

From critical reflection to transformative praxis: Intersecting Freire, Mezirow, and Brookfield

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Abstract

This paper adapts a comparative critical theoretical analysis and synthesis of the theories of Paulo Freire, Jack Mezirow, and Stephen Brookfield, three seminal scholars whose work has shaped the concept of critical reflection in adult education. Although all three regard education as a site of human growth and democratic development, they articulate different pathways toward transformation. Freire advances a radically political pedagogy of critical consciousness (*conscientização*), situating reflection within collective struggle and action against oppression. Mezirow frames transformation as a primarily cognitive and individual process, through which adults reassess meaning perspectives via rational–critical discourse. Brookfield occupies an integrative position: drawing on critical theory, he emphasises ideology critique and the pervasiveness of power, arguing that critical reflection is inherently political and must expose hegemonic assumptions embedded in practice. By juxtaposing these perspectives, the paper shows that critical reflection is not a uniform construct, but a multifaceted practice shaped by distinct ontological, epistemological and ethical commitments. Synthesizing their insights points toward an integrative framework in which education as praxis unites meaning-making, ideological critique and collective action. In the face of growing inequality, authoritarian tendencies and the marketisation of adult learning, adult educators must cultivate spaces of dissent, reflection and solidarity where individuals and communities can imagine and enact more just worlds.

Keywords: adult education; critical reflection; critical pedagogy; transformative learning; emancipation

1. Introduction

Historically, adult education emerged at the intersection of social movements and struggles for emancipation. From the late 19th century up to the mid-1980s, it was linked with labour, feminist and community movements within a critical, radical paradigm (Gioti, 2019; Heaney, 1992; Kokkos, 2006). In this context, criticality was not an optional but a constitutive element of adult education: its aims were empowerment, transformation and emancipation through reflection on oppression, illumination of power relations and inequalities, and collective action towards a more just and democratic world (Apple & Au, 2009; Brookfield, 2000a, 2005, 2017; Freire, 1977, 2006; Zarifis, 2009).

While adult education still addresses issues such as adult literacy, youth unemployment, feminist struggles, migration and citizenship since 2000 it has increasingly been tied to economic and employability agendas (Gioti, 2019). Adult learning is reconfigured as a market-oriented, credential-granting service that adapts to labour-market demands, privileges skill

acquisition and targets already credentialed adults seeking mobility (Briton & Plumb, 1993; Fejes & Salling Olesen, 2016; Finnegan, 2008). Vocationalism has become a dominant policy driver and a common European trend (Fejes et al., 2016; Keogh, 2009).

In this landscape, critical reflection becomes a crucial site of struggle over what adult education is for and whom it ultimately serves. If adult education is reduced to employability, upskilling and individual career advancement, reflection risks becoming an adaptive tool rather than a means of questioning structures. Conversely, within a critical perspective, reflection interrogates how dominant ideologies, social inequalities, and power relations shape educational aims, curricula and pedagogy. It is precisely at this point that the theories of Freire, Mezirow and Brookfield diverge: while all three centre reflection in adult learning, they differ in how deeply they connect reflection to power, collective action, and social transformation. And they also differ in the way they directly link one's self-empowerment and emancipation to action for a radical democratic transformation of society.

Against this shifting landscape - from emancipatory roots to market-driven orientations - the theoretical traditions of critical reflection acquire renewed urgency. Mezirow, Brookfield and Freire offer distinct yet intersecting frameworks for understanding how adults interrogate assumptions, power relations, and social structures.

In our study, we adopt a comparative critical theoretical analysis, a methodological approach that allows for the systematic investigation, comparison, and evaluation of the theoretical contributions of Freire, Mezirow, and Brookfield in the field of adult education. The analysis focuses on comparing central concepts such as critical consciousness, transformative learning, and critical reflection, and their relationship to educational practice and collective action. Specifically, we examine how each theorist understands the potential of learning to challenge and subvert oppressive power relations and social structures. At the same time, a critical assessment of the theoretical assumptions underlying their different approaches is attempted: from Freire's liberatory pedagogy, which directly connects learning with collective action and social emancipation, to Mezirow's transformative learning, which focuses on individual's will for the scope and extent (individual, cultural, sociopolitical) change of frames of reference, and Brookfield's critical pedagogy, which bridges personal and social transformation through the analysis of power relations. The methodology is completed with a theoretical synthesis that exploits the points of convergence and creative tensions between the three approaches, thereby forming a coherent conceptual framework for understanding how transformative learning can function as a lever for both personal and social transformation.

2. Mezirow: Critical Reflection and Meaning Transformation

Mezirow's transformative theory is grounded in a wide range of concepts and fields, including constructivism, developmental and cognitive psychology, psychotherapy, sociology, social theory and critical social theory and draws on thinkers such as Dewey, Freire, Habermas and Kuhn (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Dolioti & Zarifis, 2009; Fleming, 2018; Kitchenham, 2008; Kokkos, 2022; Zarifis, 2009). Mezirow explicitly acknowledges the influence of constructivism, arguing that an individual's meaning system is constructed through socialisation (Mezirow, 1991) and shaped by cultural context (Kokkos, 2005). Within this framework, transformative learning explains how adult learners make sense of their experiences, how social structures influence that interpretation, and how meanings undergo change when assumptions are recognised as dysfunctional (Mezirow, 1991).

At the core of Mezirow's theory lies the process of meaning making. New experiences are interpreted through one's existing meaning schemes (Mezirow, 1990), which reflect psycho-

cultural assumptions developed through past learning and socialisation. Learning is thus understood not as the accumulation of knowledge, but as the reconstruction of these interpretive schemes into more functional ones that can orient future action (Mezirow, 1996; 2000). Critical reflection plays a central role in this process, as it enables adults to examine and revise both their meaning schemes and, more profoundly, their meaning perspectives. Transformation occurs when individuals reassess and reinterpret experience in ways that allow them to act more effectively and autonomously in light of new insights (Doliti & Zarifis, 2009; Gioti, 2024b; Mezirow, 1981, 1990, 1996, 1991, as cited in Taylor & Cranton, 2013, pp. 34, 35, 40). Such transformation of established frames of reference is central to transformative learning, as it enables learners to identify dysfunctional assumptions and reorient their action on the basis of more inclusive, better justified and more autonomous interpretations.

Types of Reflection

Mezirow (1991, 1993) distinguishes three types of reflection (Cranton, 1994 as cited in Zarifis, 2008, p. 73; Kitchenham, 2008):

1. Content reflection – examining the content of an experience.
2. Process reflection – questioning the reasons and influencing factors for one's actions.
3. Premise reflection – interrogating the broader assumptions that frame one's value system; this is what Mezirow identifies as critical reflection.

Premise reflection draws on critical theory and Habermas (Mezirow, 1981, 2003), as it involves re-evaluating deeply embedded assumptions to transform one's meaning perspectives. While content or process reflection may cause changes in beliefs or opinions, premise reflection leads to transformations in one's frame of reference.

According to Mezirow (1990), critical reflection enables individuals to assess and reinterpret an experience, question the validity of the assumptions underlying prior knowledge, and examine the justification of the conditions under which problems are defined. It may be implicit, when internalized values guide behaviour without conscious scrutiny, or explicit, when individuals deliberately question and evaluate the grounds for their choices.

When the object of reflection is assumptions, Mezirow differentiates between:

- Critical reflection of assumptions (objective reframing) – examining others' assumptions (Mezirow, 2000, 1998).
- Critical self-reflection on assumptions (subjective reframing) – interrogating one's own assumptions for deeper perspective transformation.

Both constitute “the emancipatory dimensions of adult learning, the function of thought and language that frees the learner from frames of reference, paradigms or cultural canon that limit or distort communication and understanding” (Mezirow, 1998, pp.191-192).

Forms of Critical Reflection

Critical reflection of assumptions includes:

- Narrative critical reflection, which examines the validity of ideas, feelings, and actions communicated through speech, writing, or art.
- Action critical reflection, which interrogates the assumptions implicit in how one defines a problem, aiming at more effective action.

This type of reflection is closely linked to instrumental learning and problem-solving (Mezirow, 1998). He describes perspective transformation as a process that evolves and is completed in ten sequential and interconnected stages (Gioti, 2024b).

Critical self-reflection on assumptions (CSRA) concerns the psychological or cultural assumptions that constrain individuals' lives. It examines the fundamental conditions shaping experience and aims at significant perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1998). Mezirow differentiates CSRA into several subcategories (ibid):

- *Narrative critical self-reflection*, critically examining one's ideas and actions by narrating their lived experience.
- *Systemic critical self-reflection*, concerning assumptions about economic, political, educational, religious, linguistic or other cultural systems, often leads to collaborative or collective action.
- *Organizational critical self-reflection*, addressing assumptions embedded in workplace culture and history.
- *Moral-ethical critical self-reflection*, examining the principles guiding moral decision-making.
- *Therapeutic critical self-reflection*, revealing assumptions underlying feelings, moods, and emotional responses; central in psychotherapy.
- *Epistemic critical self-reflection*, examining one's frame of reference, its origins, and its consequences in shaping learning goals and orientations.

Mezirow's contribution to the conceptualization of critical reflection is decisive: he places critical (especially self-) reflection at the heart of transformative learning, as the mechanism through which adults reassess and reconstruct their meaning perspectives. For Mezirow, emancipatory learning is primarily achieved at the individual level through the critical examination of personal assumptions. However, it is up to each individual's will whether, after becoming aware of the sociocultural imposition on the formation of their assumptions, they will take action to change and transform this context (Gioti, 2019, 2024a, 2024b).

In adult education, however, critical reflection extends beyond the individual to collective, social and political dimensions. This is the direction in which Brookfield moves - foregrounding the critique of hegemony and dominant ideologies, and linking critical reflection to collective action, pedagogy, and the transformation of power relations both within and beyond educational practice.

3. Brookfield: Critical Reflection, Ideology and Power

Brookfield is a prominent British scholar in adult education, whose work focuses on critical thinking, dialogue, critical reflection, leadership, and, particularly, on analysing the dynamics of power - especially in relation to racial identity and white supremacy.

According to Brookfield (1985, p. 46) "*adult education is that activity concerned to assist adults in their quest for a sense of control in their own lives, within their interpersonal relationships, and with regard to the social forms and structures within which they live.*" Adult educators, he suggests, support one another in identifying and challenging both the external sources and the internalized assumptions shaping their behaviour. Adults thus recognize that the systems of ideas and values guiding their behaviour are culturally constructed rather than natural or divinely ordained.

From this definition, six principles of critical adult education emerge (Brookfield, 1985):

1. voluntary participation;
2. respect for self-worth;
3. adult education is collaborative;
4. praxis at the heart of education - *praxis*: a continuous cycle of action and reflection as understood by Freire;
5. Adult education fosters a spirit of critical reflection; and
6. the aim is nurturing autonomous, empowered adults who initiate change in their personal, professional and social worlds rather than passively adapting to external forces.

Brookfield acknowledges that his approach to critical reflection draws on multiple traditions: pragmatic constructivism, analytic philosophy and logic, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, and, most centrally, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School - particularly Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and Fromm - as well as Freire and, to some extent, Foucault (Brookfield, 2000b, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2016).

Pragmatic constructivism highlights how individuals construct and deconstruct meanings through analysing experience and seeking new understandings. Analytic philosophy focuses on detecting logical fallacies and making sound judgments, viewing criticality as the capacity to analyse arguments. Psychoanalysis/psychotherapy direct attention to childhood inhibitions and traumas that shape adult behaviour (Brookfield, 2005, 2016).

Freire's influence is clear: Both scholars situate adult education within a radical, emancipatory perspective linking reflection with collective action. Freire's insights - on the role of the educator's experience and the importance of understanding how learners interpret teachers' actions (Freire, 1998) - anticipate Brookfield's "lens of personal experience" and "lens of learners' eyes." Both place action at the heart of adult education, which Brookfield approaches from Freire's perspective as a participatory action research which he describes as an uninterrupted cyclical process of action followed by reflection on the action, collaborative analysis of the action, transition to new action, reflection again and starting again from the beginning (Gioti, 2024a, p. 27). Finally, both treat students' emotions as essential and catalytic in the critical thinking process (Darder, 2020; Freire, 1997, 2022; Gioti, 2024a).

However, it is critical theory that most profoundly shapes Brookfield's thinking (Brookfield, 2005). From this perspective, reflection aims at uncovering the workings of power: how hegemony and dominant ideologies permeate everyday practices. Drawing on Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse (Brookfield, 2005), criticality enables individuals to distance themselves from implicit assumptions and exercise greater conscious control over their lives. This oppositional distancing and re-engagement with culture constitutes, for the Frankfurt School, the central learning task of adulthood (Brookfield, 2005).

Extending this tradition into the field of adult education, Brookfield articulates a dual mission for critical reflection (Brookfield, 2000a, 2010, 2016, 2017, 2023):

1. Illuminating power
Adults must analyse assumptions rooted in dominant ideologies - capitalism, positivism, democracy, militarism, patriarchy and white supremacy. Giroux (1983, as cited in Brookfield, 2009, p. 299) similarly argues that critique involves revealing the historically embedded values shaping knowledge, social relations and material practices.
2. Uncovering hegemony

Drawing on Gramsci (Brookfield, 2010, 2016, 2017, 2018; Gioti, 2024a; Leonard, 2002) and on the later elaboration of the concept of hegemony from Raymond Williams and Cornel West (Gioti, 2024a), Brookfield emphasizes that hegemony is learned rather than imposed, as a set of assumptions and practices that appear to work in our favor, but in reality end up working against our interests (Gioti, *ibid*). He conceives hegemony rather as a form of self-surveillance that mirrors Foucault's disciplinary power (Fraser, 1981; Kioupkiolis, 2015; Widder, 2004). In the same vein, he stresses the role of the educator as an intellectual who can highlight an alternative or counter-hegemony (Gioti, 2024a).

Brookfield therefore argues that all interactions in adult education are structured by power relations, echoing Freire's claim that no educational action is neutral and Foucault's extension of power into everyday domains (Keramás, 2014). From this standpoint, critical pedagogy becomes both the analytical lens and the practical framework through which educators and learners can question assumptions, reveal ideology, and expose hegemony—turning knowledge into a tool for social transformation toward a more just world (Gioti, 2024a; Toka & Gioti, 2023). To enact this mission, Brookfield proposes four lenses for developing critically reflective teaching:

1. learners' eyes;
2. colleagues' perceptions;
3. theory;
4. personal experience (Brookfield, 1998, 2002, 2017).

These lenses offer complementary perspectives for interrogating assumptions and power relations in teaching.

For Brookfield, critical reflection must be collaborative and collective, to avoid the risks of isolation, cultural suicide or political marginalization (Brookfield, 1994, 2017). Its outcome is collective transformative action, aimed at dismantling unequal power relations and achieving radical social change (Brookfield, 2000a, 2016). Even personal reflection, Brookfield argues, is socially conditioned, shaped by broader political, economic, historical and cultural contexts (Brookfield, 2000a). Ultimately, transformation means adopting fundamentally different ways of viewing reality - framed explicitly through an analysis of power, ideology and hegemony, thereby connecting individual insight with the broader critical-theoretical project of social transformation.

4.Freire: Critical Consciousness and Emancipatory Praxis

Paulo Freire (1921–1997) was a Brazilian radical educator, philosopher and leading figure of critical pedagogy. Having experienced hunger and poverty from an early age, he became acutely aware of the relationship between social class and knowledge (Gadotti, 1994, as cited in Karalis, 2021, p. 17). Exiled from Brazil by the military junta (1964–1980) because of his efforts to empower and emancipate the oppressed, he moved to Chile, where he participated in adult literacy programmes. In his thought he brought together seemingly opposing perspectives, such as Marxism and Christianity, and was influenced by Marx, Gramsci, Jean-Paul Sartre, Mounier, Fromm, Althusser, Ortega y Gasset, Mao, Martin Luther King, Che Guevara, Unamuno, Marcuse, Buber and others (Gioti, 2020; Shaull, 2000).

Freire is described as radical because he sought the transformation of society as a whole at social, economic and political levels, and as a humanist because the human being and their reflective capacity are central to this transformation (Kioupeoglou & Zarifis, 2009). A core principle for Freire (2000; 1998) is that there is no neutral education and therefore no neutral

educational practice that is indifferent to the reproduction or the contestation of dominant ideology. Every educational act either reinforces the dominant ideology or challenges and resists it. “Washing our hands” of the struggle between the powerful and the powerless, he argues, means siding with the powerful, not remaining neutral. Education is therefore a political act, and democratic education cannot become reality unless it is an education for citizenship (Freire, 2018).

On this basis, Freire places education at the centre of a critical framework of action in which critical consciousness (*conscientização*) is linked to social change, emancipation and liberation from oppression (Kioupeoglou & Zarifis, 2009). His literacy programmes sought: to empower Brazilian peasants to escape the “culture of silence”, gain both the capacity and the language to understand and critically reflect on themselves, their lives, and the political decisions taken in their absence but affecting their everyday existence; to realize that their daily life is shaped by a dominant ideology whose aim is to maintain the status quo by keeping them oppressed and silent; and to transform themselves from objects passively placed within reality and history into acting subjects who understand their situation and seek to free themselves from what oppresses them (ibid; Gioti, 2020).

A defining feature of critical consciousness is its collective character: it is an endeavour that should be undertaken socially rather than individually. Within this endeavour, education must present people’s situation as a problem. Problem-posing education therefore does not separate the activity of teacher and learner but encourages the emergence of a new relationship: that of teacher-students and student-teachers (Freire, 2000).

The basic components of critical consciousness - critical dialogue, critical reflection and praxis - are inextricably linked. Freire’s approach to critical reflection remains highly influential in contemporary adult education literature. Problem-posing learning and critical reflection refer to the process by which people critically examine the way they exist in the world. For the critically reflective subject, reality is a dynamic, evolving process, which may be shaped through learning but is not predetermined (ibid). Therefore, individuals should not passively adapt to reality; rather, by critically evaluating it, they should intervene to transform it. This is the essence of Freirean (educational) praxis: intervention in the world, the unity of action and critical reflection, theory and practice. Only when these elements coexist is collective action and the transformation of oppressive reality possible. Without critical reflection, theory degenerates into empty rhetoric and practice into mere activism (Freire, 1998, 2000).

For Freire (1998), developing critical reflection requires moving from naive curiosity to epistemological curiosity, a more rigorous mode of inquiry enacted through critical teaching - a dynamic, dialectical movement between action and reflection on action (Freire, 1998, 2000). Knowledge emerging from this interplay must be created by learners in community with the educator. Knowledge, Freire argues, is a social process that engages the whole conscious self - memory, senses and emotions - and necessarily entails critical thinking (Freire, 2018).

Critical dialogue, inseparable from reflection, constitutes the second core dimension of critical consciousness. Dialogue is a reality-mediated encounter through which people discover and name the world, and it must be carried out *with* the oppressed, whose conscious involvement in emancipatory action is essential if they are not to be reduced to objects (Freire, 2000; Gioti, 2020; Leonard & McLaren, 2002). Dialogue is not genuine if it lacks reflection, which presupposes action; and action becomes authentic only when its results are subjected to critical reflection (ibid). Dialogue that demands reflection can also generate it, becoming an instrument of liberation, since it is through people’s dialogue and action that the world is transformed (ibid). This dialectical relationship/communication is fundamental to Freire. It permeates multiple encounters: between consciousness and world, student and teacher, writer and reader. Education becomes an act of freedom only when mediated by dialogue and

communication, whose acceptance Freire regards as an act of radicalism (Freire, 1998, 2000; Gioti, 2019, 2020; Leonard & McLaren, 2002).

Praxis, in turn, is indispensable to critical consciousness. By praxis Freire (2000) means action grounded in critical reflection. People do not automatically become subjects simply by reflecting on their oppressive reality and understanding their situation. Without subsequent action to transform that reality, they remain “subjects-in-expectancy” (ibid). Moreover, critical reflection should not be confined to educational structures, since any changes limited to those structures constrain the transformative potential of critical reflection and the extent of social transformation it can produce.

The process of critical consciousness, centred on dialogue, reflection and praxis, unfolds in three stages (Freire, 2000, 2005; Gioti, 2020; Kioupeglou & Zarifis, 2009):

1. Investigation of the values encoded in dominant ideologies.
2. Codification, which presents an existing situation that learners experience but do not yet fully understand. Codification is achieved through selecting specific words that give meaning to the situation and render it more comprehensible to learners.
3. Decoding, which enables deeper penetration into reality and its understanding through critical reflection. It requires movement from the abstract to the concrete. It begins with identifying and describing the key elements embedded in the codified situation, followed by examining how these elements relate to learners’ consciousness and lived experience. As understanding deepens, the situation is revisited as a constructed whole whose components are interdependent and mutually shaping. Finally, through heightened critical awareness, learners analyse the situation in transformative ways that allow them to reinterpret reality and recognise possibilities for action.

For Freire (2000, 2018), human emancipation through education is a demanding, often painful process, because freedom entails risk, accountability and decisions with consequences. People, therefore, frequently prefer to delegate decisions to others to avoid assuming responsibility. Another difficulty is that the oppressed internalize the oppressor; they are simultaneously oppressed and oppressors and must first recognize this condition and then struggle to transform it and free themselves (Freire, 2000, 2018).

All of this must occur in an environment of discipline, not laxity or lawlessness born from fear of authoritarianism. Democracy and freedom are possible only when discipline is present; and since education for citizenship presupposes freedom, we must embrace healthy discipline not only in educational settings but in all domains of life - home, school, traffic, everyday interactions (Freire, 2018). Lack of discipline, Freire (2018) argues, is not the opposite of authoritarianism, nor is a certain use of authority synonymous with it; rather, lack of discipline supports authoritarianism and undermines freedom. However, he cautions that there is a difference between being an authority and being authoritarian (Gioti, 2020, 2024a). Only through discipline, critical thinking, critical dialogue, praxis and the rejection of dogmatism can we consolidate democracy and emancipate ourselves from the oppression and inequalities of dominant ideologies. For Freire, this is a collective, difficult, unfinished and ongoing struggle.

In sum, Freire’s account of critical reflection within the broader process of critical consciousness treats educational practice as a political act. Critical reflection, as a dimension of critical consciousness, aims to help learners realize that their culture and values have been imposed by the dominant class and dominant ideologies serving the preservation of the status quo. Through critical reflection, people come to understand their situation and are led to

praxis—action grounded in reflection—seeking to transform themselves from objects that passively receive history into acting subjects who participate in shaping it.

In the next section, the positions of Freire, Mezirow and Brookfield will be juxtaposed, highlighting their convergences and divergences.

5. Three Paths in Dialogue: Freire, Mezirow and Brookfield

Freire stands as a foundational figure in critical pedagogy and one of the most influential thinkers in adult education. Historically, he precedes Brookfield and Mezirow, both of whom draw from aspects of his work, albeit in different ways. At a first level of comparison, the strongest affinities lie between Freire and Brookfield. Both adopt politically oriented perspectives linking educational practice to its wider economic, political and social context. For both thinkers, critical reflection fosters awareness of inequalities produced by dominant ideologies and initiates collective action to transform oppressive social realities. Action is not optional, but integral.

Although Brookfield and Mezirow share several theoretical influences (Pragmatism, Psychology/Psychoanalysis/Psychotherapy, Critical Theory, Liberatory Pedagogy), they diverge significantly in how they approach critical reflection, transformation and the role of ideology. Brookfield (2000a) maintains that *critical reflection on assumptions* is the only meaningful form of reflection, insisting that it is a conscious, explicit and political practice. Mezirow, by contrast, views critical reflection as potentially implicit and subdivides it into multiple categories (Mezirow, 1998). According to Brookfield (2000a), this fragmentation risks diluting the concept's radical potential by dividing an inherently unified process. Of Mezirow's categories, *systemic critical self-reflection on assumptions* (Mezirow, 1998) most closely resembles Brookfield's understanding, as it interrogates the ideological and socio-cultural structures shaping meaning perspectives. Yet, while Mezirow emphasises *individual* cognitive transformation, Brookfield foregrounds the *collective*, socio-political and emancipatory dimensions of reflection. For him, all of Mezirow's categories involve elements of ideological critique, albeit less explicitly or consistently (Brookfield, 2000a).

A central differentiation lies in their treatment of power. Brookfield - drawing on Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Fromm, Raymond, Cornel and Foucault - treats power analysis, ideology critique and the uncovering of hegemony as *intrinsic* to critical reflection (Gioti, 2024a). Brookfield, as he himself has stated (*ibid*), was influenced by Freire's work, and similarly like him, he regards education as a political project and the educator as a political agent committed to human emancipation. He argues that dominant ideologies - capitalism, patriarchy, positivism, white supremacy - permeate societal institutions, and therefore education, as well as the everyday life (Brookfield, 2017).

Mezirow, though also influenced by critical theory (notably Habermas), prioritizes the *communicative* and dialogical dimensions of reflection. He proposes that education should serve learning rather than politics (Mezirow, 1991). His aim is to create conditions for distortion-free communication, encouraging participation and mutual understanding. However, this view downplays how educational systems function as mechanisms for class reproduction (Carnoy & Levin, 1985, as cited in Collins, 2009, p. 36), perpetuate social inequalities (Batrach et al., 2019q Vesely, 2012), and absorb neoliberal ideology (Macris, 2011).

The three theorists also differ in the orientation of critical reflection. For Freire and Brookfield, it is explicitly emancipatory and political: critical reflection must interrogate power, destabilize hegemonic norms, and culminate in collective action. Mezirow's approach remains largely individualistic; transformation concerns reconstructing one's frame of reference, with power

viewed mainly as a distortion of personal development (Inglis, 1997). Inglis's distinction between *empowerment* (the acquisition of skills that enable adaptation to existing structures) and *emancipation* (the critique and transformation of those structures) underscores this divergence (ibid; Gioti, 2019).

From this perspective, Mezirow's emphasis on self-improvement risks shifting critical reflection toward individual adaptation rather than collective action, echoing Foucault's disciplinary power and Bourdieu's concept of accumulating capital to better "fit" within existing hierarchies (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, as cited in Inglis, 1997, p. 11; Gioti, 2024a). Brookfield (2003) similarly warns that terms such as *empowerment* and *transformation* are often used so broadly that they lose their critical force.

Accordingly, Brookfield and Freire articulate critical/radical approaches to adult education, whereas Mezirow's framework is better described as progressive and individual-centred (Gioti, 2019). Yet, even within this shared critical orientation, Freire articulates most explicitly and emphatically the view of education as resistance to oppression and as a project of transforming the world. In many respects, Brookfield can be seen as extending and adapting elements of Freirean liberatory pedagogy within Western adult and higher education, drawing on critical theory, Gramsci, Williams, West, Foucault and other intellectuals and activists to render Freire's emancipatory horizon intelligible within contemporary institutional and cultural settings (Gioti, 2024a). Although Mezirow acknowledges a social dimension in transformative learning - envisioning more open and democratic societies (Gioti, 2019; Toka & Gioti, 2021) - the revolutionary horizon present in Freire and Brookfield is largely absent. Like Foucault, Mezirow focuses primarily on the micro-level and does not fully connect personal change with broader structures, whereas Brookfield argues that emancipation requires collective action and systemic transformation. Furthermore, Freire and Brookfield inextricably link the process of critical reflection and the transformation of dominant sociopolitical and cultural influences, as well as the mediation of power relations in shaping our assumptions, with the undertaking of collective action for their radical transformation. On the other hand, Mezirow believes that the connection of transformation with the undertaking of collective action is a matter of subjective position and choice (Gioti, 2019, 2024a, pp.44-45).

Dialogue, central to all three approaches, is also conceptualized differently. While Brookfield and Mezirow draw on Freire, only Freire and Brookfield anchor dialogue in collective action and political struggle. For Mezirow, mutual understanding through dialogue is sufficient; For Freire and Brookfield, dialogue must lead to praxis - action grounded in critical reflection. Freire's emphasis on humility, curiosity and mutuality between teacher and learner is echoed in Brookfield's lenses of personal experience and learners' eyes, which stress the relational and democratic nature of critical teaching.

The process of transformative critical reflection is considered by Freire and Brookfield as a continuous participatory cyclical process and they further recognize the important role that emotions play in it, while Mezirow treats it as a more linear and logical process (Gioti, 2024a).

In short, while all three highlight the importance of questioning assumptions, they differ significantly in the scope and purpose of critical reflection. Freire and Brookfield situate this questioning within broader struggles for democracy, justice and social change, framing reflection as a collective, emancipatory and political endeavour. Mezirow, by contrast, locates transformation primarily within the individual's meaning structures and communicative processes, without explicitly embedding it in a broader political project or connecting it systematically to structural critique and collective action.

6. Conclusion

Taken together, the perspectives of Freire, Mezirow and Brookfield illuminate the richness, depth and complexity of critical reflection in adult education. Each offers indispensable insights: Mezirow clarifies the cognitive and interpretive processes through which adults revise their assumptions; Brookfield exposes the ideological, hegemonic and power-laden dimensions of those assumptions and reclaims democracy as a learning practice; and Freire situates reflection within collective struggle, critical dialogue and the broader fight for emancipation. Their differences - concerning the locus of transformation (individual or collective), the role of ideology, and the relationship between reflection and action - are significant, yet they need not be seen as mutually exclusive. Rather, they represent complementary layers of a fuller conception of transformative adult learning.

Synthesizing their contributions allows us to envision an integrative framework in which education as *praxis* unites meaning-making, ideological critique and collective action. Such a framework affirms that personal transformation is inseparable from social transformation, that dialogue is inseparable from action, and that adult education must cultivate both critical awareness and collective agency. In the face of growing inequality, authoritarian tendencies, and commodified knowledge, the task of adult educators is to cultivate spaces of dissent, reflection, and solidarity - spaces where individuals and communities can imagine and enact more just worlds.

7. From Theory to Practice: Implications for Adult Education

This comparative critical theoretical analysis highlights that fostering critical reflection in adult education requires moving beyond purely individual, cognitive interpretations toward approaches that integrate ideology critique, collective inquiry, and emancipatory action. For practitioners, this means designing learning environments where dialogue is not only exploratory but also action-oriented, where assumptions are interrogated through multiple lenses, and where learners situate personal transformation within broader social, cultural, political, and economic realities. Ultimately, the convergence of Freire, Mezirow and Brookfield challenges educators to reclaim adult education as a democratic, critical and socially responsive practice.

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