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Empowerment

« The Radical Empowerment Discourse: Originating in the 1970s, this discourse was championed by feminists, black, and popular education activists, and focused on collective liberation in self-emancipatory and explicitly political terms. It emphasised egalitarian, participatory, and local aspects, and at its core, was framed as the self-capacity of grassroots groups to take power over their own lives and dismantle oppressive systems as a necessary condition for social change. The Reformist and Liberal Empowerment Discourse: Then, in the 1980s, a first elite capture of the meaning occurred, and “from its radical roots, we begin to see its incorporation and institutionalisation within systems of state governance” (McLaughlin, 2016, p.5). The empowerment discourse evolved towards a more reformist and light-liberal framework of incremental ways to reform without posing a threat to existing systems. The previous focus on conscientização (Freire, 2017) embraced more therapeutic and isolated notions of individual self-awareness, and the leading figures for change became professionals and experts. Empowerment adopted a state-based, rather than community-based, approach to hybrid governance and light self-management, especially in the realm of community development, as an alternative to older, top-down types of institutionalized government considered paternalistic and obsolescent. The Neoliberal Evolution of Empowerment: Finally, perhaps the most significant leap in the evolution of empowerment discourse was the full neoliberal shift from the 1990s onwards, when financial interests took over the conversation. Since then, empowerment has been ultimately stripped of its political and militant meanings and reframed as the entrepreneurial capacity of individuals to insert themselves into the market society. It established its definitive integration into global discourses of managerial and financial expertise through programs and policies led by international institutions such as the United Nations and the World Bank, and, through deregulation and privatisation, saw central governments abdicating allocations of power, responsibility, and resources to the free market. » (Volpi et al., 2024)

Engagement