

THE POLITICAL "LITERACY" PROCESS = AN INTRODUCTION

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When I accepted to write this article for the Lutherische Monatshefte I took its theme as a challenge. The very fact of having recognized it in such a way obliged me to assume before it a critical attitude and not a naive one.

This critical attitude implies, in its turn, the penetration into the very "intimacy" of the theme, in order to unveil it more and more. So, the article, in being the answer that I seek to give to the challenge, becomes another one for the readers. This is because, if my attitude with respect to the theme is the above-mentioned, I find myself engaged in an act of knowing, which demands not only the knowable object, but also another cognitive subject like me.

To know, which is always a process, implies a dialogical situation. There is not, strictly speaking, "I think", but "we think". It is not "I think" which constitutes "we think", but, on the contrary, it is "we think" that makes it possible for me to think. In the gnoseological situation, the knowable object is not the term of the knowledge of one of the cognitive subjects, but their mediation.

The theme that I have before me, as the nucleus of my reflexion, cannot become the end of my act of knowing, because it is the object which establishes the cognitive relationships between me and the readers as cognitive subjects too. So, I would really like to invite them to assume this role and not to refuse it, thus becoming mere recipients of my analysis.

This means that, to the extent in which I am writing, I cannot be a pure narrator of something which I consider as a given fact, but on the contrary I have to be a critical mind, curious and unquiet, constantly seeking, along with the readers who have to recreate the effort of my search. The only difference between me and the readers, with regard to the theme itself, is that while I am before it, engaged in its clarification, and better and better fixing my perception of it, the readers will be also before it, on the one hand, but on the other hand before my understanding of it, which is expressed in my article.

It does not mean, however, let me emphasise again, that the readers must admit that their effort is diminished, thus subjecting themselves with docility to my analysis. Their effort, on the contrary, in a way is larger than mine, because they have to penetrate simultaneously into both the theme itself and into my understanding of it.

In fact, to read as an act of studying, is not an intellectual pastime, but a serious and committed action in which the readers seek to clarify the opaque dimensions of the object of their study. It is in this way that to read is to re-write and not to memorize the contents of the reading. We have to overcome a naive understanding with regard to the act of reading and studying as an act of "eating". From the point of view of this false conception, which I call the "nutritious conception of knowledge",* those who read and study have to do so in order to become "intellectually fat". Hence, the use of expressions like "hunger for knowledge", "thirsty for learning", "appetite or not appetite for knowledge", "to drink wisdom", etc. It is the same mistaken vision that we can easily find behind, in, and at the same time, illuminating educational practice as an act of transferring knowledge. In such a practice, the educators are the possessors of knowledge, while the educatees are as if they were "empty pots" which should be filled by the "deposits" of the educators. In this way, the educatees put nothing forward for questioning, since their attitude is nothing other than that of receiving passively the knowledge which the educators hand out to them.

If knowledge were something static and consciousness something rather empty, occupying some space within man, the above-mentioned educational practice would be a correct one. But it is not the case. Knowledge is a process and consciousness is "intentionality" toward the world. Because of this, the process of creating knowledge is another process.

At the human level, knowledge implies the constant unity between action and reflexion on reality. As presences in the world, men are "conscious bodies" who transform it by acting and thinking, which makes it possible for them to know at the reflexive level. Precisely because of this, we can take our own presence in the world, which implies always the unity action-reflexion, as the object of our critical analysis.⁺ In such a way we can know how we knew in former experiences, by standing back from them. The more

* See SARTRE, Jean Paul : Situations I, Librairie Gallimard, Paris, 1959.

⁺ This possibility of exercising a critical reflexion on our own last experiences by standing back from them, makes it possible for us to develop what I call the perception of the last perception. (Pedagogy of the Oppressed). In the last analysis, this perceptive activity constitutes a "theoretical praxis". On this, see the extraordinary book Dialectica de lo Concreto by Karel Kosík, Grijalbo, Mexico, 1967.

N.B. There is a German edition of this book.

we are able to unveil why we are as we are, the more it is possible for us to reach the reason of reality, overcoming the naive understanding of it by a critical one.

This is precisely what we, myself and the readers, have to do with respect to the theme of this article. At the moment in which I write, as well as at the moment in which the readers read what I am writing now, we have to exercise that critical analysis referred to before. That is, we have to have as the object of our reflexion our experiences or the experiences of other subjects in the field that we are trying to understand better. Thus it will be possible for us, in different moments, and not necessarily at an equal level, to begin to perceive the real meaning of the linguistic context : the political "literacy" process, in which the noun literacy appears metaphorically. Considering the presence of this metaphor, it seems to me that the best way to begin our analysis is to study the concrete phenomenon which made possible the very use of such a metaphor. That is, to discuss, even if not to any great extent, the adult literacy process, from the linguistic point of view, on which the metaphor referred to is based. It implies, methodologically, some previous considerations about the different practices in the field of adult literacy that, in their turn, condition the different ways in which illiterates are understood.

The antagonistic practices, which reflect those forms of perceiving illiterates, are fundamentally two in number : the first one, the practice for "domestication" of men; the second, the practice for their liberation.*

After describing the first of these practices, in some of its main characteristics, in the light of my experience in Latin America, I will discuss how I see the second of them.

The first one, as a "domesticating" practice, no matter whether the educators are conscious of this or not, has, as its central connotation, the manipulating dimension in the relationships between the educators and the educatees, in which, obviously, the second are the objects of the action of the first. In this way, the illiterates, as passive beings, are to be "filled" by the words of the

* It does not mean that the mere fact of developing such a practice is enough to liberate the oppressed; it means that such a practice helps the liberation because it is able to criticize men on the subject of their reality.

educators, instead of being invited to participate creatively in the process of learning. The "generative words",* which, as I almost said before, are chosen by the educators, within their cultural frame of reference, are presented to the illiterates as if they were something isolated from life. As if language-thought were possible without reality. On the other hand, in such an educational practice, the social structures are never discussed as a problem which should be unveiled. On the contrary, they are mythologized by different kinds of action which emphasize the "false consciousness" of people. Nevertheless, in making the criticism of this practice, I think it necessary to point out that the conscious bourgeois educators - no matter whether they are teachers at primary schools, at adult literacy schools or professors at universities - can do nothing but engage themselves in such a kind of action.

It would be a naive attitude, as I stated before, to hope that the power elites develop a form of education which would be able to make it viable for people to discover social injustices in a critical way.

Such a conclusion demonstrates, then, the impossibility of a neutral education,⁺ whose understanding needs to be explained. For a naive mind, a statement like this can make me appear to be saying that education, in not being neutral, should be a practice through which the educators do not respect the expressivity of the educatees of their right to choose and learn how to choose by choosing.

In fact, however, education cannot be neutral because it is always an action either for the "domestication" of men or for their liberation. Only in the first case is it, as we have seen, a "domesticating" practice. In the second hypothesis, on the contrary, education is a procedure in which the educator invites the educatees to know, and to unveil reality, in a critical way. So while education for "domestication" seeks to improve the "false consciousness" of

* In a syllabic language, the "generative words" are those which, by being decomposed into their syllables, make possible the creation of other words by the combination of the syllables. Let us take as an example the Brazilian word favela : slum. If we decompose it into its syllables, we can have the following syllabic families :

fa-fe-fi-fo-fu

va-ve-vi-vo-vu

la-le-li-lo-lu

Now, by combining these syllables - and sometimes without the combination - we can have : fava : a kind of bean; fe : faith; fala : speech and also, the verb falar : to speak, he speaks; luva : glove; vilã : village; fivela : buckle, etc.

With this one word it is possible for the illiterates, in the first night of their learning, to recognize at least twenty words in Portuguese, instead of receiving them from the educator.

⁺ On this aspect, see FREIRE, Paulo : Cultural Action for Freedom, Center for the Study of Development and Social Change, and The Harvard Educational Review, 1970.

people, in order to make easier their adaptation to reality, education for liberation cannot be an effort through which the educator imposes liberty on the educatees. This is because, while in the "domesticating" education there is a necessary dichotomy between those who manipulate and those who are being manipulated, in the liberating education there are not subjects who liberate and objects who are liberated. In this process, dichotomy cannot exist between its poles. So, the first process is itself a prescriptive one; the second, dialogical.

Because of this, education for domestication is an act of transferring knowledge while education for liberation is an act of knowing and a method of transforming action which men must exercise on the world.

In this way, the literacy process, seen from the liberating point of view, is an act of knowing, a creative act, in which the illiterates exercise the role of cognitive subjects, as well as the educator. In this way, the illiterates are not considered as "empty pots", or mere recipients of the educator's words. From the critical and liberating point of view, the illiterates are not marginal beings who need to be recuperated, but men who are prevented from reading and writing in the social reality in which they are. Instead of being considered marginal beings, they are perceived as they really are, that is, as dominated men, castrated in their right of transforming the world. In this way, while in the literacy process as a domesticating practice, the "generative words" are chosen by the educators, in the literacy process as an act of knowing, they come from the illiterates themselves through the investigation of what I call the "minimum linguistic universe" of people.*

If we begin to consider now the problem of political "literacy" it seems to me that our point of departure must obviously be on the one hand, the analysis of what is a political "illiterate" and on the other hand, the discussion about the political "literacy" process.

If the illiterate, from the linguistic point of view, is he who does not know how to read and write, the political "illiterate" - no matter whether he knows how to read and write or not - is he

* FREIRE, Paulo : Educação como Prática da Liberdade, Paz e Terra, Rio, Brazil, 1967-68.

This book has editions in Chile, ICIRA, and Uruguay, Tierra Nueva. At the moment, it is being translated into French.

The teacher who "is divine" within the sacred and sacralising school is almost always untouchable, not just in his mythified authority but even - quite logically - physically. The pupil cannot even make the affectionate gesture of putting his hand on his shoulder. This intimacy between mortals would threaten the distance which should necessarily exist between him and the educatees..... The latter finally have nothing to do except receive the "contents" which the educator transfers to them, impregnated with the ideology which is necessary for the interests of the "sacralised" order.

What did you learn in school today, dear little boy of mine ?
What did you learn in school today, dear little boy of mine ?
I learned that Washington never told a lie,
I learned that soldiers seldom die,
I learned that everybody's free,
And that's what the teacher said to me
That's what I learned in school today,
That's what I learned in school

I learned that policemen are my friends,
I learned that justice never ends,
I learned that murders die for their crimes,
Even if we make a mistake sometimes
I learned our government must be strong
It's always right and never wrong,
Our leaders are the finest men,
And we elect them again and again.

What did you learn in school today, dear little boy of mine ?
What did you learn in school today, dear little boy of mine ?
I learned that war is not so bad,
I learned about the great ones we have had,
We've fought in Germany and France,
And someday I may get my chance.
That's what I learned in school today,
That's what I learned in school.*

This could be more or less the song that millions of children from different parts of the world might sing if we asked them what they learned in school today.

If our curiosity led us to ask our young people what they learned in the university today, their reply would not be dramatically less impressive than that of the little boy in Tom Paxton's song.

Among other things they might say :

Today we learned in the University that the objectivity of science implies the neutrality of the scientist; we learned today that Knowledge is pure, universal and unconditioned, and that the University is the Seat of this knowledge.

We learned today - although not verbally - that the world is divided between those who know and those who do not know - that is to say, those who work, and that the University is the Home of the former.

*Tom Paxton, sung by Pete Seeger

Today we learned that the University is the temple of chaste knowledge, and must live above terrestrial preoccupations like the liberation of men.

Today we learned that reality is a given fact, that it is what it is and that our scientific impartiality allows us to describe it as it is. In order to describe it as it is, we have no need to seek more important reasons explaining how it is. Today we learned in the University that if we manage to denounce it as it is at present in order to announce its new form of being, we are no longer scientists but ideologues.....

Today we learned that economic development is a purely technical problem; that underdeveloped peoples are inefficient - sometimes because of race-mixture, sometimes for climatic reasons, and sometimes just by nature.

Today we were informed that negroes learn less than white because they are intellectually inferior, even though they also show certain unquestionable abilities, such as being able to run, to use their hands, and to stand up to the most exacting physical work.

What is unquestionable is that the end-result of all this mythification, whether it comes through school or not, is to obstruct men's critical capacity in favour or preserving the status quo. The imposition of these myths, as of so many others, explains forms of action inconsistent with the options announced by many.

They speak of respect for the human person, and the "human person" is compressed into a banal phrase; then they fail to recognise the real men who are dominated and "thingified".

They say that they are committed to liberation and then act on myths which deny the humanisation of man.

They analyse the social mechanisms of repression, but at the same time, and using equally repressive methods, they hold down the students to whom they speak.

They call themselves revolutionaries, but at the same time do not believe in the people they claim to lead to liberation - as if this were not a glaring contradiction.

They desire the humanisation of men, and at the same time desire to preserve the social reality in which men are dehumanised.

At heart, they are afraid of liberty. With this fear, they cannot take the risk of establishing liberty through communion with those who live deprived of it.

Seminar, EDUC-INTERNATIONAL : Tomorrow began Yesterday, Rome, November, 1970

Translated from the Brazilian original by Louise Bigwood