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PAULO FREIRE

Reformist or Revolutionary

In this brief paper I shall argue that Paulo Freire is (not) revolutionary in either a cultural or a pedagogical sense. I will further argue that though his pedagogy may help to accomplish very modest consciousness raising in Western capitalist society, its use in the developing world is limited to a post-revolutionary situation.

"At first the charge that Freire is not revolutionary may strike the reader as being absurd for certainly he uses the appropriate language, such terms as "the dialectic," "praxis," "oppressors" and "oppressed," and, of course, "revolution" occur frequently in the book. These terms occur, however, in a curious vacuum without being rooted in a social or economic context. For example, in attempting to analyze the concept of the oppressor certainly Freire could have pointed to the land owners and high church officials in Northeastern Brazil who were eventually responsible for the defeat of his attempted educational reforms, his arrest, and his expulsion from Brazil and yet no where do we find any reference to actual social conditions. Another indication of the thoroughly non-revolutionary nature of Freire's thought is in his consideration of violence. Although he correctly indicates that violence is always initiated by "those who oppress, who exploit, who fail to recognize others as persons, not by those who are oppressed, exploited and unrecognized."¹ He seems quite ambivalent about whether it is possible to initiate and bring to fruition a cultural and political revolution without the use of violence." Now I am sure that

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many of us are watching Chile at the present time to see whether in fact a fundamental social revolution can come about peacefully. Even if as Freire argues,

Consciously or unconsciously the act of rebellion by the oppressed (an act which is always, or nearly always as violent as the initial violence of the oppressors) can imitate love. Whereas the violence of the oppressors prevents the oppressed from being fully human, the response of the latter to this violence is grounded in the desire to pursue the right to be human.

At what point should the oppressed resort to violence? When and under what condition might the oppressed's response not be as violent as that of the oppressors? No where do we find these questions raised.²

Not grounding his argument in a social context creates another difficulty for Freire. If we have learned anything about revolutionary possibilities in the last twenty years, it is that revolutions will take different forms in different social and economic situations. Revolution in Cuba has not been the same as revolution in Chile. By not linking his revolutionary model to a particular social and economic context, he makes it that much more difficult for those of us not in Northeastern Brazil to find it useful. Who specifically here in North America are the oppressors and the oppressed, where does violence play a role, where should it not play a role and what is the correct praxis? Are teachers in public schools oppressors or are they part of the oppressed? To answer these questions one must virtually write another book filling in the social and economic context without which not much use can be made of Freire's analysis.

As a guide for revolution in the underdeveloped world, the book has not yet proved to be an overwhelming success. There has been revolutionary activity in Northeastern Brazil and it may be possible that Freire's educational program planted seeds there which will be harvested

later, but certainly Brazil is still ruled by a Facist, military dictatorship. Since one feature of Freire's pedagogy is that it is very public, that is, there can be no secret about what is going on, one cannot help but wonder what happened to the educators and the educated that stayed behind Freire after his exile. The remark made by Regis DeBrae concerning the situation in Brazil is unfortunately pertinent,

to promote public assemblies in an Indian village or open union meetings is simply to denounce the inhabitants to the forces of oppression and the political cadres to the police, it is to send them to prison or to their graves.³

What is Freire's pedagogy? One might be brief and only slightly cynical and describe it as a multi-media approach to community education. What Freire seems to be suggesting is a combination of critical anthropology, television and community action. As impressed as I am with the work of many anthropologists, it does not seem to me that there is anything inherently revolutionary in the discipline. Nor is there in the use of concepts such as "themes," "thematics," "epoch," "limit situations," "tasks" or "problem-posing." It sounds very much like the community-school approach all over again. I have not heard any rumors of a revolutionary situation developing in Flint, Michigan. Freire's concept of "owning your own word" or naming your own world is, pedagogically speaking, a very useful one. Certainly there is a close resemblance to Sylvia Ashton Warner's system used with the Maori in New Zealand.⁴ Again there is no evidence that the Maori's in New Zealand are, at the present time, involved in serious revolutionary activities. It seems to me that Freire's pedagogy is much more suitable for a society that has already gone through the first stage of a political and social revolution--Cuba or perhaps China. Some of the youth programs in Cuba, like those associated with the Isle of Pines, might well have been designed by Freire.⁵

In China part of the cultural revolution involved radical changes in the Chinese educational system as a continuation or revitalization of a revolution that was already underway. The outspoken criticism which Chinese students directed against both their professors and the cadres of the Communist party and the attempt to combine manual labour and higher education, for example, requiring university professors to do agricultural labour for part of the year, all could have drawn their inspiration from Freire.⁶ Perhaps then what Freire has designed is not a pedagogy of the oppressed so much as a pedagogy for continuing the revolution. A pedagogy that has its greatest possible use after the oppressors have been dispossessed either violently or peacefully.

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This meeting of the A.E.R.A., the fact that ten American educators from various disciplines have been persuaded to assemble in Chicago and read papers, however brief, suggests that Freire's book will find a use among educators in North America. In fact I predict that its greatest use will be here in North America rather than in the third world. This present enthusiasm should give some pause to those who claim Freire as a revolutionary since American educationists even in the foundations of education are not widely known for their revolutionary proclivities. Freire's critical anthropology, multi-media, community-action approach, if followed in urban North America school systems could have limited effect on the consciousness of both teachers and students involved in it. Although even here one might ask the question, will the oppressors really permit the consciousness of the oppressed to be significantly raised.

Since I have been arguing that Freire is not a revolutionary educator, one could reasonably ask, who is, and what should such a person be doing? For educators in revolutionary societies the answer is too

complex for me to deal with here but for North America some suggestions can be made. I would argue that those who accept the stated goals of Freire's book ought not to be trying to put his proposals in to action but should be doing one or more of the following things.

1. Revolutionary educators ought to be studying our present educational system as thoroughly and as carefully as possible, since we do not understand very well the linkages between education and other social institutions nor the process of education itself. There is a tremendous amount of work to be done in all the academic disciplines.

2. Revolutionary educators should be studying other educational systems, especially socialist ones, since there are important questions about the relationship between revolution and education that can only be answered by examining educational systems in socialist states. For example, Susan Ferge, writing in the current issue of the Sociology of Education⁷ produces some very interesting evidence about how teachers in Budapest, Hungary view the relationship between their school and the larger society. Depressingly the results seem to match the limited and very negative view which many teachers have in North America. Since I would argue that China is the most revolutionary society in the world, its educational system should receive serious attention from revolutionary educationists in the West. Very little work has been done as yet, for obvious reasons, but with the changing political climate it should be possible to study and compare educational systems in China with those in the Western world.

3. Revolutionary educators must criticize as forcefully and as intelligently as possible liberals and reformers and romantics, including Freire.⁸

4. Finally, revolutionary educators must also engage in practice. Any program of educational reform which contains the potential for raising consciousness should be supported. Such reforms would include community control or community involvement in schools and educational systems. The Free Schools Movement, although containing elements of both elitism and romanticism, can also help raise the consciousness of both teachers and students. It is interesting in this connection to note the ideological history of an important quarterly journal published in Canada, This Magazine is About Schools. It began publication in 1966 as a clearly reformist, romantic quarterly, with articles by Friedenbergs, Goodman, Dennison, Kohl, and later Illich. But over the past five years the editors have become increasingly disenchanted with reformist school critics and with free schools. In its most recent issues, (Summer and Fall of 1971) it has begun to redirect its editorial position away from the free school--counter-culture movement and is now intent on becoming a Marxist educational journal.

In conclusion let me say that (if) educators here in the United States or in Canada planned to initiate an educational program based on Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and started it tomorrow, I would neither join in that effort nor oppose it. At best such a program in this repressively tolerant capitalist society might modestly affect the consciousness of those people involved in it. At worst, I do not believe that a program based on Freire's ideas could mystify the oppressed of North America to any greater degree than the presently existing educational system.

NOTES

¹Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: Herder and Herder, 1970, p. 41.

²Ibid., pp. 41 -42.

³Regis DeBrae, Revolution in the Revolution? New York: Grove Press, p. 38.

⁴Sylvia Ashton Warner, Teacher. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963.

⁵Samuel Bowles, "Cuban Education and the Revolutionary Ideology," in Harvard Educational Review, No. 4, pp. 472 - 500.

⁶Victor Nee, The Cultural Revolution at Peking University. New York or London: Monthly Review Press, 1969.

⁷Susan Ferge, "How Teachers Perceive the Relation Between School and Society," in Sociology of Education, (Winter 1972), Vol. 45, No. 1, pp. 1 -22.

⁸Herb Gintis, "The Politics of Education: A Critique of Crisis in the Classroom by Charles Silverman," in Monthly Review, (December 1971), pp. 40 to 51.