

POTRANSI Quest Insight

Turning theatre on its head: A quest into Theatre of the Oppressed



Curiosity, the unknown, a journey, deep fundamental questions – these are words that come to mind when we think of a “quest.” For POTRANSI, the overarching quest guiding our research is: How can people transform power relations towards more just, sustainable, and democratic futures, and how might we help enable that? As we carry this main quest forward, each of us focus on different questions, concepts, and methods. Quest insights are short written reflections capturing early ideas and hunches. Rather than providing a final answer, they are threads inviting you to follow our intertwined personal and academic pursuits. They are humble and transparent, shared to spark conversation.

Tessa de Geus

About the author: Tessa de Geus is a postdoc researcher within the POTRANSI project, where she studies how different methods (including theatre) can help to better understand and unpack power dynamics, as for social innovations to contribute towards more just futures. She has over 12 years of experience in both research and practice of social innovation in the Netherlands and across Europe.

Power in transition manifests in many forms and guises: from how buildings are designed, to the beliefs we hold, or how we hold our bodies. Methods through which power is often studied tend to focus on spoken conversation or ‘rational’ dialogue: think of interviews, observations or document review. While tried and tested, these methods also miss out on ways in which power can be traced - for instance through sound, emotion, image or movement. Through Theatre of the Oppressed knowledge on power can be developed collaboratively using the body and the arts. With POTRANSI, we are curious to understand how this approach might contribute to finding answers to one of our main quests: *How can people transform power relations towards more just, sustainable and/or democratic futures and how might we further enable that?*

Theatre of the Oppressed: Rehearsing for reality

While theatre might feel inaccessible at times, either because of high ticket prices, formal etiquette or lofty playwrights, Theatre of the Oppressed turns those notions on its head. Away with sitting back in the velvet red chairs: Theatre of the Oppressed is a collection of methods that invites people to study structural oppression themselves and develop concrete ways to deal with this. In the words of its Brazilian ‘discoverer’ Augusto Boal (1931-2009), spectators become ‘spectactors’ in order to “rehearse for reality” (Boal 1992).

There are three reasons why I fell in love with Theatre of the Oppressed (TO): its sense-making powers, the community it forges, and the diversity of contexts in which it is used. Through all its different exercises, sense-making happens through a constant back and forth between the agency of the individual and the entanglement with systems and

institutions, as well as between the body and the mind. As such, barriers to, as well as space for, action are identified. Theatre of the Oppressed offers a stage to make embodied knowledge of internalized oppressions visible, while overcoming a sense of powerlessness (Raule 2020). The latter might be strongly related to the formation of a community, the second reason I am fascinated by TO. The intensive research process on oppressions requires trust building and sharing vulnerability, to an extent that is not often invited in Dutch society. In my experience this can result in a tight-knit group where candid reflections are shared. Finally, Theatre of the Oppressed has been applied in a great diversity of environments, and with all kinds of people; from elderly in assisted living, pupils in schools, residents of neighbourhoods transitioning away from natural gas, undocumented people, civil servants in ministries, to Palestinian and Israeli youth – the list goes on. It unites people in their ability to play, work towards more just outcomes and the human ability to create art.

Based on experience with social innovation across Europe (e.g. the projects [SONNET](#) and [UrbanA](#)), as well as more recently the POTRANSI [kickoffs](#) in Utrecht and Lisbon (2025), I observed a need among social innovators for an informal space to research how power structures can be transformed, and what role they can play, by working with hands-on situations. I am curious to understand to what extent Theatre of the Oppressed can support these needs. Through TO, we hope to better understand what stories people share and construct about how transformation occurs, and what tactics can be developed for dealing with power dilemmas. I wonder whether understanding how power works, or, in other words developing 'power literacy' (see [Avelino \(2025\)](#)) relates to the ability to change it, and how such understanding may be fostered.

The Baobab tree of Theatre of the Oppressed

Theatre of the Oppressed was initially developed by Augusto Boal in Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s, in the context of the military Junta. Boal, often considered one of the greatest theatrical innovators of the 20th century, built strongly on the discipline of critical pedagogy developed by fellow Brazilian Paulo Freire. Critical pedagogy centres around the concept of conscientization, or 'critical consciousness': to become aware of your oppression, becoming critical towards it, and finally acting towards liberating yourself from it (Freire 1973). Whereas Freire proposes dialogue as a way to enact such conscientization, Boal focusses on theatre to this end. Boal was originally trained as a playwright in the US, and throughout his life influenced by legacies of the likes of Steinbeck, Stanislavski, Brecht, and Shakespeare, while also known to have met with poet Langston Hughes during his time in New York.

For a quick understanding of the diversity of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), you can follow the metaphor of the Baobab tree (see Figure 1) (Boal 2006). The Baobab tree indicates how TO is rooted in ideas on solidarity, ethics and economy, referring to its Marxist understanding of economy and oppression. Furthermore, it depicts the elements of image, sound and words as its actual roots.

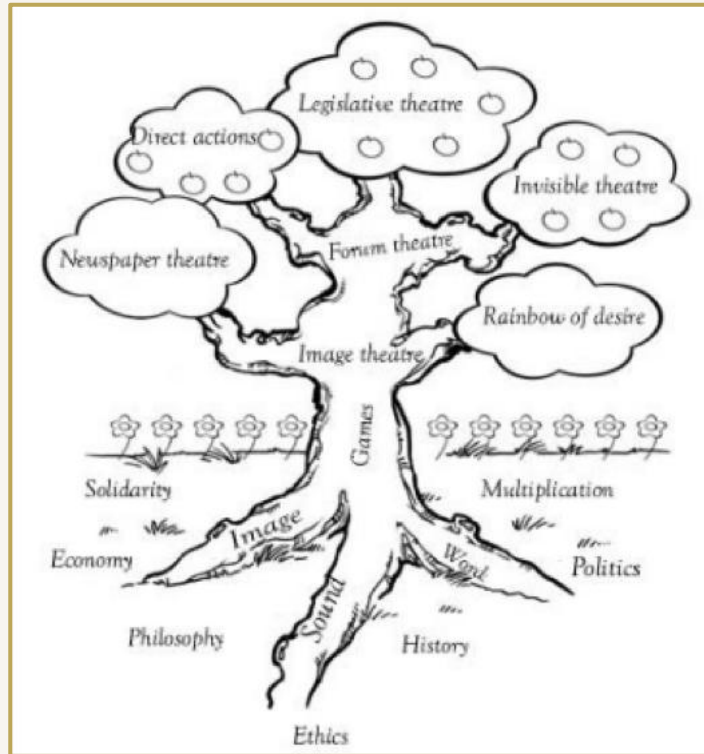


Figure 1: The Baobab tree of Theatre of the Oppressed (Source: [ImaginAction](#)).

Moving up the trunk, games are positioned at its very base. The ‘arsenal’ of games that have been developed serve different purposes, from getting acquainted, to building concentration or trust, to building images or scenes, rehearsing, and stimulating introspection (OpdeBeeck en Bevers 2014). In my notes I unearthed a quote from a workshop I attended: “Games are the embodiment of social life, featuring a setting, rules and consent: what freedom can you find in that? It is a humanizing the self and the others.” To conduct research through theatre, play is essential: becoming a group and establishing trust, embracing mistakes, and becoming aware of your body. For instance, holding your body still for a period of time, as required for image theatre, does not come easy to many people. Games also play an important role in ‘de-mechanisation’: this refers to exploring patterns of oppression our bodies have internalised. In practice, this means that by working through your senses you can explore how your body responds quicker than your head, and reflect on what that means for how you have internalised power. Through such de-mechanisation, the body can be ‘regained’ as an instrument to express resistance and alternatives to oppression (Boal 2002).

Moving further up the tree’s trunk, Image theatre and Forum theatre are the central methods of Theatre of the Oppressed. Image theatre invites people to sculpt images with their bodies, for instance based on particular words such as ‘the oppressor’ and ‘the oppressed’, or ‘power’ and ‘powerlessness’. These images can be interpreted by others, animated through sound or words, and curated in groups based on similarities. With Forum theatre, scenes of oppression are performed, and an audience is invited to step into the scene to experiment with possible ways to act, while building confidence for trying this out outside of the rehearsal space (Boal 2016). The ‘joker’, who is a ‘difficultator’ rather than ‘facilitator’ (Boal 1995), constantly moves between the agency of the spectator, systemic dimensions and the dramaturgy on stage. The scenes feature a protagonist (“lead role”), antagonist (“the opposition”), and tritagonist (“the third character”) all involved in a passionate conflict.

Importantly, Forum theatre is not about telling an individual’s story: it is about mixing stories of where people encountered power, to come to a collective story that can be shared and discussed. It is also *not* about re-enacting specific scenes – it is about reflecting on what happened in a certain situation, making power relations visible and

treating that as a metaphor. From there on, the joker leads a conversation on whether people recognize that story, discussing questions such as “Who oppresses who?”; “What is the dilemma here?”, and “What interests are at stake?”.

The branches of the Baobab tree feature more methods:

- Newspaper theatre. Using different reading techniques, this method takes written text (e.g. newspaper articles) as a basis to develop theatrical action.
- Direct action. Applying theatre for interventions and performances as part of protests.
- Invisible theatre. As part of a crowd in the public domain, actors play a theatre piece without the audience being aware of this.
- Legislative theatre. Through legislative theatre, Forum theatre can be translated to institutional action, through means of voting rounds. In this form, theatre becomes a political process as a form of participatory democracy (Boal 2008).
- Rainbow of desire. Rainbow is a collection of 15 methods that focus on internalised oppressions: the so-called “cops in the head”.

Importantly, what exact approach is used completely depends on the questions that emerge and the themes that come up in the group. Depending on a group’s goals, you can follow different branches towards different methods. These different forms have been developed for different purposes: from more activist strategies (e.g. direct action), to ways to relate to incumbent power (e.g. legislative theatre).

As per the analogy of the tree, Theatre of the Oppressed is meant to bear fruits and seeds, as it spreads and is adapted across different contexts. Moreover, in *Aesthetics of the oppressed* (2006) Boal argues that all art forms can be used, and should not only be appropriated by certain institutions or professions – from painting to for instance working with light, as initiated by Theatre of the Oppressed group *Formaat* with *Shadow Theatre* by undocumented people.

What’s next? Working with Theatre of the Oppressed in POTRANSI

Working with Theatre of the Oppressed for understanding the role of social innovation in just sustainability transitions raises many questions that require further investigation. To start with, how does it lay bare different axes of oppression? Those who are oppressed in one way are oppressors in another way. How does this translate to a group where some people represent new innovations and others established institutions and interests? Do we stick to replacing the protagonist, or do we experiment with replacing the antagonist as well? And, as researchers, how can we harvest what is done in a respectful way, doing justice to the process and embodied knowledge? After all, the harvest will likely translate well to written text; what is the potential of video, podcasts, photography? How can power be shared within the group while also benefitting from existing experience with Theatre of the Oppressed and theories or concepts on power?

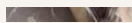
Regarding some of the root assumptions in Theatre of the Oppressed, I wonder how concept such as de-mechanisation can be considered while building on renowned power scholars such as Michel Foucault? Or, how might we discuss how some bodies are more controlled than others (Oyewumi 1998 in Raule 2020), and discuss

what sociologist Bourdieu might have said about that. Or how about the Marxist ideas of class struggle that have shaped its theory of change – what happens if those ideas are challenged by findings from transition studies? And how can concepts and theories such as the facets of power and transformative power relate to Theatre of the Oppressed?

In spring 2026, we started a first round of working sessions to experiment with Theatre of the Oppressed together with a group of social innovators, artists and researchers. Together, we develop input for the Transformative Power Arena in October 2026, to continue our collective research with a larger group. After all, reading about Theatre of the Oppressed can only tell you so much: the *doing* will teach us so much more.

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 **Suggested citation:** De Geus, T., (2026). Turning theatre on its head: A quest into Theatre of the Oppressed. Quest Insight. Utrecht: POTRANSI.

