



## “I can’t breathe”: Praxis, parrhesia and the current historical moment

Adam Davidson-Harden

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## **“I can’t breathe”: Praxis, parrhesia and the current historical moment**

As educators, writers and public intellectuals, many of us share a sense of responsibility for reflecting on the worlds in which we live, with a view to transforming them for the common good, toward a world free of inequalities founded on wealth, race/ethnicity, ability, gender or other forms of identity, and a world in ecological balance (in short, a world that reflects social and environmental justice). Freire’s idea of praxis still offers a powerful embodiment of these types of goals in the context of critical pedagogy: “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire 1970, p. 33). Freirean praxis can be seen as a type of professional ethical toolbox, one which challenges us to attempt to read the world critically on an existential basis, and invite others to do the same. Praxis is not always without risk, however. In working to understand and witness to forms of violence and injustice in our worlds, the interpretations we offer – or the truths we speak – have the chance to open us up to different sorts of dangers. In this sense Foucault’s interpretation of the idea of ‘parrhesia’ is a useful complement to Freire’s conception of praxis. Foucault characterized parrhesia as speaking truth when doing so is dangerous to the speaker (Foucault, 2011, p. 11). When interrogating policies, discourses or regimes of truth that reinforce forms of violence and inequality across various domains, for example, we attempt to enact a type of praxis that may entail parrhesia. In so doing we attempt to live up to a form of responsibility as critical witnesses and potential agents of positive transformation in our local and global worlds. The present offers us a reminder that both silence and truth-speaking in the face of injustice are dangerous, for different reasons in different contexts. Praxis can be dangerous, as many in the United States are experiencing continually, and in the present moment particularly. Silence can be equally dangerous.

### **‘I can’t breathe’**

As I write this on June 3, 2020, brave activists in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement are attempting to draw the world’s attention toward appalling levels of systemic racism, particularly in the USA, but also in my home country of Canada, and globally. The recent mobilizations emerge out of even more tragic deaths of black Americans at the hands of police in ugly circumstances, and are simply the most recent episodes of a long and repulsive history of police violence against unarmed black Americans, from Trayvon Martin to Eric Garner and so many others, and now George Floyd. Indeed they form the most recent book-end in the history of the US movement for civil, social and economic rights for black Americans, a long, protracted struggle which is the direct descendant of white supremacism and slavery, and resistance against these. Research has demonstrated consistent links between police violence against black Americans and the persistent racial inequalities in the US, revealing police violence against black males to also be a war on the poor (Johnson et al., 2018; Helms & Costanza, 2020). The citizen data initiative <http://mappingpoliceviolence.org> helps provide some valuable perspective on this sad contemporary iteration of systemic racism in the US. Police violence in the US has persistently and disproportionately targeted unarmed black men, in tandem with an appallingly disproportionate

representation of this same demographic in the American prison system (Nellis, 2016). The phrase “I can’t breathe”, tragically uttered by Floyd as he lay strangled by the knee of his police officer murderer, has become widespread in the current mobilizations. It is a haunting reminder and symbol of the reality of race-based injustice and oppression in the US, where the legacies of white supremacy, slavery and segregation echo into persistent inequalities in the present. As such it represents a ‘generative phrase’, to play upon Freire’s idea of the ‘generative word’ – a type of word in his approach to literacy instruction that connects in subject to other words and concepts that might help a literacy learner better understand their ‘word and world’. The phrase “I can’t breathe” also eerily and accurately highlights the vulnerability of people of colour to the current pandemic, where distancing is all too often a privilege tied to socioeconomic status, whether in terms of living or work arrangements and conditions. Recently in my home province of Ontario, Canada, an entire group of migrant workers from Mexico were diagnosed with COVID-19 due likely in no small part to the cramped barracks-style living conditions for such workers (Rodriguez, 2020). One such ‘temporary foreign worker’ (as our government calls them) from Mexico has already died from the virus in Canada. Compare this with the racialized inequality and deprivation in the living conditions of many black Americans in large urban centres of the US, and then again with predominantly white, suburban neighbourhoods where distancing and isolation is more easily facilitated. All of forms of vulnerability stem from inequalities that have racial and other intersectional dimensions.

While I am not a person of colour, I have struggled to be an ally to antiracist movements in my own way, and though I can never know what it is like to experience anti-black racism, I am acutely aware of my own white privilege, rooted as it is in the patterns, discourses and institutions that reflect systemic racism in the communities in which we live. Sometimes these are evidenced in the brutal and repulsive snarl of white supremacist and white nationalist discourses, but often they are more subtle-differences in employability or myriad forms of discrimination based on visible minority status, for example, or even perception of minority status. Negative looks on the street. Painful conversations that betray racial tropes and stereotypes. Justifiable fear of even simple interactions with law enforcement in urban centres, a reality painted vividly by poet Javon Johnson in his spoken word poem ‘Cuz He’s Black’ (Johnson, 2013). All of these are realities for people of colour, and realities I can only try to oppose and call out as an ally, and as an educator who takes this kind of solidarity work seriously.

Vulnerability to disasters and socioeconomic shocks of the kind we are experiencing today – including with respect to the ongoing and unfolding COVID-19 pandemic – is heightened among visible minority populations. Inequalities are persistently and disproportionately represented along colour lines, as are social determinants of health. Inequalities founded on race and colour run deep wherever they take root. In Canada and the US – as elsewhere – they are founded and fueled not only by historical oppression but by the continuing realization of these oppressive legacies in current policies, behaviours and actions (I am thinking here of the recent and ongoing pitting of fossil fuel companies against indigenous rights in Canada and the US, or Turtle Island). Racism ought to be a thing of the past, but it is very much in our present, and in the present moment in particular, one might say.

## **Racist discourse speaking through a capitalist symbol**

A few days ago the Canadian Prime Minister declared that “anti-black racism is real” and asserted that it is a common problem across Canada, a part of our daily reality that needs to be addressed and confronted. Along with many Canadians, I was pleased to hear this, and equally shocked when this same Prime Minister struggled in twenty-one seconds of silence a few days later to avoid answering a question about the US president Donald Trump’s reactions to the current wave of BLM mobilizations. Many speculate that the Canadian federal government is

concerned that direct criticism of the president could impact bilateral relations, including the flow of critical supplies. This type of non-confrontational stance was in evidence in the recent 'NAFTA 2.0' negotiations when Canadian leaders did not respond to a torrent of insults and taunts from the mercurial megalomaniac/billionaire-in-chief. The result was another neoliberal trade deal for Canada in that case. The result of silence today from leaders regarding the current actions of the US president is similarly dangerous, a type of reverse parrhesia, wherein the silence of speakers endangers all. After witnessing four years of sexism, racism, xenophobia and a literal swamp of corruption around this president, today we witness his response to the current iteration of BLM movements, in the form of divisive, illegal, authoritarian, reckless, racist and violent rhetoric and policies. This president has proven himself time and time again to be a divider and destroyer, a megalomaniac focused only on his personal gain who has flirted with white supremacists/nationalists and racist media figures. He has announced that he wants to turn the American military on his own fellow citizens, and that they should 'dominate' the mobilizations. The US needs reconciliation and healing, while the current president fans the flames of war. Behind Trump is a Republican party in thrall to – or in the willing employ of – American capitalism (and a Democratic party in the same boat), a larger problem that American social movements must contend with, whether inside or outside of electoral politics.

In the same way that "I can't breathe" represents a powerful discursive symbol of current racial inequality in the US, the figure of Trump himself personifies the degradation of the mainstream political sphere in that country and the precipitous decline of its ostensibly democratic institutions into racism, xenophobia and self-aggrandizement. To return to Freire's notion of 'generative' words, ideas and concepts, the current president can be seen as a type of symbol for tendencies and drives in American capitalism itself. In his *Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault suggests that discourse can be seen as a type of vehicle for meaning carried by and through individuals (Foucault, 1972, p. 107). In the case of Trump, who personifies self-interest, corruption, greed, prejudice and a disregard for the well-being of the vulnerable and marginalized or for ecological balance, we see a symbol of the effects of an economic system predicated only on profit. These fundamental elements of capitalism and their essentially plutocratic co-optation of democracy are strongly entrenched, not only in the US, as pointed out repeatedly by thinkers such as Noam Chomsky (Chomsky, 1992). It so happens that the person of the president exemplifies them particularly well, almost poetically, one might say. Trump is a willing and one-dimensionally ignorant megaphone for systemic racism and the motivation of self-aggrandizement and greed that undergirds capitalism. Purveyors of neoliberal discourse have facilitated its colonization of more and more elements of life, privatizing what remains of public space, in the name of profit and an economic system founded on aggregate economic growth and concentration of wealth in fewer and fewer hands (Harvey, 2007; Davidson-Harden, 2017). In the person and actions of Trump we see this discourse speaking clearly. It casually disregards any semblance of public interest, and only focuses on gains for the few. It embodies racial and gender prejudice and reinforces these divides. It circumvents rules when they get in the way of self-aggrandizement. It seeks to nurture a system where wealth can be safely concentrated more and more in fewer and fewer hands. A palpable nihilism undergirds the casual disregard for any semblance of the defense of public interest that is meant to be integrated into democratic institutions when the elected leaders of those institutions are allowed to degrade, attack and subvert them. Just recently a headline announced the Russian president's most recent efforts to enshrine his own power until 2036, while Trump argues Russia be readmitted into the G7. Nietzsche feared for what form of nihilism would arise out of what he perceived as the vacuum created by the loss of relevance of older cultural, religious and philosophical traditions. In the combination of cult of celebrity and the drift to fascism and authoritarianism seen under Trump, we see a generative symbol worth reading critically in the present moment.

At the same time, the figure of Trump himself represents merely the most violent caricature-edge of the discourse that speaks in the present moment through many, including himself. With

both mainstream political parties in the US essentially in thrall to a capitalist system bent on further entrenching racialized divides in wealth and human security, and ignoring the perils of climate change, citizen movements have momentous choices to make. Of course there are alternatives to the trajectories dictated by a political spectrum captured by right-wing, neoliberal plutocracy. We can choose to build, nurture and channel policies and discourses that protect and promote the public good (the movement for universal medicare in the US is one example), a movement captured in the idea of the 99 percent versus the 1 percent. Meanwhile, the cry of “I can’t breathe”, on placards of peaceful protesters forcefully removed for a photo op with Trump outside a church in New York City, continues to paint the gruesome distinction between social movement mobilization for the public good, and the ambitions of a would-be dictator.

### The point is to change it

The willingness to act existentially to attempt to witness and respond to injustice in our worlds represents an ongoing challenge for critical pedagogues. We experience our worlds and carry our ethical toolboxes with us through them, as it were, choosing how and when to use them. In the present moment, for example, I am grateful to have the privilege, voice and support to be able to use my ‘toolbox’ to attempt to fulfill the requirements of praxis in interpreting forms of injustice unfolding in the current moment, through the vehicle of this essay. As Marx observed suggestively in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, however, the philosophical interpretation of the world is one matter, and the praxis-inspired desire to transform reality, another (Marx, 1845). What, then, can critical pedagogues do in response to the current moment?

We can struggle to invite others to come to grips with the reality of race-based inequalities, whether in specific disciplinary context (social sciences, history, politics, or cultural studies and literature) or in the context of labour and popular education and social movements. Provocative novels like *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas offer vivid portraits of the BLM movement (Thomas, 2017). We have an abundance of texts available to us as tools to illustrate the vibrant and myriad forms of reflection and resistance in response to the painful legacies and history of racism – works by authors such as David Walker, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King, Alice Walker, bell hooks and Nina Simone, and the work of critical historians like Howard Zinn in his *People’s History of the United States*. We can endeavour to embody an antiracist approach in our teaching, not only as regards anti-black racism, but also around the continuing reality of ongoing colonization and systemic racism toward indigenous peoples and in various contexts. We can work to represent the voices, stories and perspectives of communities and people of colour in our curricula. Efforts such as <https://blacklivesmatteratschool.com/> offer a plethora of avenues to attempt to invite others to consider the reality of race-based inequalities and oppression in the US and elsewhere, as do citizen-driven initiatives like the aforementioned Mapping Police Violence initiative. These initiatives attempt to realize a creative antiracist praxis and are led by people of colour. They will necessarily entail a different form of parrhesia than solidarity initiatives undertaken by those who work from the standpoint of white privilege, such as myself.

Black activists and educators in the US may risk their personal safety in the present moment by undertaking these forms of praxis. Dr. Martin Luther King observed that riots were “the language of the unheard” in a 1967 interview with CBS news (CBS, 2013). As such, riots in the present are a symptom of an unjust racist system, and when authorities use more violence to respond to BLM mobilizations instead of working toward reconciliation, more violence and risk is the result. When Trump declares “when the looting starts, the shooting starts” he fans the flames of a war against black Americans and glorifies violence against them (Hern, 2020). In this charged context, the praxis of black activists and educators perfectly exemplifies the type of parrhesia Foucault thought of when characterizing it as truth-speaking that has potentially dangerous or violent consequences for the speaker. In contrast, the parrhesia of those working from a

standpoint of white privilege is best characterized by the dangers of silence. If parrhesia entails truth-speaking when that speaking endangers the speaker, silence on the part of potential allies entails danger for society at large, in the form of further entrenched and violent inequalities and degraded democratic institutions. Ultimately, we can choose as critical pedagogues to be as silent as we choose to be with respect to various contexts of injustice in our worlds. As allies and those promoting solidarity with movements like BLM, our silence can be as dangerous as a tear gas canister fired at a peaceful protester. These choices have a real impact as existential acts of witness in a troubled world, and the stakes for social and environmental justice in the current moment are high, indeed.

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Adam Davidson-Harden  
 Teacher, Limestone District School Board, Kingston, Ontario, Canada  
 [adavidsonharden@gmail.com](mailto:adavidsonharden@gmail.com)