

## Article

# Current and Future Potentials of Liberation Pedagogies: A Discussion of Paulo Freire's, Augusto Boal's, and Johannes A. van der Ven's Approaches

Jan-Hendrik Herbst 

Department of Humanities and Theology, Institute for Catholic Theology, Technical University of Dortmund, 44227 Dortmund, Germany; jan-hendrik.herbst@tu-dortmund.de

**Abstract:** In a time of social crises, pedagogical approaches are necessary that are sensitive to power relations, social crises, and political transformations. The pedagogies of Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal, and Johannes A. van der Ven represent such approaches. In this article, I aim to critically re-read these three theories and contextualize them within the vibrant and transnational history of liberation theologies. This historical approach makes it possible to uncover untapped potential for today and to think of liberation pedagogy at the cutting edge. Even though the three approaches were developed in contexts different from today's, Freire, Boal, and Van der Ven, reflected on some commonalities that are also characteristic of the social crises of our time. With their help, I am going to outline three elements useful for the much-needed elaboration of a contemporary liberation pedagogy. A lively *theory-practice-relationship* and an embedding of theory in social movements (1); a complex *analysis and critique of society and education* and an easy-to-understand short version of it (2); and a profound *emancipatory concept of education* that gives freedom to learners while not being politically neutral (3).

**Keywords:** history of liberation theology; history of liberation pedagogy; Paulo Freire; Augusto Boal; Johannes A. van der Ven; theory-practice-relationship; critique of society and school; emancipatory education



**Citation:** Herbst, Jan-Hendrik. 2023. Current and Future Potentials of Liberation Pedagogies: A Discussion of Paulo Freire's, Augusto Boal's, and Johannes A. van der Ven's Approaches. *Religions* 14: 145. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020145>

Academic Editors: Peter Admirand and Thia Cooper

Received: 5 December 2022

Revised: 10 January 2023

Accepted: 13 January 2023

Published: 25 January 2023



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## 1. Introduction

The present is characterized by social inequality and poverty, violence and war, ecological peril, and exploitation (e.g., Herbst 2020). In such a time, pedagogical approaches are needed that are sensitive to power relations, social crises, and political transformations. Liberation pedagogies (e.g., Wolf 2017; Oldenski 1997), such as Paulo Freire's, Augusto Boal's, and Johannes A. van der Ven's approaches, stand for such pedagogical thinking, which will be discussed in the following article. The article answers the question of the current and future potentials of these approaches to liberation pedagogy. The perspective of the article combines a general and a religious pedagogical view. In this way, the liberation-theological content of the approaches discussed and the potential of religious education (especially in schools) should become clear.

Four Weberian ideal types can describe the present references to liberation pedagogy. First, there is a *radicalized continuation*: pedagogues like Bell Hooks (1994), Henry Giroux (2011), Peter McLaren (2015), and Frei Betto (2018) carry on Freire's approach in particular and liberation pedagogy in general. Their references are not purely affirmative, but they remain within this tradition of thought. Their aim is to take Freire and other approaches seriously and to continue—and, if necessary, radicalize—them under current conditions (McLaren and Jandrić 2017). A similar development can be found in relation to Augusto Boal, for example, in his son Boal et al. (2015).

Second, there are *defusing adaptations*: authors of this reception often limit the impulses to the fact that liberation pedagogy brought about an orientation toward learning subjects and pupils. For example, Kira Funke (2010) embeds Freire's thinking in a social

constructivist pedagogy. Thus, she partially weakens Freire's socio-critical perspectives. After all, these ideas fit well with a school system that focuses on competency orientation. A similar development can be observed, for example, in the work of the *Centro de Teatro do Oprimido* in Rio de Janeiro, insofar as rather reformist adaptations of Boal's approach are advocated there.

Third, there is *harsh criticism and rejection*: authors like Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020) consider liberation educators like Freire as precursors of identity politics today (which they regard problematic). In their view, these educators laid the groundwork for a dangerous tribal worldview. In some countries, such as the US and Brazil, liberation educators are even the bogeymen of right-wing identity politics. During his presidential campaign, for example, Jair M. Bolsonaro boasted to his supporters that he would "enter the Ministry of Education with a flamethrower to remove Paulo Freire" (quoted according to Woods 2020). In the horizon of such escapades, the vehement but well-founded criticism of educators such as Martin Stauffer (2007) seems almost harmless.

Fourth, the issue of *academic oblivion* is significant. Van der Ven's "Kritische Godsdienst-didactiek" is the prime example of this. This Dutch religious educator with an international reputation is best known for his empirical research and human rights pedagogy. His 700-page work on liberation pedagogy was primarily noticed mainly in the Netherlands and partly in Germany (e.g., Mette 1986). Without invoking the scientific discipline of *agnotology*,<sup>1</sup> it is clear that the forgetting of such approaches may be a consequence of their problems, but also of the changing zeitgeist and new epistemological interests (e.g., Herbst 2022, pp. 211–97; Knauth 2003, pp. 51–152).

It is interesting that the four types have different emphases. Type 1 and type 3 elaborate on the socio-critical and utopian perspective of liberation pedagogy but evaluate it differently. Type 1 perpetuates it. Type 3 devalues it. Type 2 and type 3 share reservations about this critical orientation, but deal with it differently. Type 2 deradicalizes the liberation approaches. Type 3 rejects them. Type 3 and type 4 are related because the latter can follow the former. Moreover, type 4 (*academic oblivion*), is probably the most effective way to achieve type 3's goal: to debunk liberation theories and the questions and attempted answers that accompany them.

The aim of this article is to take seriously the strengths of the different types, especially type 1 and type 2, and to make them productive in their mutual field of tension. In doing so, I do not simply presuppose a position, but it should be possible to unfold a reasoned view—even in the face of the fundamental critiques (type 3). The following re-reading of Freire's, Boal's, and Van der Ven's approaches thus does not simply aim at a "Retrotopia" (Bauman 2017). Its goal is not to 'make liberation pedagogy great again'. Rather, I pursue a redemptive critique ('rettende Kritik') of the three approaches in the sense of Walter Benjamin. In doing so, the focus is primarily on their positive impulses, without thematizing their problematic sides in detail (in contrast to e.g., Zumhof 2012).

Moreover, also with a view to the following remarks, it should be noted that historiography of liberation pedagogy still too rarely considers the entire breadth of approaches (e.g., Orth 2021) and that, especially, out-of-school education still receives too little attention (e.g., Gärtner and Herbst 2020, pp. 421–609).

## 2. History and Context: Liberation Theology and Education

On the one hand, a distinction must be made between liberation theology and liberation pedagogy. There are theological approaches that do not address pedagogical issues and vice versa. For example, critical pedagogy in the U.S. often leaves out any spiritual or religious dimension (for a brief overview of this tradition: Vossoughi and Gutiérrez 2016, pp. 140–45)—even though this dimension has been increasingly addressed recently (McLaren and Jandrić 2017). On the other hand, there is an explicit convergence of theological and pedagogical thought among the authors mentioned in this article. In particular, their roots in the context of liberation theology are important in order to understand their pedagogical concepts.

The three approaches selected are representative of liberation pedagogy in the 1970s and 1980s. They come from Brazil and the Netherlands, two countries that were strongly influenced by liberation theology and political theologies. The names of Dom Hélder Câmara, Pedro Casaldáliga, Clodovis, and Leonardo Boff as well as Carlos Mesters or Edward Schillebeeckx are examples. The Dutch catechism and the Brazilian basic ecclesial communities became pioneers.

The connections between European and Latin American theology and church become clear in what the historian Gerd-Rainer Horn (2015) calls the “Spirit of Vatican II”. This means that the Second Vatican Council was an *event* that linked church reform movements across national borders. The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* was of particular importance. A key figure of this period was the German theologian Johann B. Metz (Metz 1973; Metz and Rottländer 1988), who promoted the exchange between Europe and Latin America (e.g., Horn 2015, pp. 37–43; Janßen et al. 2018). The “Spirit of Vatican II” directly influenced Câmara, the Boff brothers, or Schillebeeckx (and vice versa). Moreover, this spirit had an impact on Freire or Van der Ven, mediated, among others, by the aforementioned theologians. All these authors, the theologians as well as the pedagogues, shared the basic theological concept of a “utopian messianism” (Horn 2015, pp. 24–25). This refers to the idea that the kingdom of God is not otherworldly and purely transcendent. Rather, it aims at an active humanization of this world here and now.

The Second Vatican Council can also illustrate the historical connection between liberation theology and education. The various synods, such as the *II. Latin American Bishops’ Conference in Medellín* (1968) or the *Pastoraal Concilie van de Nederlandse Kerkprovincie* in Noordwijkerhout (1966–1970), tried to implement the decisions of Vatican II at the local level. In this context, educational efforts were also developed, for example, within the framework of the *Semana Internacional de Catequesis* (1969), which also took place in Medellín in 1968. The influence of this congress on liberation pedagogy was great (e.g., Grzona and Arés 1999, pp. 1588–89). It led to a transnational exchange (e.g., Exeler 1968) and to educators like Freire being received in Europe (e.g., Herbst 2021, p. 23). In the wake of this vibrant dynamic, scholars developed a political religious pedagogy and a liberation catechesis in Europe and Latin America (e.g., Gevaert 1987, p. 367; 1985, chp. 1.II). In this course, educators in French speaking countries (e.g., Avalos 1971), in the Netherlands (e.g., Lombaerts 1976), in Italy (e.g., Medica 1973), or in Germany (e.g., Exeler 1970), for example, received Latin American pedagogy (e.g., Van der Ven 1982, pp. 400–5). In addition to these strongly Catholic exchange processes, the role of the World Council of Churches, for which Freire was active in Geneva, for example, should also be highlighted (Ahme 2022b).

The differences between Latin American and European liberation pedagogy, which may be rooted in the fact that they were dealing with military dictatorships on the one hand and liberal democracies on the other, should not be ignored. With Horn (2018, p. 2), however, it can be argued that “the boundaries sometimes erected between post-Vatican II Latin American Liberation Theology and Western European Left Catholicism are, to a significant extent, historically—and theologically—unwarranted and artificial”.

### 3. Liberation Pedagogies: Three Different Approaches

In the following text, I will present the three different approaches to liberation pedagogy mentioned above. They were chosen because they represent different aspects of liberation pedagogy: internationally known (Freire, Boal) and forgotten approaches (Van der Ven); intuitive (Freire) and systematic theories (Van der Ven); cognitive (Freire, Van der Ven) and aesthetic pedagogy (Boal); approaches from central Europe (Van der Ven) and the global south (Freire, Boal); adapting (Van der Ven) or partially disregarding academic customs (Boal, Freire). In this horizon, they represent a broad spectrum of liberation pedagogy and can therefore be used to reflect on the topic more generally than it would have been possible in relation to one or two approaches. Moreover, there are relationships between the three pedagogies, e.g., Van der Ven and especially Boal refer strongly to Freire.

### 3.1. Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Paulo Freire is the best known and most cited liberation educator. In the international context, the importance of Paulo Freire is enormous (e.g., [Ahme 2021](#)). Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy has left a deep mark on international pedagogy and religious education up to this day ([Ahme 2022a](#), pp. 226–39; [Byrne 2011](#)). His thinking has several sources, such as Marxist theory and liberation theology. However, his approach also has some similarities with poststructural theories ([Funke 2010](#), pp. 126–31). Anthropological and social ontological assumptions about humans and society, which also inform the thinking of Boal and Van der Ven, form the basis of his theory: it is not predetermined what the human being is. The human being is unfinished and open. People can free themselves from the conditions of alienation by which they are shaped and they can develop themselves in greater freedom. They can help shape society, which can be changed through practice, and work responsibly for a better world in which all people can live in dignity. This can be achieved by people joining together in dialogue. Freire's hope for a good life for everyone is based on this fundamental understanding of the world.

Against this background, Freire formulates a profound critique of modern schooling, which is determined by external factors such as economic expectations and the state's goal of combating extremism. The main subject of criticism in his "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" is the so-called "'banking' concept of education as an instrument of oppression" ([Freire 1970](#), p. 7). This notion of learning is characterized by the fact that students are expected to accumulate knowledge. Curricula and teachers specify the content of this knowledge. Students are seen as a blank page, a *tabula rasa*, to be filled. The difference between teacher and student in this learning model is very large. An *imaginary red line* separates them. The teacher is the knower who passes on his knowledge. The students are the ones who are ignorant and absorb the knowledge. "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor." ([Freire 1970](#), p. 72). Freire criticizes this model of learning in several ways. An important point of criticism is its political implications: it perpetuates a "culture of silence" ([Freire 1970](#), p. 30) and thus stabilizes the unjust status quo of social relations. The bankers' method of learning makes students passive. They accept the world presented to them and conform to the apparent reality. The name of the model already suggests a perspective critical of capitalism, which Freire later elaborates in relation to a specific historical phase. "Neoliberalism" leads to a pragmatic reduction of education, to the training and evaluation of competencies that "the market" demands, which makes a critical-utopian education impossible (e.g., [Freire 2007](#), pp. 97–121; [2008](#), pp. 104–20; for a discussion of these recent texts: e.g., [Mette 2021](#), pp. 21–24).

Freire's counter-model to this is the concept of problem-posing dialogue, which centers around so-called "generative themes" ([Freire 1970](#), pp. 79–86). Liberation is a main goal of this education; it is "not a gift, not a self-achievement, but a mutual process" ([Freire 1970](#), p. 7). In this model of thinking, it is assumed that learners bring their own experiences and interpretations of the world into the learning process. These are shaped by the social conditions in which they have been socialized. Together with the teacher, learners now try not to simply adopt the knowledge presented to them, but to question it. The objective is to develop a critical awareness of reality. On the one hand, this means questioning seemingly self-evident basic assumptions and, on the other hand, accepting what stands up to criticism. In this model, there is no imaginary red line between teacher and student because students are experts in their own life experiences. In this sense, the people who participate in the learning process are *teacher-student* and *student-teacher*, respectively. Thus, dialogue is a two-way communication that is subject-oriented and "world-mediated" ([Freire 1970](#), p. 7). Methodologically, Freire further develops his educational conception in relation to the study of so-called generative themes, i.e., the themes that emerge from the context of the students' social circumstances and shape them in their everyday life ([Freire 1970](#), pp. 87–124).

Freire is also aware that education alone does not make a new society possible. Therefore, he draws two results from his dialogical approach and his goal of liberation. First,



education is understood as part of social movements that already choose social and political ways to change society. From the dialogical approach to the world arises the desire to act together with others and to shape coexistence (Freire 2007, pp. 144–47). The importance of social movements for Freire is exemplified by his sympathy for the Landless Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*). Moreover, he even recognizes in such movements a paradigmatic role model for other excluded people (Streck 2012, pp. 7–8). And second, education is not only or even primarily school-based education, but also extracurricular practice. Freire himself has always understood education as part of social change that overcomes poverty, exploitation, and oppression. Freire's literacy work and alphabetization campaign in the global south (e.g., Brazil, Chile, or Guinea Bissau), which he developed, respectively, and which applied the educational concept described, are an example of this pedagogical practice. Before teaching people to read and write, it was about learning about their context and knowledge. The goal was to empower people and to break the culture of silence. Only after that was it about developing a reflexive relationship to these pre-concepts and learning about the concrete cultural techniques. In such a program, reading and writing enable a new access to the world, cultural participation, and the possibility of criticism and resistance.

### 3.2. Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed

Augusto Boal, a Brazilian like Freire with similar experiences (e.g., migration biography and conflicts with the military dictatorship), further developed Freire's concept of education. Boal takes over the anthropological and social ontological basic assumptions from Freire for the most part. He transfers Freire's critique of the teacher–student relationship to the theater, where he also sees an imaginary red line between active actors and passive spectators (e.g., Boal 1993). He crossed that line, for example, by having people write plays in groups. He recruited actors from slums and prisons and had them perform their own plays. Overall, the Theatre of the Oppressed deals not only with the past and with the imaginary but with present reality and future possibilities.

Freire himself understood education as the development of consciousness and thus primarily as a rational process. Even though sensory perception, feelings, and the body play a role in Freire's consciousness-raising (Mette 2021, p. 23), their fundamental importance only becomes truly clear through Boal's general approach. With Boal, and especially in relation to the further development of his approach (Boal 2009; Fritz 2012; Santos 2016), an *aesthetic turn* enters liberation pedagogy. It is assumed that oppression involves not only thinking, but also feeling and perceiving. Thus, according to Boal, the culture of silence is not only based on cognitive structures but is inscribed in the body. The human senses of seeing, hearing, and smelling have been profoundly shaped by modern capitalist society (e.g., media consumption) and must be reappropriated. To achieve this, Boal develops a multi-layered approach that can be located at the intersection of theater, pedagogy, and political practice. He developed various methods and techniques that show how theater, education, and political action can collaborate to humanize society. Famous examples include the "Forum Theatre", the "Newspaper Theatre", the "Legislative Theatre", the "Rainbow of desire", and the "Invisible Theatre" (Boal 2022; for a brief overview, see Staffler 2009, pp. 66–124). Two of these methods will now be explained in more detail.

First, Forum Theatre is developed by a group of people who want to work on a political issue of oppression (e.g., sexism, racism, exploitation). In different ways, but mostly with the help of creative techniques and exercises (e.g., "Image Theatre"), this group deals with their own experiences on the chosen topic. In the course of this process, they develop their own play, which they perform in public spaces (e.g., on the street). Crucial for storytelling in Boal's understanding is thereby a conflict between protagonist (oppressed) and antagonist (oppressor). Invited and passing people can—the short play is repeated several times—slip into the role of the actors and act themselves. At the point where they want to intervene, they can shout "Stop!" and try out alternative ways of acting. In this way, the red line between actors and spectators is broken, there are only "spect-actors", as Boal

calls them. Thus, a new play is spontaneously created with old and new actors. After each different repetition of the play, the respective plot is reflected in relation to the potential for liberation. The so-called “joker” (*Curinga*) takes on the task of moderating the discussion between all participants and spectators. The main goal is to understand the problem, the conflict, in its complexity in order to create adequate and collective possibilities of action. One implementation of Forum Theatre is, for example, the reflection of controversial issues such as LGBTIQ\* (Hammer 2021).

Second, Boal developed the Invisible Theatre primarily for public spaces (e.g., restaurants or subways). In a social conflict situation, a group of actors develops a play on a topic that is performed in real life. The bystanders, who are not actors, do not know (at first) that it is a play. They think it is an everyday scene and they must respond in some way. In these scenes, the actors play out typical oppression situations from everyday life, such as racist discrimination or a sexist assault. The method is well thought out and there are various protective mechanisms to prevent explosive developments (e.g., Staffler 2009, pp. 74–78). After the Invisible Theatre, bystanders are engaged in reflection conversations by insiders. This method can also be used in history or religion classes, e.g., to teach about the Holocaust or to deal with the topic “Christian churches under National Socialism”. Such performative simulations open up cognitive and emotional learning opportunities with regard to one’s own entanglement in contexts of power (Herbst 2022, p. 437).

### 3.3. Johannes A. van der Ven’s Approach of Liberation Catechesis

Johannes A. van der Ven’s approach is the most systematic outline of a Dutch liberation catechesis (on the term: Lombaerts 1976, pp. 15–20; Van der Ven 1986, pp. 432–33). Liberation catechesis is a “current” (“*stroming*” in Dutch) that discusses the social framework in religious education critically and contrasts it with the anthropological and social ideas of the Gospel (Van der Ven 1986; 1982, pp. 400–5). There are also other names for liberation catechesis, such as emancipatory, political, or critical religious education (Eijkman and van Lier 1979, p. 9). The main sources of liberation catechesis are, on the one hand, political and liberation theology (e.g., Metz and Gutiérrez), and, on the other hand, critical and liberation pedagogy (e.g., Mollenhauer and Freire) (Van der Ven 1986, p. 433). The anthropological and social ontological assumptions are more or less the same as those of Freire and Boal. The context, the Netherlands in the 1970s, was important for this kind of liberation catechesis. Similar to the developments of religious education in other European and Latin American countries, there was the so-called “anthropological turn” in theology and the Catholic Church. An orientation towards experience, everyday life, concrete persons, and their interests was common. Some scholars thought this shift further and developed political conceptions of religious education that reflected critically the societal context (e.g., Kuiper 1980, pp. 407–11; Van der Ven 1986, pp. 432–33). Indeed, Catholicism and theology in the Dutch 1970s were namely influenced by political and liberation theology (e.g., Hoger Katechetisch Instituut (H.K.I.) 1979), such as Van der Ven’s academic teacher Edward Schillebeeckx.

In his major work, “*Kritische Godsdienstdidactiek*”, Van der Ven (1982) develops a critique of contemporary religious education and argues for a new concept based on the biblical idea of the “kingdom of God” as opposed to a “bourgeois ideology”. He thus shows how to combine fruitfully a pedagogy of liberation with a theology of the kingdom of God (Stachel 1984, p. 87). To illustrate this, Van der Ven’s critical examination of how exactly religious education contributes to the reproduction of social ideology can serve as an example. For this purpose, the author uses the aforementioned and theoretically determined concept of religion as “bourgeois ideology” in the sense of critical theory and political theology (Van der Ven 1982, pp. 23–43). Van der Ven concretizes his considerations by means of a pedagogical analysis of church texts and the curricular orientation of religious education (Van der Ven 1982, pp. 44–61). He thus offers a qualitative-empirical approach that complements other studies in this historical period—in particular, a critical analysis of religious education textbooks (Herbst 2022, pp. 245–47). Therefore, he an-

analyzes two bishops' letters on religious education from the Netherlands and France to identify the extent to which bourgeois ideology is explicit and implicit in them. In doing so, Van der Ven (1982, p. 61) specifies this form of ideology on the basis of the characteristics "humanistic pedagogy", "personalism" and "compensation and differentiation programs" and transfers abstract social theoretical considerations to concrete questions of religious didactics. Within this approach, Van der Ven offers what he calls a blueprint for future analysis (Van der Ven 1982, p. 61). Finally, he outlines some perspectives on how his approach can be implemented concretely in schools and religious education (Van der Ven 1982, pp. 365–669). In the Dutch 1970s, there were also some projects that further illustrate how religious education for liberation can be concretized: Lombaerts (1976, pp. 3–11), for instance, presents two projects of Bulckens and the H.K.I. (Higher Catechetical Institute of Nijmegen). These projects and Van der Ven's approach, like Freire's, are about making space for children and young people's issues and giving them the opportunity to reflect on their social environment. At the same time, the pupils are confronted with the liberation message of Christianity, which can invite them to act and shape the world together with church or secular actors.

#### 4. Current Potentials: Discussion of the Approaches

Even though the three approaches (hereafter: Freire and Co.) were developed in a different context than today, the three authors have given much thought to commonalities that are also characteristic of the aforementioned social crises of our time (chap. 1). Therefore, their approaches still have current and future potential. I will outline at least three elements that are useful for the urgently needed elaboration of a contemporary pedagogy of liberation:

First, I want to stress the *Theory-Practice-Relationship*: Freire and Co. were part of social movements responding to the respective contexts and the crises there (e.g., Freire and alphabetization; Boal and resistance to military dictatorship; Van der Ven and collective education in the 'Jewish Teaching House' (*joodse leerhuis*)).<sup>2</sup> They worked as Gramscian 'organic intellectuals' rather than as 'free-floating intellectuals' (similarly conceptualized in Critical Theory: e.g., Honneth 2017). They show that today liberation pedagogy can only work if there are social movements and fields of practice to which the pedagogues belong. This fact becomes even clearer when looking at the differences between the three authors. Freire's and Boal's thoughts have survived until today in the framework of international networks that support liberation pedagogy. Although Freire and Boal are not really established in the scientific community (like Van der Ven), their liberation pedagogies are more alive because there are groups all over the world that read and live their visions. In terms of the Theatre of the Oppressed, for example, it is worth mentioning: the *Centro Teatro do Oprimido* in Rio de Janeiro, the *Curinga Berlin*, the *Centre for Community Dialogue and Change* in India, the *ARGE Forum Theater Wien*, and the *Theatre of the Oppressed New York City*. There is also the *International Theatre of the Oppressed Organisation* and the *international Magdalena Network*. Freire and Boal are global phenomena although their approaches are not relevant to academic pedagogy (except in "critical pedagogy"). It is obvious that Freire's and Boal's style seem less academically elaborated than Van der Ven's on the one hand, but on the other hand, it is easier to understand and more vivid. This could be a reason for their success outside the academic world. The goal of both authors is not only a theory of liberation pedagogy but also a praxis that must be lived if it is to survive. Today's context for such practices of liberation pedagogy might be social movements like "Black Lives Matter" or "Fridays for Future". They advocate a "Revolution for Life" (von Redecker 2021) in terms of Freire and Co. While Van der Ven has also been influenced by social movements, his approach was not part of the corresponding groups and did not influence social movements as much. This is probably one reason why the "Kritische Godsdienstdidactiek" is not in general memory until today. It lacks the space and resonance in which his thoughts and concepts could survive practically in a social form of life. At this point, it can also be productive to seek connections to other concepts of liberating education,

such as concepts of humanistic psychology like *Theme-Centered Interaction* (e.g., Hagleitner 1996) which emerged and were received in a similar context (Ahme 2022a, pp. 231, 237–38). An examination of the approaches of Freire and Co. shows that “pedagogical concepts of medium range” (Gärtner and Herbst 2020, p. 626) such as *Anti-Bias* and *Social Justice and Diversity Training* can enrich liberation pedagogy because they are forms of living learning in the context of political groups.

Second, I want to highlight the *analysis and critique of society and education* that is necessary for liberation pedagogy. Freire and Co., within the framework of various critical theories, made a profound critique of education in the 1970s and 1980s. An important object of reflection for them was the notion of a so-called “hidden curriculum” (e.g., Giroux and Purpel 1983). According to this view, students learn objectives that are not in the official curriculum but have a social function. Behind the backs of teachers and pupils, an educational program unintentionally takes place that reproduces the social status quo. Students learn about competition and achievement through grades and other practices (Van der Ven 1982, pp. 23–65). By drawing a red line between acting subjects (e.g., teachers) and passive objects (e.g., students), for example, Freire and Co. assume that students learn to accept social hierarchies. This fundamental critique of education is inevitable for a liberation pedagogy. It is an important impulse for today’s theory building because current critical approaches rather problematize single aspects like textbooks—but not the framework of the school system as such (e.g., Winkler and Scholz 2021). This places them in a tradition of critical engagement with schooling that other authors have also advocated (e.g., Ivan Illich, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Basil Bernstein, and Siegfried Bernfeld) (Chitty 2010, pp. 73–74). Many scholars challenge this tradition fundamentally, seeing it as overly unproductive. For example, Chitty (2010, p. 73) states that those approaches offer an “educational fatalism” which “helps the Right to make its case”: schools and education cannot change society. Nevertheless, this critique does not apply to Freire and Co. because they developed an alternative concept to the criticized forms of education. Their pedagogy was groundbreaking because it combined a complex analysis and an easily understandable short version of it. Although the analysis found in Freire’s or Boal’s pedagogy is less systematic, complex, and scientifically based than in Van der Ven’s thinking, all three approaches are based on similar basic assumptions as outlined. However, only Van der Ven (1982, pp. 23–65) discloses his theoretical interpretive framework in detail and applies it to real educational processes based on empirical research. In this respect, it resembles contemporary critiques that, while not as fundamentally oriented as Freire and Co.’s, are similarly systematic and empirical as Van der Ven’s. Beyond Marxist analyses of society and schools (Freire and Co.) and their empirical verification, e.g., with regard to religious education (Van der Ven), references to postcolonial theories (Winkler and Scholz 2021), recent approaches of critical theory (Gruschka et al. 2021) or the theory of governmentality (Ideland 2019; Wohnig 2017) are constructive today. Such a multi-theoretical and scientific approach has many merits, including the opportunity of actualizing liberation pedagogy in a post-Fordist dispositif in which capitalism and emancipatory values such as autonomy and individuality interact (e.g., Boltanski and Chiapello 2007).<sup>3</sup> However, a difficulty in contrast to Freire and Boal also becomes apparent. If critical analysis is to be perceived globally, it also needs a simple and figurative language that gets to the heart of the critique. Freire succeeds in this with terms such as the *banking concept of education*. Even if this makes some seemingly trivial statements, social groups can cluster around such ideas because they offer a clear critique and vision. Freire’s aforementioned critique of neoliberal education and Boal’s critique of a “brain invasion” (“invasão do cérebro”) (Santos 2016, pp. 294–303) as a description of internalized forms of domination could give direction to future critiques. What is interesting about Boal’s approach here is that, in contrast to Freire and Van der Ven, he does not represent older notions of ideology critique as a critique of a false *consciousness*, but furthermore focuses on the corporeal dimension of ideology (e.g., practices, rituals, and discourses) that, for example, Bourdieu and Foucault emphasize (Rehmann 2014).



Third, I would like to stress the *emancipatory concept of education*. Even though Freire and Co.'s critique of society, school, and education is fundamental, they remain optimistic about the possibility of liberating education. In doing so, they follow Gramsci's well-known dictum "Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will", which other critical theorists such as Max Horkheimer (1988, p. 337: "Pessimism in theory. Optimism in practice") have similarly formulated. Through critique and beyond it, the three educators offer a positive conception of education. Notwithstanding the differences between their approaches, they all aim at an emancipatory conceptualization of pedagogy by trying to enable people to think and act more autonomously. A first step in this direction is to remove the problematized barriers, such as thinking differently about the educators' role as teacher-pupils and empowering learners by engaging them with their own questions ("generative issues" or "sociological imagination"). Freire and Co. also assume that, as Rancière (1981, p. 102) writes in "The Ignorant Schoolmaster", "no party or government, no army, school or institution, will ever emancipate a single person". Emancipation cannot be institutionalized because institutions already embody social inequality *and* emancipation requires the willingness of individuals. However, there are institutionalized obstacles to emancipation that must be removed, according to the three authors. Even today, liberating education is based on reducing such obstacles as (e.g., Loick 2012, pp. 297–302):

- Fewer exams and more freedom to work on topics in a self-determined way;
- Fewer curricular requirements and more forms of extracurricular education beyond formal courses;
- The advocacy for subjects that enable a reflexive reference to reality and open up self-critical perspectives;
- The resistance to the economic logic of optimization and exploitation.

However, these perspectives, which aim at genuine thinking by trying to overcome the ideological barriers of reflection and discussion, face a difficult aporia: how to deal with the fact that not everyone wants to humanize the world? The question is significant because the lack of an answer may lead to two different problems: first, there is the danger of undermining education in the emphatic sense as a purpose-free engagement with an object of learning. While Freire and Co. aim at education, they also deal extensively with the social conditions of educational success. In practice, it is important to avoid the danger that combating the social conditions that prevent education becomes the actual goal and that education is thus subordinated to this political goal—as can also be observed in some social movements, where education primarily means socialization. Second, there is a danger that approaches to education that are critical of domination and emancipatory—contrary to their own intention—give rise to new forms of discrimination. For example, they can cause the exclusion of conservative students (Hammer 2021, p. 9).

These two problems cannot be dealt with *in general*. Freire and Co., however, offer conceptual perspectives to mediate the outlined tension *in concrete educational situations* (similar to others like Rancière, Gramsci, or the critical psychologist Klaus Holzkamp) (Haug 2020). Therefore, they value *transparent* positioning, reflexivity, and the ability to criticize and disagree with educators (e.g., through retreats for small group reflection or dissenting opinions). The role of the "joker" in Forum Theatre, who can be seen as the structural equivalent of the teacher, illustrates this. Following Hammer (2021, p. 9), the "joker" combines directive (e.g., designing the scene; certain questioning strategies) and non-directive forms of learning (e.g., not taking one's own position; openness to the best solution). Thus, the "joker" connects humanizing positioning with the freedom of the students. In this regard, the works of Freire, Boal, and Van der Ven are instructive for contemporary pedagogy because each show how a true person-orientation can work and that it is intrinsically opposed to external commitments and curricular goals such as competencies.

In conclusion, it has been shown how an affirmative *and* critical engagement with the approaches of Freire and Co. can mediate the four types of contemporary references to liberation pedagogy described above. On the one hand, critical perspectives of type 2

(*defusing adjustments*) and to some extent of type 3 (*harsh criticism and rejection*) can focus on virulent problems that every liberation pedagogue has to deal with. On the other hand, affirmative perspectives of type 1 (*radicalized continuation*) and type 2 can emphasize the current significance of liberation pedagogy. Obviously, type 4 (*academic oblivion*) is the only type that, in my opinion, cannot contribute to the improvement of liberation pedagogy and pedagogy in general. At least the questions and attempted answers that accompany liberation pedagogy should be remembered today.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to thank Benjamin Ahme, Jan Niklas Collet, and Tim Zumhof for their advice and feedback.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Agnatology is a scientific discipline that has recently been developed (mainly in the U.S.) to examine the political and economic conditions of scientific research. In short, agnatology means a critical examination of the production of scientific knowledge and especially ignorance.
- <sup>2</sup> The “Jewish Teaching House” is a model of lifelong learning that goes back to the philosopher Franz Rosenzweig. Such educational programs offer religious education and an examination of Jewish writings and traditions.
- <sup>3</sup> The term “post-Fordist” refers to a shift away from the Fordist model of production and society. The core of this model, named after the entrepreneur Henry Ford, was the rationalization of production (Taylorism), which led to standardized products. This caused a strong division of labor in hierarchical structures and standardized work activities and consumer goods. In contrast, a post-Fordist dispositif is about individuality, freedom, and creativity, or the ability to innovate and autonomy, which are required in a project-based economy.

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