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The Paulo Freire Literacy Method: A Critical Evaluation

In the early part of the 1960's, in the poverty stricken Northeast of Brazil, Paulo Freire developed a highly controversial method of literacy training among the poorest people. However, with the fall of the Goulart government in 1964, Freire's work in Brazil came to an end and he moved to Chile where, until 1970, he used his method to bring about agrarian reform. Freire then spent a year in the United States, lecturing at Harvard University and working with groups interested in his method. Since 1971, he has been based in Geneva, Switzerland as a consultant to the World Council of Churches and recently established there an institute for the further development and extension of his methods of education.

In this paper it is my purpose to make a careful examination of the Paulo Freire Method. Though many groups throughout the world are using it in varying types of educational endeavors, unfortunately many of them have not looked seriously enough at the underlying philosophical, cultural, and pedagogical assumptions.

origins of the Paulo Freire method

Freire's initial training was in philosophy and law. It was while he worked as a labor union lawyer among the people of the slums that he became interested in the work of literacy training. He quickly became dissatisfied with traditional literacy methods because of the paternalism and authoritarianism which they involved. In 1959, Freire was appointed a Professor of the History and Philosophy of Education at the University of Pernambuco in Recife, Brazil. In this capacity he continued his literacy work among the poor and was able to involve many students in his project. In the early 1960's, democratic reform centering around the Popular Culture movement developed in the Northeast. The members of this movement to which Freire belonged, conducted many discussions with the ordinary peo-

ple. In these discussions they used visual aids to dramatize various social issues and, so satisfactory were the results, that Freire decided to use the same types of methods with his literacy training.

From all accounts, the Freire Method was successful in the few years of its utilization in Brazil.¹ In its initial stages, the Alliance for Progress was interested in the experimental method. In the city of Angicos 300 hundred workers learned to read and write in 45 days. In June 1963, the literacy program was extended in principle to the entire nation and between June 1963 and March 1964, training programs were developed in almost all the state capitals. The 1964 plan was to establish 20,000 discussion groups which would be equipped to teach approximately 20 million illiterates. However, widespread opposition began to develop in Brazilian conservative circles. Freire was accused by many of using his literacy method to spread subversive and revolutionary ideas. It seems clear that incitement to revolt was never Freire's direct objective, though his method did, in fact, contain the seeds of revolt since it gave the people an awareness of the oppressive conditions under which they lived and worked.

Freire's literacy work in Brazil was brought to an abrupt ending in April 1964. A military coup toppled the Goulart government and, along with many other leaders of leftist groups, Freire was jailed. He spent seventy days in jail, was stripped of his rights of citizenship and forced into exile. With his wife and five children, he went to Santiago, Chile, where he worked as a UNESCO consultant and with the Agrarian Reform Training and Research Institute (ICIRA).

While he was in prison, Freire began to write an account of his literacy method. He finished the book, *Educação Como Prática da Liberdade*,³ in Chile where it was extensively used. This work has appeared in English as the first part of *Education for Critical Consciousness*.⁴ Freire has also written numerous articles and two additional books on his educational thought: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Cultural Action for Freedom*.⁵

the Paulo Freire method

The Paulo Freire Method of literacy training is most clearly presented in *Education for Critical Consciousness*. A brief description will be given here, followed by a critical analysis.

The *first stage* is the study of the context. An investigating team examines the lives of people in a given area. Their common vocabulary and the problems confronting them are recorded and lengthy interviews are held to discover their longings, frustrations, and hopes. Efforts are made to involve them as much as possible, even at this first stage, for Freire insists that the words used in literacy training should come, not from the educator, but from the people.⁶

The *second stage* of the method is the selection of the generative words. Words are "generative" for Freire if they have the capacity of leading learners to new ones. Three criteria are used in choosing these words:

1. They should contain the basic sounds of the Portuguese and Spanish languages;
2. When organized, they should enable the learner to move from simple letters and sounds to more complex ones;
3. They should be useful for confronting the social, cultural, and political reality in which the people live.

Freire's coordinators developed different lists of words for each area in which they worked.

The *third stage* of the method is the actual literacy training. In Brazil, literacy training was preceded by at least three motivation sessions in which the students analyzed the concept of culture in order to see themselves as genuine creators of it. In Chile, these sessions were incorporated into the actual training sessions. The training sessions themselves consisted of discussions around the generative words and the pictures which illustrated them. Each word was broken down into its syllables, e.g. *favela* (slum) was broken down into *fa-ve-la*. The family of syllables was shown: *Fa, Fe, Fi, Fo, Fu*. This was done with all the syllables. The learners were then led to create other words using these syllables and their families. When the second generative word was shown, the learners began to make combinations of its syllables and also combinations with all the syllables of the two words presented.

At the same time that the students were decodifying the word *favela*, they were also decodifying the reality of the slum in which they were involved. For Freire, literacy training is no mere mechanical process for teaching a person to read and write. It is rather a process that should lead a person to critical consciousness. It should lead him to a greater awareness of the oppressive forces in his life and to the realization of his own power to denounce these forces in the name of freedom.

A *fourth stage* has been added to the method which Freire himself has called "post literacy" or political literacy.⁷ This is concerned with the raising of critical consciousness among those who are already literate. Rather than generative words, generative themes now form the basis of education. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* shows how this form of education may be the preparatory stage of revolutionary action. Such themes as "oppression," "domination," "imperialism," "welfarism" would serve as the basis for discussion and action.

Freire describes his literacy method as "conscientization." Freire did not coin this term, but he has used it repeatedly to explain the educational theory and practice he proposes. Perhaps the best definition for conscientization is contained in a footnote in *Cultural*

Action for Freedom. "Conscientization" is defined as

. . . the process in which men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives, and of their capacity to transform that reality through action upon it.⁸

a critical analysis

The Freire Method is closely tied to certain theoretical views which he espouses. For him "all educational practice implies a theoretical stance . . . , an interpretation of man and the world."⁹ Since Freire is given to over-intellectualizing the rather simple educational practice in which he engages, the reader who delves into his books soon finds himself confronted with rather abstruse and detailed philosophical discussions. Yet it is useful to look seriously at these philosophical discourses because they reveal certain weaknesses in his method.

Freire's thinking is apparently eclectic. He quotes from existentialists, both Christian and atheistic, from phenomenologists, Marxists, and pragmatists. In his more recent writings, he has begun to show some consistency and coherence as he has become more closely allied with theologians in his work at the World Council of Churches. The major thrust of his philosophical view would appear to be a Christian humanism which attempts to include within itself important elements of other philosophical positions.

Philosophy of Man

A serious problem in Freire's philosophy is his static view of man. Freire appears to have within him some intuitive concept of what it means to be human. He speaks of man's ontological vocation to become more human. He writes of humanization and dehumanization as opposed concepts. He defines man in terms of his relationships to God and to others, relationships that should be characterized by freedom, not by domination. Freire writes often of oppression as opposed to man's true nature.

Freire rarely gets beyond generalities or pieties in developing his philosophy of man. There is little here that one can grab hold of. He speaks of men as defined by their praxis-reflective action. Men are also the creators of history and of culture. Man just does not exist; he is an abstraction. He lives in no historical time. He has no body, no passions, no emotions. He is controlled by no particular culture. He knows neither relativism nor pluralism. He is not faced with compromises. He never has to choose between evil alternatives. He lives in a world where things are clearly right or wrong.

Because of this faulty view of man, Freire is forced to offer an inadequate explanation of oppression. Oppression, for Freire,

is "any situation in which 'A' objectively exploits 'B' or hinders his pursuit of self affirmation as a responsible person."¹⁰ Freire gives no criteria for judging what objective exploitation would be or what a responsible person would be. His explanation of oppression appears both tautological and dangerous. Freire certainly labored in situations in Brazil which one would surely term oppressive, yet he has not adequately analyzed these situations when he divides Brazilian society into oppressors and oppressed. In contrast, Memmi's work on Algeria is an example of an analysis of oppression which is both concrete and theoretical.¹¹

Freire's static view of man is also shown in the comparisons which he makes between men and animals. Men and animals are placed at opposite poles of the spectrum. He makes no attempt to show the continuity in nature between men and animals, but here depends on the rather rigid categories of scholasticism and existentialism. These categories appear incapable of taking account of the biological and psychological findings of the past century. In exaggerating the distinction between men and animals Freire is led into another serious difficulty. If animals are immersed in nature and thus determined as to their actions, then men must be above nature and thus free in their actions. Freire clearly exaggerates the power of man's freedom to choose and his failure to take into account the limitations to human freedom gives rise of an overly simplistic and optimistic view of the possibility of social and political change. Freire speaks of change as if it is merely a matter of seeing its necessity and possibility and then willing its existence. At times he "comes through" as a religious preacher, urging men to live a better life without at the same time showing them how to cope with the personal and social obstacles that make the living of this life very difficult, if not impossible.

Freire's vision of man is utopian, yet it is a vision which is not totally true to the religious tradition to which Freire belongs and lacks some of the realism of the Christian tradition with its strong insistence upon original sin and the corruptibility of man. Heilbroner has pointed out that the deepest weakness of the utopian vision of man

has been its failure to formulate a conception of human behavior in all its historical, sociological, sexual, and ideational complexity, a conception that would present "man" as being at once biologic as well as social, tragic as well as heroic, limited as well as plastic.¹²

When Freire describes the man that will be, this man bears no resemblance to the man that is. This is no doubt the prerogative of a utopian thinker who proclaims the coming of the New Man. It is no doubt the style and rhetoric of the preacher who proclaims the coming of the Kingdom. But this vision of man is a faulty one on

which to base not only a criticism of society and its institutions, but also a program for social and political revolution. The dark side of mankind will not be eliminated when the present oppressed are released and when people turn from oppressive to non-oppressive institutions. Theories and programs of social change must deal realistically with this dark side of human nature.

Theory of Conscientization

Freire's philosophy includes, as one of its most essential elements, a theory of human consciousness and of knowing. He is indebted to the phenomenological view of knowledge which attempts to avoid the extremes of materialism and idealism by positing a third way¹³ and he tries to explain knowledge as the process in which man becomes aware of objective reality and of his own knowledge of objective reality. He contends that conscientization goes deeper than the French *prise de conscience*. He contends that it goes deeper because it penetrates to what reality really is and because it is connected with praxis or reflective activity. For Freire, then, conscientization demands an historical commitment, it demands involvement, it also implies intervention into reality through action.

Freire valiantly attempts to avoid the idealist position, but it appears that he does not succeed. The difficulty with his position lies first of all with his view of objective reality. Reality appears to be a static given for Freire. It exists outside man's consciousness. His theory of conscientization depends on some sort of transcendent view of reality so that through conscientization individuals are brought to see this reality and the group as a whole arrives at a true and authentic knowledge of the situation. Freire seems to have little awareness of the complexities of the reality which people are attempting to discover.

His idealist view of knowledge is apparent in another weakness in his theory where the connection between thought and action becomes blurred. Freire seems to say that people involved in the circles of culture fashion a new reality which will replace the old reality which they denounce. He seems to assume that a person's knowledge of his true interests guarantees his participation in activity to achieve these interests. As Horowitz rightly points out:

The line between action and interests is far from straight. Even if we ignore the dilemmas arising out of a direct correlation of actions and interests, there is a policy issue involved; namely, the degree of social unrest necessary to stimulate a person to think along developmental lines without creating complete revolutionary upheaval.¹⁴

There is also the real possibility that people involved in conscientiza-

tion might become even more entrenched in their thinking once they realize the full impact of oppression in their lives.

In spite of these objections, Freire's concept of learning as conscientization is interesting for a number of reasons. It is refreshing to look at a theory of human learning that has been elaborated after an educational practice such as Freire's literacy training. People learned to read and write in a short period of time. They also became critically aware of the social reality in which they were immersed. Yet success in practice does not mean truth and consistency in theory. One can inadequately explain what one has successfully done. A person can also succeed because he does not practice what he theorizes. In theorizing, Freire goes back again and again and again to the reality of what he did in order to explain it as completely and as consistently as possible. He also modified his practice as a result of theoretical and practical considerations. There is in his work, then, a close dialectical relationship between theory and practice.

The Problem of Indoctrination

Freire's theory of learning is subordinated to political and social purposes. Such a theory opens itself to the charge of indoctrination and manipulation. The situation in which Freire worked in Brazil made him sensitive to these charges, at least to the degree of avoiding conflict with rightest elements in Brazilian society. He is even more sensitive to these charges now that his theory of conscientization is being examined and considered for application in other countries and cultures. Is the Freire theory of learning indoctrinative and manipulative?

Freire is strongly opposed to the banking concept of education,¹⁵ whereby knowledge is deposited into the minds of the students by teachers. He criticized the primers that were used in adult education because they imposed words and ideas on the learners. He insisted that the words and the themes used in education should be those common among the people being educated. Freire's contention is that the purpose of conscientization is to get people to learn by having them challenge the concrete reality of their lives through discussions. No alien view of social reality is imposed upon them; but through discussing a problematic situation, they are led to see the true condition under which they live. Through discussion they also begin to see that the present social reality is not determined but can be changed by them.

Though Freire is sensitive to the charge of subtle manipulation, it cannot be clearly stated that he totally escapes this charge. For him, there is no neutral education. He writes that:

All educational practice implies a theoretical stance on the part of the educator. This stance implies — sometimes more, sometimes less implicitly — an interpretation of man and the world. It could not be otherwise.¹⁶

This non-neutrality of education is shown in the fact that, out of all the words and themes that could be chosen for discussion, those are chosen which have the greatest capacity for challenging the existing social reality.

The process of conscientization entails for Freire a radical denunciation of dehumanizing structures, accompanied by the proclamation of a new reality to be created by men. Freire is confident that this will come about through free dialogue in which learners and educators participate as equals. Yet one cannot help but wonder if there is not a more subtle manipulation built into this method, given the lack of education in the learners and the obvious political purposes of the teachers. In such circumstances it would appear most difficult for teachers to satisfy the demands for objectivity and for an appeal to rational argumentation.

Freire is no doubt less concerned with the question of indoctrination because of his view of objective reality. It is his conviction that through dialogue the truth will be made apparent. Indoctrination into what is the truth does not raise problems for such an educator. Freire seems only slightly sensitive to the reality that most often men differ about what the objective reality of the situation truly is.

Theory of Revolution

Freire's theory and strategy of revolution appear to be naive, to use a favorite word of his. He discusses revolution without discussing any particular social and historical contexts. He appears to be generalizing upon his reflections on the Brazilian situation in which he was involved. He is like the crusader who, after the good and brave fight, stands ready to generalize his theories and strategies to the situation of all oppressed peoples of the world.

Freire became much more politically motivated in his writings after *Educacao*. According to Francisco Weffort, who wrote the preface for this work, the failure of conscientization in Brazil was in its neglect of political strategies.¹⁷ Weffort criticized the Popular Culture Movement, of which Freire was a part, for its failure to be more critical. He contended that the forces interested in popular mobilization failed to perceive and exploit the implications that conscientization had for political relevance. The ability of movements such as Freire's to be truly effective politically resulted from the fact that these movements were committed directly or indirectly to the government and thus to existing institutions.

Freire has now become an advocate of political revolution. At the basis of his political philosophy lies his analysis of oppression. He sees only one relationship in the Third World, that of oppression or subjection. Freire even thinks of relationships in more advanced countries in terms of oppressor-oppressed. The oppressors in these societies are those who use technology to manipulate people and to produce a mass society. Freire does not condemn technology in itself but rather he condemns its harmful uses. The treatment that he gives to technology is not extensive, but when he does treat man and technology, he uses the same type of relationship — dependence, subjection, oppression.¹⁸

The tendency of Freire to see only one type of relationship among people makes it most difficult to apply his pedagogy. The cultural, the social, the political, and the religious were all cast by him into the one relationship of oppressor-oppressed without any particular context. In attempting to forge a universal theory of revolutionary pedagogy, he oversimplified to a dangerous degree and appeared to be unaware that revolutions differ according to differing social and economic situations. Freire's failure to link his revolutionary theory to a particular historical context separates him from such students of revolution as Johnson¹⁹ and Arendt²⁰ who consider contexts essential to developing a theory of revolution. It also renders his pedagogy less useful to many groups who work in varying contexts.

Freire considers that his main contribution to a theory of revolution is his emphasis on the dialogical nature of revolutionary action, believing that leaders should be in constant dialogue with the people at all points in the revolution. In fact, he points to his experience in dialogical and problem-solving education as giving him the necessary experience to write a book on revolutionary action, though he has never participated in a revolution. Freire wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to defend the eminently pedagogical nature of the revolution. He writes that:

Critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever stage of their struggle for liberation. The content of that dialogue can and should vary in accordance with historical situations and the level at which they can perceive reality.²¹

Freire's commitment to the dialogical character of the revolution is a limited one. After he indicates the number of cases in which dialogue among equals is to be suspended, there is little left to his theory of dialogical revolution. Freire has great difficulty making his hero, Che Guevara, an advocate of dialogical revolution. He quotes the revolutionary leader's words:

Mistrust: at the beginning, do not trust your former shadow, never trust friendly peasants, informers, guides, or contact men. Do not trust anything or anybody until a zone is completely liberated.²²

Guevara advocates communion with the people only after liberation has been achieved. This does not, as Freire would wish, make Guevara an advocate of dialogue with the people at every stage of the revolution. Freire commends the realism of the guerilla leader and still attempts to make him an advocate of Freire's theory of dialogical revolution, but this appears an impossibility. In commending Guevara's mistrust of the ambiguity of oppressed men and his refusal to dialogue with them, Freire has denied the very essence of his theory of revolutionary action as fundamentally dialogical.

Freire compromises his dialogical theory of revolution in a number of other instances. He denies the necessity or the duty of the revolutionaries to dialogue with the former oppressors. He agrees with Guevara's admonition to punish the deserter from the revolutionary group. This must be done to preserve the cohesion and the discipline of the group. Freire also agrees with the guerilla leader in his non-toleration of those who are not ready to accept the conclusion that the revolution is essential. He speaks of the revolution as loving and creating life: "And in order to create life, [the revolution] may be obliged to prevent some men from circumscribing life."²³

Freire attempts to make his theory of the dialogical character of the revolution hold up against the stated views of revolutionaries. This effort must be pronounced a failure. The forging of a revolution would seem to preclude the dialogue among equals to arrive at truth by permitting the free expression of ideas.²⁴ Freire, the educator inexperienced in revolutionary activity, has certainly exaggerated the role that free educational processes have to play in a revolution.

conclusion

From this analysis, it appears that there are serious problems involved with the Freire method. These make it difficult to transfer the method to situations in other cultures and groups which have attempted to work with it have already come face to face with these difficulties which exist both at the theoretical and methodological levels. Nevertheless, there is still reason for educators to examine Freire's philosophy of education.

The enduring value of Freire lies, I believe, in his emphasis on the political nature of knowledge. He sees educational systems of the Third World as the chief means that oppressive elites use to dominate the masses. Knowledge and learning are political for

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Freire because they are power for those who generate them as they are for those who use them.

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