



# paulo freire

By its very title, "An invitation to conscientization and deschooling — a continuing conversation", this seminar is described as an informal and straightforward meeting. We are here to take up a dialogue begun some time ago. With certain people that dialogue has been direct, with others it has been indirect. In both instances communication has been through our writings. However, precisely because today this is a meeting for dialogue, the simplicity and spontaneity which it should have cannot become, in the first case, simplistic, nor in the second, an empty spontaneity.

To dialogue does not mean a haphazard asking and answering of questions ; asking for the pleasure of asking and answering for the pleasure of answering ; being satisfied in touching the periphery of the object of our curiosity in a disordered way. Dialogue is the hallmark of the cognitive act. When that which is to be known is grasped by those who want to know it, and, as it were, surrenders itself as a mediator between two searchers in their critical unveiling of the object to be known, the cognitive act of dialogue takes place.

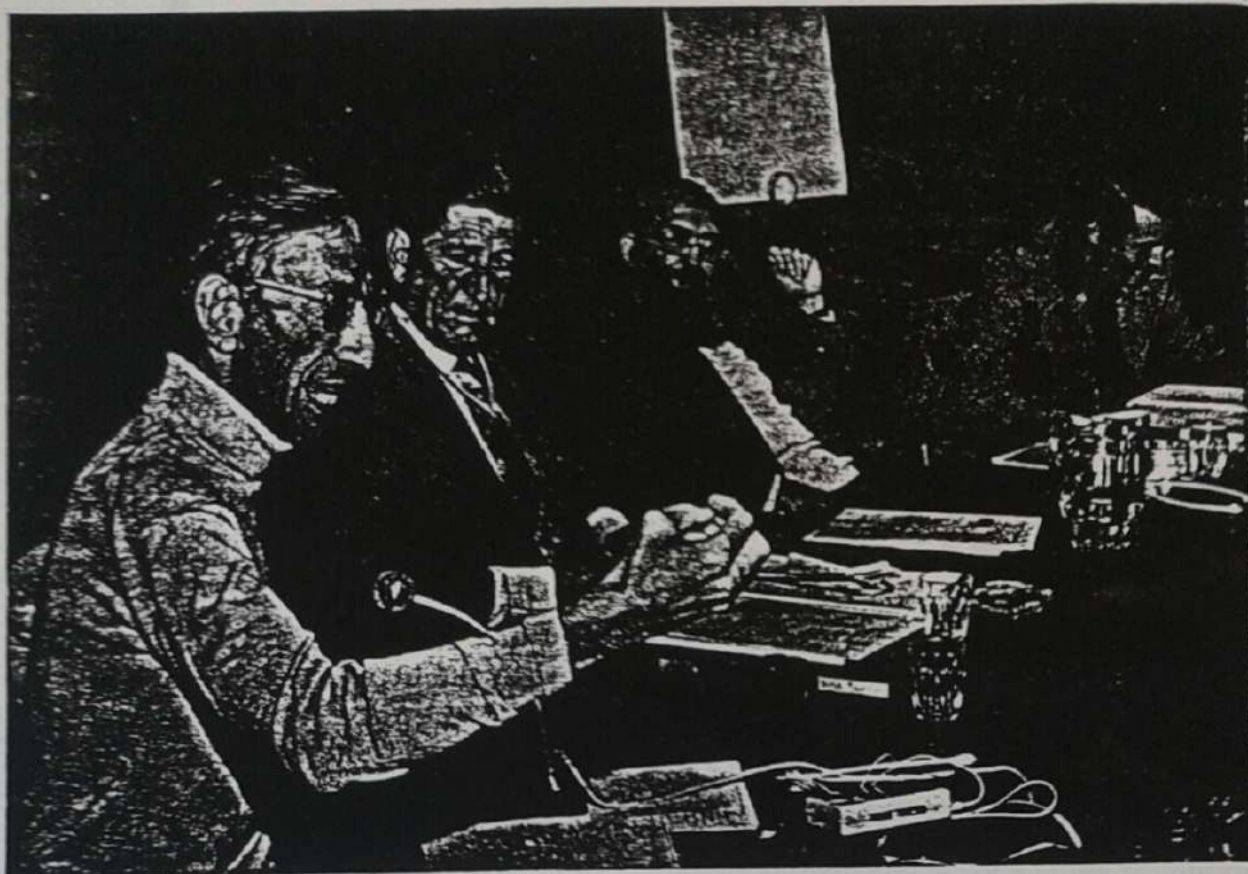
The importance of understanding the dialogical relationship in this way is made clear inasmuch as we take the epistemological cycle as a totality, without separating the stage of gaining already existing knowledge from the stage of discovery, of creating new knowledge. Moreover, this "corresponds", as Prof. Alvaro Vieira Pinto has said, "to the highest functions of thought — that is to say, to the heuristic activity of the consciousness".<sup>1</sup> In both these stages of the epistemological cycle, the subjects who know must face the object of their knowledge with a critical and curious attitude. Every time this critical attitude is negated through a break in the dialogical relationship, a process is set up where there is mere transference of knowledge ; a process in which "to know" ceases to be a creative and recreative act, and becomes merely a "digestive act".

"Conscientization and deschooling" are words which, without Ivan Illich or myself wishing it, have become magical or quasi-magical. That is why we are

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<sup>1</sup> Vieira Pinto, Alvaro : *Ciencia e Existencia, Paz e Terra*, Rio de Janeiro, 1969, p. 363.





**Philip Potter:** First of all, I want to say that this is a typical exercise in what I call "ecumenical dialectics". Such dialectics promote subversion in order to facilitate conversion. We have two apostles of that ecumenical dialectic with us today in the persons of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich. They have both been great trouble-makers for the sake of change in Latin America, and now they have the world as their parish! It is a delight to have them at the Ecumenical Centre this morning.

We are also very pleased to have with us Heinrich Dauber and Michael Huberman. Dr Dauber is with the Institute for Education of the University of Tübingen, and his doctoral thesis was on "the teacher's role and socialization". Dr Huberman was with Unesco's Department of School and Higher Education until 1970, when he became Professor of Education at the School of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Geneva. Last but not least, I would like to welcome Leo Fernig, Director of the International Bureau of Education, who will guide us during this seminar.

**Leo Fernig:** First of all, may I thank Dr Potter and Dr Kennedy for the idea of organizing this meeting and for their subversive invitation to all of us to attend today!

Paulo Freire will be our first speaker; he will be followed by Ivan Illich, and we shall then have some discussion time, before asking our two other speakers to take the floor.



gathered here today, so that, by taking them up as objects of our critical inquiry, their real significance may be analysed, in as far as that is possible.

In this analytical endeavour, which all of us are called upon to pursue, there are, nevertheless, specific tasks which, since they constitute the departure point for our joint reflection, should be undertaken by certain of our number: Ivan Illich, Heinrich Dauber, Michael Huberman and myself.

It rests with me today, when the time available is insufficient for the task we undertake, to begin this process. And to do so, I must put some distance between myself and the object of my reflection — the process of conscientization — and begin to question it. It seems to me that my first concern in this self-questioning, which is, in part, a re-questioning, should be centred on the very word "conscientization" which has its origin in the word "conscious". Understanding the process

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and practice of conscientization is, therefore, closely connected with the understanding one has of consciousness in its relationships with the world.<sup>2</sup>

If I adopt an idealistic position, I separate consciousness from reality and I subject the latter to the former, as if reality were the result of consciousness. And thus, the change of reality comes about through a change of consciousness. If I adopt a mechanistic position, I also dichotomize consciousness and reality and I take consciousness as a mirror which merely reflects reality. In both these cases there is a denial of conscientization which can only exist when, as well as recognizing, I also experience the dialectical relationship between objectivity and subjectivity, reality and consciousness, practice and theory.

Consciousness addresses itself to an object. The consciousness which human beings have of self implies their consciousness of things, of the concrete reality in which they find themselves as historical beings and which they grasp through their cognitive abilities. A knowledge of reality is indispensable for the development of a consciousness of self, in the same way that the consciousness of self is indispensable for a knowledge of reality. Moreover, the act of knowing which, if authentic, always demands the revelation of its object, does not take place in the above-mentioned dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity, action and reflection, practice and theory.

It is, therefore, important that in the conscientization process the uncovering of social reality be grasped not as something *which is*, but as something *which is becoming*, as something *which is in the making*. However, if reality is in the making, in an "interplay" of permanence and change, and if reality is not itself the agent of this "interplay", it is because this "interplay" is the result of the practice of human beings on reality.

It is therefore imperative to understand the *raison d'être* of this practice: the goals, the objectives, the methods, the interests of those who lead it, and whose

<sup>2</sup> See: *Conscientization and Liberation: a Conversation with Paulo Freire*: Institute of Cultural Action (IDAC), Geneva, No. 1, Dec. 1973.



interests it serves and whose interests it threatens. And then in the end we see that this is only *one kind of practice*, but not *the practice*, to be taken as given destiny. In this way, in the theoretical practice, which is revelation of the social reality, the understanding of this reality implies its being seen as a reality which is always in a process of undergoing a certain kind of practice by human beings. Thus its transformation, whatever this may be, can only be achieved by practice also.

If conscientization cannot take place without the revelation of objective reality, as an object of knowledge for those subjects involved in the process, then such a revelation — even if it be a clearer perception of reality — is still not sufficient to make conscientization authentic. In the same way that the epistemological cycle does not end at the stage of acquiring already existing knowledge, but continues through to the stage of creating new knowledge, conscientization cannot stop at the stage of the revelation of reality. It is authentic when the practice of revealing reality constitutes a dynamic and dialectical unity with the practice of transforming reality.

### Recognizing mistakes

On the basis of these thoughts some comments could and should be made, such as, for example, some personal self-criticism. In *Education for Freedom*, while considering the process of conscientization, I considered the moment when social reality is revealed to be a sufficient psychological motive for attempting to transform the reality which is discovered. Obviously, my mistake was not that I recognized the fundamental importance of a knowledge of reality in the process of its change, but rather, that I did not take these two different moments — the knowledge of reality *and* the work of transforming that reality — in their dialectical relationship. *It was as if I were saying that to discover reality already meant to transform it.*

Let me say in passing that in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and in *Cultural Action for Freedom* I do not take the same position when confronting the problem of conscientization. My own praxis in the interval between the last two books and

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the first taught me to see things I had no opportunity to see before. However, it is above all in my most recent texts (interviews and small essays such as *Education, Liberation and the Church*, which are the result of my most recent experience) that my approach to the problem differs from that found in *Education as the Practice of Freedom*.<sup>3</sup>

In recent experience I find the mistake which I made at the beginning of my work recurring again and again, sometimes even more markedly, among educators who do not see the political dimensions and implications of their pedagogical practice. This is why they talk about a "strictly pedagogical conscientization", different from that which the politicians develop. This conscientization has its place in the intimacy of their seminars, in a more or less aseptic fashion, with no political involvement whatsoever.

<sup>3</sup> In *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Sheed & Ward, London, 1974.



This kind of separation between education and politics, whether it be done naïvely or shrewdly, is, and we must emphasize this point, *not merely unreal but also dangerous*. To think of education in isolation from the power which establishes it, to detach it from the concrete reality in which it was engendered, gives rise to the following consequences. On the one hand, it reduces education to the realm of abstract values and ideas, which the educator nurtures in the interior of his consciousness, without his realizing the conditioning which makes him think in this way. On the other hand, it converts education into a repository of behaviour patterns. Or yet another consequence is that education is seen as the lever with which reality will be transformed.

#### **Education as power**

The truth is, however, that it is not education which forms society in a certain way. It is society which, having formed itself in a certain way, establishes the education to fit the values which guide the society. However, since this is not a mechanical process, the society which structures education to meet the interests of those who hold power then finds in education a fundamental factor for the preservation of this power.

Seeing education as the lever for the transformation of reality is the result, in part, of an inadequate understanding of the cycle which we have referred to above. It is based on the second stage of the cycle — the stage where education functions as the instrument for the preservation of society. It is as if those upholding this view agreed that if education maintains society it is because it can transform that which it maintains. They always forget that the power which created it will never allow education to be turned against it. It is for this reason that the profound and radical transformation of education as a system cannot take place — and anyway never in an automatic or mechanistic way — except when society also is radically transformed.

This does not mean, however, that the educator who wishes and who does take part in the radical and revolutionary transformation of society can do nothing. There is much he can do, even if he does not have prescribed guidelines for his activities,

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since he himself must discover them and find out for himself how to put them into effect in his particular historical setting.

It is necessary, therefore, that he recognize clearly his limitations and, accepting them with humility, avoid falling into a paralysing pessimism on the one hand and a cynical opportunism on the other.

The fact, for example, that certain given historical circumstances in which the educator finds himself do not allow him to participate more actively in the process of the revolutionary transformation of his society does not mean that his more limited effort is worthless, since this is the effort that for him is historically viable.

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From here comes the need for an understanding, a much clearer understanding, of his task, which is political, in the sense that he accepts limitations imposed on



him, so that he can confront, as successfully as possible, the oscillation between pessimism and opportunism.

This is always a difficult existential moment. Many times it is precisely at the moment when the educator is confronted by this situation that he hears about conscientization. For many different reasons, among them his own lack of clarity in relation to his task, he draws near to conscientization like someone attracted by what he hears rather than someone who has grasped its exact meaning. In this way, he makes magic out of the process of conscientization, giving it powers which in fact it has not got.

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Sooner or later, however, the magic is broken, at the same time breaking the naïve hope which sustained it. Some of these educators, frustrated by the poor results of their own magic, instead of denying it, deny the very role of subjectivity in the transformation of reality and desert to swell the ranks of the mechanists.

Basically, however, experience has taught me how difficult it is to cross the line between subjectivity and objectivity: in the last analysis, how to be in the world and with the world, without falling into the temptation of making absolute one or other of the dimensions. How difficult it is really, to see them dialectically! It is not by chance that one of the themes which has always preoccupied philosophy, especially modern philosophy, has been that of the relationships between subject and object, theory and practice, consciousness and reality.

#### **Demythologizing conscientization**

It is because of all this that during the last four years, while working for the World Council of Churches, one of my main tasks has been to strip away the myths surrounding conscientization, and I have become a sort of "pilgrim of the obvious".

In this pilgrimage, I am learning how important it is to take the obvious as an object for critical reflection and, going into it more deeply, I find that it is not, at times, as obvious as it seems.

As a result, being well aware of the frustration which I often provoke in the public whom I address, I place the accent not on the analysis of methods and techniques in themselves, but rather on the political character of education, from which the impossibility of it being neutral follows naturally.

Once convinced of the impossibility of neutrality, not merely from having heard it said, but also by verifying it through my own experience, I am then aware of the relationship between methods and ends, which is in fact the same as the relation between tactics and strategy. Therefore, instead of naïvely overestimating the methods I see them as serving given ends, and so these methods are formed and reformed.



It is perhaps this making a myth of the methods and techniques (I am now merely thinking aloud) and the reduction of conscientization to certain methods and techniques used in Latin America in the field of the alphabetization of adults which explains, at least in part, the affirmations I often hear — affirmations in which conscientization appears as a sort of tropical exoticism, something which is specifically Third World.

Thus it is concluded that conscientization is something which would be impossible in complex societies, as if the Third World were not also complex.

### Knowing and being

Without wishing to return here to an analysis made in previous work about the existence of a Third World in the First World and of a First World in the Third World, I would simply like to draw attention to the fact that conscientization is not a privilege of the Third World, since it is a human phenomenon.

As conscious beings, in a dialectical relationship with the objective reality upon which they act, human beings are involved in a permanent process of conscientization. That which changes, in time and in space, is the contents and the objectives of conscientization. Its original source is found in the far-off moment which Teilhard de Chardin calls *hominization*, since which time human beings have been capable of discovering the reality on which they worked, and not only have they been aware of it but they have also known of their awareness.

The problem which presents itself, therefore, is not of viability or of conscientization in so-called complex societies, but rather the undesirability of transplanting that which is done in different ways in different areas of Latin America to another historical space, without due respect for the different situation. It is unimportant that this other historical space be also part of the Third World. Indeed, as a man from the Third World I know well what it means to suffer the ideological power of alienation from transplantations at the service of domination. I, who have always been against those who dominate, will not be the one to defend them today.

But, apart from the undesirability of "transplanting" conscientization, there is another undesirability: the bureaucratization of conscientization, its institutionalization which, while emptying it of its dynamism, as if suffering from sclerosis, ends in transforming it into a rainbow of solutions — which is just another way of making a myth of it.

With this I shall finish my reappraisal — which I know is incomplete — of a theme to which, rightly or wrongly, I have dedicated myself for quite some time. However, despite its incompleteness I believe that it is sufficient to fulfil its main purpose: to provoke comment and raise questions which can be enlarged upon.

In doing so, I should simply like to say that what I have learned in the World Council of Churches and in related activities has in no way diminished the basic convictions with which I began my work, while still quite young, in my own country: convictions of a Christian in a permanent state of searching. On the contrary, what I have learned has reinforced my convictions. And they are strengthened above all when I am helped to rise above a naïve vision to a more critical vision of certain problems by being challenged by new human realities.