

Foreword

Over the years, the thought and work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire have spread from the North East of Brazil to an entire continent, and have made a profound impact not only in the field of education but also in the overall struggle for national development. At the precise moment when the disinherited masses in Latin America are awakening from their traditional lethargy and are anxious to participate, as Subjects, in the development of their countries, Paulo Freire has perfected a method for teaching illiterates that has contributed, in an extraordinary way, to that process. In fact, those who, in learning to read and write, come to a new awareness of selfhood and begin to look critically at the social situation in which they find themselves, often take the initiative in acting to transform the society that has denied them this opportunity of participation. Education is once again a subversive force.

In this country, we are gradually becoming aware of the work of Paulo Freire, but thus far we have thought of it primarily in terms of its contribution to the education of illiterate adults in the Third World. If, however, we take a closer look, we may discover that his methodology as well as his educational philosophy are as important for us as for the dispossessed in Latin America. Their struggle to become free Subjects and to participate in the transformation of their society is similar, in many ways, to the struggle not only of blacks and Mexican-Americans but also of middle-class young people in this country. And the sharpness and intensity of that struggle in the developing world may well provide us with new insight, new models, and a new hope as we face our own situation. For this reason, I consider the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in an English edition to be something of an event.

Paulo Freire's thought represents the response of a creative mind and sensitive conscience to the extraordinary misery and suffering of the oppressed around him. Born in 1921 in Recife, the center of one of the most extreme situations of poverty and underdevelopment in the Third World, he was soon forced to experience that reality directly. As the economic crisis in 1929 in the United States began to affect Brazil, the precarious stability of Freire's middle-class family gave way and he found himself sharing the plight of the "wretched of the earth." This had a profound influence on his life as he came to know the gnawing pangs of hunger and fell behind in school because of the listlessness it produced; it also led him to make a vow, at age eleven, to dedicate his life to the struggle against hunger, so that other children would not have to know the agony he was then experiencing.

His early sharing of the life of the poor also led him to the discovery of what he describes as the "culture of silence" of the dispossessed. He came to realize that their ignorance and lethargy were the direct product of the whole situation of economic, social, and political domination—and of the paternalism—of which they were victims. Rather than being encouraged and equipped to know and respond to the concrete realities of their world, they were kept "submerged" in a situation in which such critical awareness and response were practically impossible. And it became clear to him that the whole educational system was one of the major instruments for the maintenance of this culture of silence.

Confronted by this problem in a very existential way, Freire turned his attention to the field of education and began to work on it. Over the years, he has engaged in a process of study and reflection that has produced something quite new and creative in educational philosophy. From a situation of direct engagement in the struggle to liberate men and women for the creation of a new world, he has reached out to the thought and experience of those in many different situations and of diverse philosophical positions: in his words, to "Sartre and Mounier, Erich Fromm and Louis Althusser, Ortega y Gasset and Mao, Martin Luther King and Che Guevara,

Unamuno and Marcuse.” He has made use of the insights of these men to develop a perspective on education which is authentically his own and which seeks to respond to the concrete realities of Latin America.

His thought on the philosophy of education was first expressed in 1959 in his doctoral dissertation at the University of Recife, and later in his work as Professor of the History and Philosophy of Education in the same university, as well as in his early experiments with the teaching of illiterates in that same city. The methodology he developed was widely used by Catholics and others in literacy campaigns throughout the North East of Brazil, and was considered such a threat to the old order that Freire was jailed immediately after the military coup in 1964. Released seventy days later and encouraged to leave the country, Freire went to Chile, where he spent five years working with UNESCO and the Chilean Institute for Agrarian Reform in programs of adult education. He then acted as a consultant at Harvard University’s School of Education, and worked in close association with a number of groups engaged in new educational experiments in rural and urban areas. He is presently serving as Special Consultant to the Office of Education of the World Council of Churches in Geneva.

Freire has written many articles in Portuguese and Spanish, and his first book, *Educação como Prática da Liberdade*, was published in Brazil in 1967. His latest and most complete work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is the first of his writings to be published in this country.

In this brief introduction, there is no point in attempting to sum up, in a few paragraphs, what the author develops in a number of pages. That would be an offense to the richness, depth, and complexity of his thought. But perhaps a word of witness has its place here—a personal witness as to why I find a dialogue with the thought of Paulo Freire an exciting adventure. Fed up as I am with the abstractness and sterility of so much intellectual work in academic circles today, I am excited by a process of reflection which is set in a thoroughly historical context, which is carried on in the

midst of a struggle to create a new social order and thus represents a new unity of theory and *praxis*. And I am encouraged when a man of the stature of Paulo Freire incarnates a rediscovery of the humanizing vocation of the intellectual, and demonstrates the power of thought to negate accepted limits and open the way to a new future.

Freire is able to do this because he operates on one basic assumption: that man's ontological vocation (as he calls it) is to be a Subject who acts upon and transforms his world, and in so doing moves toward ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively. This *world* to which he relates is not a static and closed order, a *given* reality which man must accept and to which he must adjust; rather, it is a problem to be worked on and solved. It is the material used by man to create history, a task which he performs as he overcomes that which is dehumanizing at any particular time and place and dares to create the qualitatively new. For Freire, the resources for that task at the present time are provided by the advanced technology of our Western world, but the social vision which impels us to negate the present order and demonstrate that history has not ended comes primarily from the suffering and struggle of the people of the Third World.

Coupled with this is Freire's conviction (now supported by a wide background of experience) that every human being, no matter how "ignorant" or submerged in the "culture of silence" he or she may be, is capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others. Provided with the proper tools for such encounter, the individual can gradually perceive personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his or her own perception of that reality, and deal critically with it. In this process, the old, paternalistic teacher-student relationship is overcome. A peasant can facilitate this process for a neighbor more effectively than a "teacher" brought in from outside. "People educate each other through the mediation of the world."

As this happens, the word takes on new power. It is no longer an abstraction or magic but a means by which people discover them-

selves and their potential as they give names to things around them. As Freire puts it, each individual wins back the right to *say his or her own word, to name the world.*

When an illiterate peasant participates in this sort of educational experience, he or she comes to a new awareness of self, has a new sense of dignity, and is stirred by a new hope. Time and again, peasants have expressed these discoveries in striking ways after a few hours of class: "I now realize I am a person, an educated person." "We were blind, now our eyes have been opened." "Before this, words meant nothing to me; now they speak to me and I can make them speak." "Now we will no longer be a dead weight on the cooperative farm." When this happens in the process of learning to read, men and women discover that they are creators of culture, and that all their work can be creative. "I work, and working I transform the world." And as those who have been completely marginalized are so radically transformed, they are no longer willing to be mere objects, responding to changes occurring around them; they are more likely to decide to take upon themselves the struggle to change the structures of society, which until now have served to oppress them. For this reason, a distinguished Brazilian student of national development recently affirmed that this type of educational work among the people represents a new factor in social change and development, "a new instrument of conduct for the Third World, by which it can overcome traditional structures and enter the modern world."

At first sight, Paulo Freire's method of teaching illiterates in Latin America seems to belong to a different world from that in which we find ourselves in this country. Certainly, it would be absurd to claim that it should be copied here. But there are certain parallels in the two situations that should not be overlooked. Our advanced technological society is rapidly making objects of most of us and subtly programming us into conformity to the logic of its system. To the degree that this happens, we are also becoming submerged in a new "culture of silence."

The paradox is that the same technology that does this to us also

creates a new sensitivity to what is happening. Especially among young people, the new media together with the erosion of old concepts of authority open the way to acute awareness of this new bondage. The young perceive that their right to say their own word has been stolen from them, and that few things are more important than the struggle to win it back. And they also realize that the educational system today—from kindergarten to university—is their enemy.

There is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes “the practice of freedom,” the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. The development of an educational methodology that facilitates this process will inevitably lead to tension and conflict within our society. But it could also contribute to the formation of a new man and mark the beginning of a new era in Western history. For those who are committed to that task and are searching for concepts and tools for experimentation, Paulo Freire’s thought will make a significant contribution in the years ahead.

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