that the two authors are two faces of the same coin, with more elements in common than different. The synergy between them is a common advantage and unfortunately, at least in Italy, the two practitioners are not working together structurally; most of the time one uses only one approach and maybe does not know the other one.
Our Boal Freire National Network is important because in just a few years it strengthened this connection.
A second remark is that in some cases Boal is more useful, in other cases

Freire, or at different stages of the research, one or the other.
For instance, I'd say that if a group in not aware enough of oppression, Freire's approach could be better because Boal's requires people who know, in some way, to have a problem/oppression, at least as a generic feeling. Then the process can bring more awareness.
On the other hand, the process triggered by Boal is more holistic and powerful (at least in Italy, maybe in Europe, while in South America popular educators use many tools and languages coming from arts), because it engages emotion and action and not only rationality. Moreover, the ritual theater can be really powerful to mobilize people towards action.
Thirdly, the interconnection among the two methods could be better explored; during a long-term process it is possible and desirable to use both approaches depending on the stage of the process. Maybe, in some context, Freire's is better than Boal's method: not all people like to play theater and someone can express one's self better in a verbal way than through action. So, depending on the individuals, groups, and stages of the process, one approach could be more useful than the other.

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