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Education as Liberation: An Analysis of Paulo Freire

INTRODUCTION

Education as liberation is the interesting and provocative theme of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.¹ This book, written by Dr. Paulo Freire, a Brazilian Social educator, insists that significant political-social change can be effected by educational methodology. A descriptive and analytical examination of Freire's theory as presented in *Pedagogy* is the primary purpose of this presentation. This brief study is arranged in four sections. Section one is the introduction and consists of a brief biographical sketch of Freire, and a summary of the book's main thesis. Section two is a presentation of Freire's underlying philosophy and section three is an exposition of his theory of education. The final section discusses some problems that may be encountered during the implementation of such a theory.

A. Biographical Sketch

Freire began life in 1921 as a member of Recife, Brazil's middle class. But as a result of the American Stock Market crash of 1929 he was reduced to a member of the lower class. Even after struggling all the way up to a doctorate from the University of Recife, he was subsequently expelled from his country because of his work on behalf of the oppressed. Both with UNESCO in Chile and as an educational consultant at Harvard University, he continued his work among the urban and rural poor (10-12).² Freire has known oppression first hand. He does not therefore, write from an objective uninvolved perspective. His style is passionate and evangelistic. He presents his ideas as an oppressed man to oppressed men.

B. Basic Thesis

Pedagogy of the Oppressed is the statement of a developing educational theory that has its roots in the philosophy of humanism. Dr. Freire believes that education can be a potent instrument for social reconstruction. The theory's ultimate goal is the political, economic and social liberation of all people via a dialogical-praxis methodology called "conscientizacao." This method is built on the conviction that when oppressed people are fully conscious of their plight, and are aware of

¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, translated by Myra B. Ramos (New York: Seabury Press, 1970).

² The numbers in parenthesis refer to pages in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

alternatives to their plight and the possibilities for changing their plight, that they will work with their leaders to alter their oppressive situation.

The dialogical-praxis methodology stresses the necessity of a relationship of mutual love and faith between the revolutionary leaders and the people. The method stresses that the relationship between the leaders and people should be that of Subject-Subject (I-Thou) rather than Subject-Object (I-it) and that the problem-posing method of program-content building should be used rather than the authoritarian, this-is-what-you-need-to-know approach. At every stage of the struggle reflection and action must be carried on simultaneously.

The "end-product" of this educational-political process is the "new man" who is neither oppressed nor oppressor but "man in the process of achieving freedom" for himself and others (30, 33-34).

I. PHILOSOPHY: HUMANISM

Philosophically Paulo Freire is first and foremost a humanist (27-29; 39f.; 61-64). Although his book is liberally sprinkled with "religious" phrases like love, hope, faith, re-born, conversion, new man, etc., one gets the overwhelming impression that he believes that "man is the measure of all things." He does not overtly deny the existence of God but nowhere does he affirm his existence or attribute to him any active role in the world's creation or administration. In one negative reference he states that some of the oppressed believe that their circumstances are decreed by God (48), but otherwise he simply ignores divine existence and gives his full attention to man.

In Freire's thinking man consists primarily of body and consciousness. Bodily, man is a part of nature and shares nature's basic characteristics. It is man's consciousness of his distinction from nature and other persons and particularly his "consciousness of consciousness" that makes him a unique creature. This consciousness of consciousness not only distinguishes people from the rest of the world but gives them power over the world. It is this unique consciousness that gives humans the ability to "speak the word," to "name the world" and thereby "to transform its reality" (75ff.).

Freirean reality (political reality) is of two kinds: subjective and objective. Subjective reality is the situation as it is perceived by the immediate participants in the situation. Objective reality is the situation in its totality. For instance, in Freire's world there are two classes of people: the oppressed and the oppressors. Each class is aware of its relationship to the other group on a general basis but neither is conscious of the total reality of their situational relationship. Oppressors usually say that the oppressed are in their predicament because they are by nature intellectually less endowed, lazy and generally unmotivated. The oppressed often agree with their oppressors and acquiesce in the "fact" that their lot is the "will of God," or just the way things are. In both cases, members of each class are experiencing a kind of subjective reality.

They are looking at the situation as it is *apparently*, and stating reality as each sees it subjectively.

Now Freire states that the objective reality can only be perceived by a critical examination of the total situation from a historical, social, economic and political perspective. From such a perspective the objective reality may be that the oppressors *have more* (goods, services, opportunities, power, etc.) not because of *who they are* — in terms of natural endowment — but because of *what they have done* — in terms of robbing the oppressed. Because they have seized and maintained the power, the oppressors have used that power to name the world and define reality both for themselves and the oppressed. And have claimed this power to name and define as their exclusive prerogative.

Now one of the main points stemming from Freire's humanist philosophical base is that this power to name the world and define reality is not the exclusive prerogative of the oppressors but the prerogative of all who are human. He argues that the power to speak the word, to name the world and transform it is what makes people human, and that any thing, or person or group who thwarts this power is a dehumanizing force that must be overthrown.

Another of Freire's main ideas is that only the oppressed can perform the act of self-liberation. The oppressors have various kinds of economic, social, political and psychological stakes in the oppressed remaining oppressed. Their whole sense of reality is bound up in the oppressor-oppressed dialectic. The oppressor cannot liberate the oppressed because he is dependent upon the oppressed for his perverted sense of reality and is therefore unwittingly bound by the chains of his own oppressive reality. The oppressor is unliberated; therefore, if the oppressed are to be free they must liberate themselves *and* their oppressors. Freire suggests that this liberation can be achieved by a special kind of education called pedagogy of the oppressed.

II. EDUCATIONAL-POLITICAL THEORY: CONSCIENTIZACAO

The word that Freire uses to summarize his special kind of education is a Spanish term *conscientizacaō*. Myra Ramos, the translator of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* defines the term as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and (learning) to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (19). It seems to me that this term, transliterated into English as *conscientization*, encompasses at least three English words. They are: 1) *consciousness* which has to do with awareness, 2) *conscientiousness* which is concerned with action, and 3) *consecration* which has to do with an attitude of dedication, in this case, to certain spiritual qualities that give meaning and impetus to liberating awareness and action. Conscientization is at once a way of thinking, acting and feeling. It is a politically oriented educational theory

dedicated to helping oppressed people think and act their way toward liberation. Let us now look at these three words separately and use them as hooks upon which to hang some of Freire's major ideas.

A. Consciousness

One of Freire's basic assumptions is that freedom is essential to full humanity. He does not enter into a philosophical discussion regarding the matter of absolute versus limited freedom. His concern is with what he calls "limit-situations" in which oppressed people's freedom are severely restricted in political, economic and social contexts (34, 73). He is especially concerned with situations in which one group of persons (oppressors) enjoy extended degrees of freedom at the expense of other groups of people (the oppressed). In such a limit-situation both groups are dehumanized. The oppressed become less human because their access to human alternatives are severely restricted and the oppressor become dehumanized because their dehumanizing activities tend to greatly develop their sub-human qualities. But since the oppressors perceive their freedom not as a part of their basic humanity but as a result of their ability to acquire and possess, they must continue to oppress others in order to acquire more. It is from their sense of having that they receive their sense of being (43-46).

Given this situation, it becomes clear that the oppression syndrome is going to have to be broken by those who profit least from it and Freire contends that the first step in breaking the chains of oppression is to raise the consciousness level of the oppressed. The consciousness raising process is initiated by reflective dialogue with the oppressed, through which they become increasingly aware of the dynamics of their situation. For instance, why is it that those who do the hardest labor in the production of goods and services often reap the least benefit from their labors? Why is it that the poor majority is at the political mercy of the rich majority? Why is it that it is usually the same relatively small groups of persons or families that are in control socially, politically, and economically? If all people are equally human and if freedom is a characteristic of humanness, then why do the great economic, social and political power discrepancies exist between the classes and the masses?

Freire suggests that an important part of the pedagogy of the oppressed is the raising of just such questions by and with the poor. But not in a bookish, classroom, academic kind of educational setting or process. Rather, these concerns should be expressed and dealt with in an in-the-situation, on-the-spot, person-to-person dialogical fashion. He calls it the "problem-posing," versus the "banking" approach to education (57-74). In the banking concept of teaching, the teacher is the depositor, who primarily through narrative, monologue-type "communiques," deposits information into the mind of the student. The aim of

this type of education is to fill the student with the "right" information so that at the appropriate time and place the correct data may be retrieved from the student's account. This kind of education is adaptive. It seeks to fit the student for "his place" in society. It is establishment oriented and designed to maintain a peaceful, don't-rock-the-boat status quo. It elevates the teacher to a pedestal position from which he talks, thinks, chooses and acts while the student listens, rethinks, accepts and reacts. In such a learning process the teacher is the Subject and the student is the object. Freire states that banking education is antithetical to the revolutionary process and is an "exercise of domination" by the teacher which "stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression" (65).

In contrast, "problem-posing" education seeks to stimulate the creative thinking of the students. It does not seek to have him adapt to the world as it is, but to change the world. The teacher does not dominate the learning process but shares it with the student, so that during the educational process the student becomes the teacher, and the teacher becomes the student. And in this relationship of teacher-student, student-teacher, both pose problems that have existential significance and both communicate and experience communion on a conscious-raising level.

The problem-posing method is not easy. It is designed to raise the consciousness of the oppressed by forcing them to think of themselves in relation to their limit-situations. It is a way of inducing a healthy group self-consciousness that will lead to acts of self-liberation. In Brazil, the process was conducted in this general order (see 101-118):

First the educator-politicians go into the area where they wish to carry out the process of conscientization. For an undetermined period of time they talk and more important listen and observe the people in all phases of their daily lives — including work, home, church, community activities, and so on. They get to know the people and the people get to know them. Secondly, they come together with the people of the area in a group meeting to discuss with them what they have in mind (a literacy program, for instance) and ask for volunteers to work with the teacher-leaders in gathering the materials on which the program is to be built. Thirdly, the large community group is broken down in smaller groups, each with teacher-leaders and community volunteers. It is in these groups that problems are posed, discussed and recorded on tape, film, and in writing. After the group meetings, these recordings are transcribed and discussed by the staff composed of the "teachers" and representatives chosen from the community. A psychologist and a sociologist may also be added to the group in order to have the advantage of their professional input. Each member of the group expresses his or her findings in the open staff meeting so that each person's perceptions can be checked out both by the professionals, the teachers and most importantly by the community representatives who represent

the "grass roots" people of the area. Out of these sessions come a series of problems which represent the crucial concerns of the oppressed people. Fourthly, these problems that the "staff" thinks should also be included. These are then changed into individual photographs and/or recordings sections called "coded" situations. Such a coded situation was the picture of a drunken "peasant." In "de-coding" the situation, the peasants affirmed the man's right to be drunk. They felt that his oppressive situation had driven him to alcoholism. Their consciousness of their oppressive situation was heightened by openly facing this "fact." But the coded situational presentation also raised a further question regarding whether or not this was the most appropriate response that they as a group could make to their limit-situation. The oppressed group was "compelled" to re-examine their responses in the light of possible alternatives. It is in the critical re-examinations of such situations that consciousness is raised.

Now once consciousness is raised by a critical appraisal of the limit-situation, the next step in conscientization is to determine what *limit-acts* are possible to change the situation. Dialogue between the people and their leaders must continue until there begins to emerge an awareness of realistic possible solutions. After these "untested feasibilities" have been discussed and a course of action agreed upon, the next step is to act.³

B. Conscientiousness

Freire is interested in change and is convinced that change, particularly revolutionary change, will not occur simply by reflection stimulated by dialogue. It must be brought about by "praxis" which he describes as a combination of "reflection and action upon the world in order to change it" (36, 52-53, 66). Freire makes two important points about praxis. One is that in order for praxis to be liberating, reflection and action must become as Siamese twins — they must always go together. Action without reflection becomes activism and reflection without action becomes verbalism (75). In order for praxis to be effective, the oppressed must always be acting on their reflections and reflecting on their actions. They must "confront reality critically simultaneously objectifying and acting upon that reality" (37). The second point that Freire makes is that praxis must take place as a joint venture by the oppressed and their leaders. The leaders must not take upon themselves the responsibility of thinking and acting *for* the oppressed. They must not succumb to a Messianism. Since only the oppressed can liberate themselves, the leaders must work in dialogical relationship *with* the people. The leaders must inspire action but must act only with the consent of and in partnership with the people.

³Freire does not tell us in *Pedagogy* how the process of conscientization resulted in learning to read. The main point is the acquiring of political power for self-liberation rather than learning to read as a personal or social skill.

C. Consecration

But not every would-be revolutionary leader can be a pedagogue of the oppressed. There are certain qualities needed that are usually associated with metaphysics or religion, however Freire interprets these qualities as attributes of full human beings without any religious reference. I have summed up these qualities in the term consecration and pictured them as pillars that support Freire's revolutionary educational structure.

The first pillar is love. He does not define love but describes it as "an act of courage" and as a commitment to other people and their liberation. This love is not sentimental and does not serve as a "pretext for manipulation," but rather "generates other acts of freedom." It is a precondition for working in dialogue for liberation. For if one does not "love the world," "love life" and "love men," he cannot enter into authentic dialogue with the oppressed or work with them in the praxis of liberation (77-78). The first pillar of Freire's dialogical educational structure is a consecration to respect, concern and compassion with the oppressed and a dedication service with them for their liberation.

The second pillar is humility. The teacher-leader must be able to listen as well as talk, see other persons as Subjects as well as himself, submit himself to critical self-examination and be willing to admit that he or she needs other people in the cooperative effort to win liberation for all. Without this humility the leader becomes a victim of Messianism, sets up a Subject-object relationship and goes about winning liberation *for* the people instead of *with* the people. This practice would be anti-dialogical since true liberation calls for a relationship in which leaders and people are partners in their struggle and victory. Humility on the part of the leaders helps to develop this kind of partnership.

The third pillar is faith. At the heart of the partnership struggle for liberation must be a mutual faith in man's ability to change for the better and his ability to create that change. Freire said that mutual trust between the oppressed and their leaders is an "indispensable precondition for revolutionary change" (46). Given the betrayal of the people that sometimes takes place after the revolution and the betrayal of the leaders that sometimes takes place during the revolutionary process, this mutual faith is often difficult to build and maintain. Too often the revolutionary leaders have been turned over to the oppressors during the struggle for liberation. And too often once the revolution has succeeded the leaders of the revolution have become tyrants over the people they were supposed to set free. Perhaps that is why faith is an absolute necessity. It is demanded in order to struggle on when there is no guarantee that genuine liberation will become a reality. Mutual faith is an indispensable pillar for partnership liberation.

However, Freire warns against "naive" faith (79). The revolutionary should expect no easy surrender of the oppressors, nor should he expect that all of the oppressed shall fight together with him. The oppressors

have a vested interest in the oppressed remaining oppressed and some of the oppressed would rather suffer their immediate miseries "than flee to others that they know not of." There is the fear of freedom and its responsibilities and there is the fatalistic attitude of the oppressed caused by an internalization of some of the ideas of his inferiority held by the oppressors. This internalized oppressor mentality makes many of the oppressed wonder whether or not his oppression is in-the-nature-of-things-as-they-should-be or "ordained by God." But in spite of these fears and negative attitudes, the teacher-leader must believe in himself, in his people and in their joint mission of liberation. He must believe that in spite of history and the present limit-situation that all men were made for freedom and that together the oppressed, their leaders and those converts from the oppressor group who fight with them can achieve authentic liberation (46-47).

The fourth pillar of dialogue is hope. Hope is the sense of expectancy that provides the climate in which faith can survive and grow in spite of history. Hope's quality of anticipation exerts pressure on faith to keep on believing, and the mutual faith of the oppressed group keeps the group working to change its limit-situation. It is very necessary that hope stays alive because when hope gives way to despair, faith disappears and work toward liberation ceases.

And so it is these spiritual qualities to which the oppressed must consecrate themselves that form the foundational pillars upon which Freire's educational theory is built. It is with these qualities of mutual love, humility, faith and hope, combined with clear critical thinking that the dehumanizing, antidialogical actions of conquest, divide and rule, manipulation and cultural invasion can be repelled and the dialogical actions of cooperation, organization, unity and cultural synthesis can be established (133-186). It is by the self-liberating action of the oppressed that the oppressor will discover that his reality does *not* depend on having someone to oppress, that he can stand tall without standing on somebody's neck, that he can be mobile without riding somebody's back and that his humanity does not depend on someone else's dehumanization.

It is Freire's dream that through conscientization the oppressed will liberate themselves and their oppressors, and that this same old bondage-ridden world will be declared new by new men who are no longer oppressed or oppressors but men "in the process of achieving freedom" for all (34).

III. IMPLEMENTATION: SOME PROBLEMS

I am in basic agreement with Freire's dream. I can readily see the need for the liberation of the oppressed through conscientization, I see the necessity for dialogue with and between oppressed peoples and I see the good common sense of a revolutionary perspective that advocates reflective action and active reflection. I can see how such a method could produce such a self-awareness that the term "new man" or new

person would be appropriate. I can also see with my imagination how if this method is used over an extended time period (perhaps 20-25 years, depending on the size, population and political situation of the country) it might conceivably change the oppressor-oppressed dialectic significantly. I believe in Freire's dream but I do have a few problems with certain aspects of it.

One problem is the manner in which Freire has opted for a Godless theology. Humanism is beautiful. There is always the need to emphasize the centrality of people in their world. It is particularly necessary to emphasize the fact that people, all people, are ends in themselves, not means to an end, not even God's end. But to make people the highest beings in the universe robs them of a resource that can be of tremendous assistance in their struggle for liberation. It robs them of a tremendous source of ethical and moral authority which is supra-historical and extra-situational. It would seem that were Freire to tie in his educational and political strategy to the strong religious (Catholic in this case) orientation and structure of the Latin American masses, he would provide his efforts with a much more secure and universal base. This was certainly one of the "secrets" of the success of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in this country. The civil rights movement was basically a religious movement and this in no small way accounted for its "popular" national and, to some extent, international appeal. Were Freire able to tie-in his efforts with the powerful Catholic church and ground his appeal for political empowerment in Catholic theology, he would automatically have an audience of hundreds of millions and the sympathy of many thousands of religious leaders and adherents all over the world. For Freire to tie his dream to a religious base would not only be politically expedient but also strategically sound.

The many quotes and footnotes in *Pedagogy* may be interpreted to mean that Freire has already been too much influenced by Communism to consider organized religion as an ally. On the other hand, perhaps his present position with the World Council of Churches in Geneva indicates that he is giving religion the serious consideration that we are suggesting here.

However, the fact that Freire is working for the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland, instead of working with the oppressed people of Brazil brings us to the second problem. It is the problem of the open implementation of an avowedly revolutionary strategy. It hardly seems the height of political sophistication to expect that the oppressors are going to allow educator-politicians to carry out a strategy be it educational or otherwise that is admittedly designed for their overthrow. We know that the Brazilian authorities did not tolerate such a program because in 1964 they expelled Freire from the country (11-12). Freire's theory is a beautiful formulation of ideas but more consideration is going to have to be given to their implementation under necessarily hostile conditions.

The third problem also has to do with implementation, for while I can see the soundness of Freire's insistence that liberation from oppression must be self-liberation, I do not see how such liberation can be achieved without the assistance of at least some of those who are in power. I suppose it is possible to overrun a government by brute, bloody force and numbers. But this does not seem to be the kind of revolution that Freire is talking about. His fight seems to be more ideological rather than military. He seeks to win more by changing minds than by burying bodies. Now if this is true, it seems that he is going to have to move away from his radical oppressor-oppressed dichotomy and move more toward a stance that appeals to the self-interest of *each* group and the mutual well-being of *both* groups. In other words, it would seem that unless Freire is willing to advocate a bloody revolution, he must sell the oppressors on the fact that their future economic, social and political well-being and progress is inextricably bound together with the liberation of the oppressed. Again, my frame of reference is Dr. King, who via his rhetoric and nonviolent demonstrations, was able to influence the government to aid his cause, not completely, but at least to the extent of providing some protection during the demonstrations, passing civil rights legislation and perhaps most important having the President, the country's official spokesman, give his moral and political support to the cause. With all due respect to the power of ideas and dedication, I do not see how the oppressed of a country the size of Brazil can be liberated without the aid of the church, the government, or both. I may be all wrong, but it seems to me that without the sympathetic assistance and involvement of one or both of these sources of economic and/or legislative power, Freire might remain in exile and for his people, his educational-political theory might remain a beautiful but impotent brain-child with no hands or feet to render itself mobile and useful.

It is my hope that circumstances will make it possible for Dr. Freire to soon return to Brazil where his vision and expertise are badly needed. There is a critical shortage of trained teachers and educational books, buildings and equipment. Over half of Brazil's 98,000,000 people can't read or write.⁴ If Freire could somehow tone down the political revolutionary rhetoric of his approach, he might be able to re-enter his country and become a major catalytic agent for the educational, and therefore social, economic and political uplift of his people. For even in Brazil where the military is a constant power to be reckoned with, the ballot is still the ordinary citizen's most consistent political expression. Only Brazilians who are literate may vote. Therefore, Dr. Freire may yet be able to carry out at least a part of his educational-political

⁴ All information about Brazil was obtained from the article entitled "Brazil" in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* IV (Chicago: Benton, 1967), pp. 115-132 particularly pp. 127-30.

For further insight into the theory of Freire see his *Education as the Practice of Liberty* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1967). For an additional source of bibliography and comment of Freire's educational theory in English is *Paulo Freire: A Revolutionary Dilemma For the Adult Educator* edited by Stanley Grabowski (Syracuse, New York: Clearing House on Adult Education, 1972).

design by simply teaching people how to read and write. Once they have the ballot, they may be able to do by a slower and less dramatic, legislative process what Freire dreamed could be done by a kind of Communist-inspired take-over by the masses and their leaders. It may be that a slower, more democratic political process, supplemented by King-like direct action techniques when necessary, will be the most effective means of Brazil's political progress.

Freire is a pioneer. His theory is not yet fully developed. Neither his epistemology nor his axiology is fully enunciated in this book. His experiments in conscientization have not been attempted in enough different situations to give them universal credence, but he has made an important step. He has added another "word" to the great conversation. Freire is to education what Cone and Roberts are to theology, what Greer and Cobbs are to psychiatry and what King and Malcolm X were to American race politics. They hewed out a rough path and held up their lamps of truth-as-they-perceived-it. Others will widen the path and brighten the light that we may with our own little lamps of truth-as-we-perceive-it follow along their paths and perhaps hew out paths of our own.

Conscientization is not a cure-all for oppression. It is another idea to be tried and another instrument to be used to give the oppressed a lever by which to gain and to exercise their right of survival and progress as legitimate members of the human family.

