

AN ORIENTATION :

RESEARCH METHODS

by

Paulo Freire

The following article consists of excerpts from a presentation given by Freire at a seminar "Studies in Adult Education" conducted at the Institute of Adult Education, University of Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, on July 20, 1972.

The text, in slightly edited and abridged form, is reprinted with permission of the Institute of Adult Education at Dar-es-Salaam University. In it, Freire first discusses his conception of social research and then puts forward a suggestion for Tanzania. The article expresses Freire's opinion of how his ideas, born in a Latin American context, might be applied in Africa.

1. *The Epistemology of Research*

First of all, I want to discuss some questions of research methodology. I would like, in fact, to begin with a discussion of social science.

One of the first problems that I think we are faced with when we are interested in knowing some aspects of a given reality, either that of a rural area or of an urban one, is to know what the concrete reality is. Secondly, there is the question of what we *consider* to be the concrete reality in that area.

The concrete reality for many social scientists is a list of particular facts that they would like to capture; for example, the presence or absence of water, problems concerning erosion in the area or those of production or productivity. For me, the concrete reality is something more than isolated facts. In my view, thinking dialectically, the concrete reality consists not only of concrete facts and (physical) things, but also includes the ways in which the people involved with these facts perceive them. Thus in the last analysis, for me the concrete reality is the connection between subjectivity and objectivity; never objectivity isolated from subjectivity. If I come to Tanzania to do research, I know this reality completely only to the extent that I understand the dialectical relation between the subjectivity and objectivity in this area - that is, when I begin to know how people in this area perceive themselves in their dialectical relationships with the objectivity.

Let us suppose that a rural area presents a problem of erosion or insects which has resulted in the destruction of crops. I only know the actual phenomenon of erosion to the extent that I also understand how the peasants perceive this phenomenon.

In my view, it is necessary to start an investigation with a pre-occupation in trying to understand the dialectical relations between subjectivity and objectivity. If I perceive reality as the dialectical relationship between objectivity and subjectivity, then I have to use methods for investigation which involve the people of the area being studied as researchers. They should take part in the investigations

themselves and not serve as the passive objects of the study.

If as a sociologist, I think of myself as a neutral or impartial scientist, I will view both people and reality together as the object of my research. Thus, I analyse them as if the world were an anatomy laboratory in which a body is analysed.

This is not for me. I have to go back, and instead of taking the people here as the object of my research I must try, on the contrary, to have the people dialogically involved also as subjects, as researchers with me. If I am interested in knowing the people's ways of thinking and levels of perception, then the people have to think about their thinking and not be only the objects of my thinking. This method of investigation which involves study and criticism of the study by the people is at the same time a pedagogical process. Through this process of investigation, examination, criticism and reinvestigation the level of critical thinking is raised among all those involved.

Thus, in doing research, I am educating and being educated with the people. By returning to the area in order to put into practice the results of my investigation, I am not only educating and being educated: I am also researching again, because to the extent that we put into practice the plans resulting from the investigations, we change the levels of consciousness of the people, and by this change, research again. Thus, there is a dynamic movement between researching and acting on the results of the research.

I think that it is important to point out again that the scientists' question is essentially an epistemological one. This, of course, implies a particular ideological way of thinking and a political choice. This is true regardless of whether it is clear to the scientists or not.

2. *Sets of Objectives*

Let us take two sets of objectives which are political and ideological. Let us suppose that I am working as a social scientist in a process of modernization of the country. In this case, it is seen as the modernization of the structures of society in order to improve the efficiency of production.

It is not in the interests of the ruling class to involve the people as subjects of their change in the transformation of the structure of society. The pre-occupation is a bourgeois, capitalist one. It is the policy of this capitalist society both economically and culturally to emphasize modernizing society. But in this process of modernization, there is no interest in involving the people as authors of the transformation. Educational projects exist only to offer those few clues necessary for more efficient production. They are to be transformed into good producers, but with only that additional education necessary for implanting the system in their heads.

If I think only in terms of productivity, then my tendency will be to emphasize that *technology is neutral, technical education is neutral*. I will attempt to convince every single person of this. It means that work is not discussed politically; it implies that to do so would be a waste of time. We need good workers, so they have to be trained in technical skills: how to use machines in the best way in order to improve the country's productivity. This is a bourgeois policy, the capitalist method.

It is deplorable to find people calling themselves socialists thinking like that. This is a total contradiction. If you read the writings of Nyerere, you will discover that Nyerere's policy is different. Even though Nyerere has not written about this directly, by reading what he has written I can sense what he thinks of this. When he speaks about the meaning of development, for example, he says that "Just as I cannot develop a man, a woman, a person, unless he or she develops, I can also not develop a nation without people." It is necessary to understand all the implications of this statement, one of which is that education for the workers has to be a political event and not an exclusively technical one.

If the objective is very clear, as in Tanzania, if people here are interested in creating a socialist society, then research requires different methods and concepts of knowledge and different organization. People have to participate in the research, as investigators and researchers and not as mere objects. Of course, the social scientists of the First World say that to the extent that we invite people to participate

in the research about them we are interfering scientifically: that is, we are interfering in the research process and the results will not be in a pure form as if it were possible to have any kind of results in social science in a pure form! When the very scientists who emphasize this concept are at home trying to write up reports they cannot escape from their own subjectivity. Their subjectivity is interfering with the "pure form" of the findings. In the second place, the very physical presence of the researcher in the field interferes with the reality there.

3. *A Suggestion for Tanzania*

Based on this principle, I have thought about the possibility of the Institute of Adult Education trying something in this perspective, but with some very clear objectives.

For example, if it fell within the interests, convictions and facilities of the Institute, a research project might be developed which would not only provide experience in alternative research strategies, but would also be the basis for an adult education pilot project. This strategy would also be a challenge to the entire university concerning its relations with the people. The team, presumably having a certain clear understanding of the area of Dar-es-Salaam, would choose a kind of mixed rural/urban area, an area in transition, in which to do research in order to try to develop an adult education programme.

First of all the team should acquaint itself with all previous research - no matter what method had been used. The team would need to explore all possible secondary sources. Secondly, the team should try to understand or to delimit the area geographically, - recognizing, of course, that there are no frontiers, culturally speaking. The team would also try to identify possible popular and official institutions, like, for example football clubs, dancing clubs, or co-operatives. The team would go to these popular institutions in order to talk with their leaders.

There should be no dishonesty in the conversation. The team would say: "We work for the Institute of Adult Education in Dar-es-Salaam and we have come here to discuss the possibility with you for all of us to hold discussions and work

together." This means that if the people of this area do not accept this proposal then we cannot work. What we mean is that we would like to discuss the realities of the area with the people. We would like to summarize these discussions.

This process would continue until the point is reached where everyone involved, the university people and those from the area, *together* feel they understand the realities of the area and can formulate a plan of action. We then say to the people: "What do you think about it?"

Suppose the people say: "Yes, there will be a discussion". The team would have a meeting not only with the leaders but with the people who are engaged in some way with that institution. The team would proceed in this manner with each institution in turn. What happens next?

The team would try to have a series of discussions once a day for maybe one week. The length of time would depend on the schedules of the various people involved. They would discuss with the people the topics and the place in which to hold the discussions. Let us suppose that there are five to six rooms in which to hold meetings. If each room holds perhaps 30 people, then 160 people could be engaged in discussions at the same time. The discussion groups might involve as many as 1,500 inhabitants. It is very important for us to have a perception of the whole.

When the people have agreed, the team would come with one or two representatives of the Institute - sociologists, psychologists or educators in each group. Records of the discussions would have to be made. The team should not go to the meetings with an already prepared list of questions. At the beginning of the meeting a chairman would be elected by the group. The role of the team would be an advisory one and they would begin to discuss the concrete conditions of that area (with each group). What do they think about education in that area? For example: Are there enough primary schools? Are they good or bad? Why? Everyone should be involved in the discussion.

4. *The Objective*

We have to be very clear about the objective of this work: it is the people themselves, not the advancement of science. If, however, the people are silent then we have to provoke them, because we are not neutral.

We might discuss for one hour the subject of education, for example, and find out just how the people see education. At this point, education ceases to be something abstract; and secondly it ceases to be merely a question that the University or the Ministry thinks about. Education now starts to become something quite concrete, because the people are talking about it. If I am to discuss education with the people then I have to start from *their* perception of education and not from my own perception. This is a mistake that we have made in many instances. We have to admit that we often labour under the opinion that we possess the truth. By discussing education, a lot of other subjects, of course, appear and we begin to provoke the team to go on with the discussion.

Let us assume that five groups have been functioning each time a discussion is being staged. After perhaps five meetings, the team itself says: "We don't want to discuss these questions further. We have analysed how we now see these realities." Justice, education, the government, industries, and many other topics, have been discussed.

At this point the groups, each with its reporter, would have a general session of the 160 people and the researchers together. In this general assembly, each reporter would speak about the reality of the area, reporting the results of his group's perceptions of the situation. The reporter, if possible, should be one of the people themselves and not one of the researchers. The researchers can be advisers, of course. In my view, it is better that the reporter comes and speaks full of confidence so that the people will see that they are able to do that which previously only officials, researchers or "specialists" had done.

I would quote here Mao Tse-tung: "More and more the intellectuals must become workers; more and more the workers must become intellectuals: Thus if we really want a

a socialist society, let us stop intellectualism. Let us begin to believe in the possibilities of the people, even if they display many deficiencies. We also have many deficiencies.

Let us return to our hypothetical case. Assume that the reporter of Group A makes the summary of the discussions the people have had. A general discussion on the report would follow. As each reporter makes his or her report there is collective discussion.

5. *The Next Stage*

At this point, the next stage of the research - the critical study of the people's discourse - begins. We have to understand the multiple implications that are discovered in the collective discussions. For example, by studying these implications, the people's levels of perception of reality can be determined. In order to do this, of course, we need to put the discussion on paper, so that the members of the groups and the groups of researchers can have an account of the discussions in all five groups. In studying these implications, the people also need to be present. This discourse cannot be analysed by the researchers alone. The reporters, acting as representatives of the people, should work side by side with the social scientists.

At this stage, the Institute of Adult Education could ask for the collaboration of other departments in the University. It might invite lecturers from the political science department to help the Institute in its interpretation of the discourses. Some economists could be invited and so on.

This method of research might also introduce the University to direct communications with the people as equals in an investigatory process. Some of those who are elitist may be fearful and say that this is the destruction and corruption of the University. But if they are not elitist, but really revolutionized and committed, they will say: "This is fantastic. Now I have the people within the University." In the last analysis this is a pedagogical project.

The presence of a linguist is extremely important in such an analysis in order to analyse the semantic aspects of the language, and the syntax of the people. Sometimes people use the

same words that we use and we have the feeling that the people are using these words in the same context and understand our meaning when, in actual fact, they are thinking of something different. For example, a certain team proved through linguistic analysis that when the workers - at least the peasants - said "trabajo," which means "work," they were not saying what we understood by "trabajo."

By "work", I understand "praxis", or the action of human beings working. For them, work was something like a magical entity as if it were outside the range of activity. They used expressions like: "There are people who were born for work; there are others who are born for no work." We found many examples. Therefore, it is very important for us to understand the semantical differences between us and the people.

6. *The Final Stage*

The last stage of this hypothetical project would be for the team, together with the people, to draft a proposal for subsequent action. This proposal would deal with the provision of adult education.

When there is a possible programme to be put into practice, it would be necessary to return once more and hold another meeting with the 160 people to discuss the plans for the programme which resulted from the analysis of the research. People would discuss the programme, accept it or reject it, and would possibly add to it. After this, one could start the programme - *with* the people, not *for* the people. In this way ministries could also be engaged. Not only the Ministry of Education, but also that of Agriculture and Planning. In other words, we have to recognize that development is a global process; we have to start on different levels of Government and in the Party. Such work would challenge many party members to help with developing a kind of mobilization in their area for the people.

To the extent that we put the programme into practice we would be researching again in order to change the programme. The programme cannot be something static - this is a naive perception of the problem. One cannot regard a programme

abstractly and metaphysically - it has to be created as a result of reality and has to be changed, dependent on the reality. So, all the time the programme is in movement, it is something which is dynamic and not static.

Let us suppose that it proves possible to carry out this project, and that you get some good results. The first result is that by doing it you learn to do it better, because by putting this methodology into practice you are creating methodology.

The main point is to discover methods with which to work whereby the people are not objects. This is self-reliance. Secondly, if it is possible in one area, then maybe you could go on to analyse other areas, so that at one stage in 3 or 4 years' time the Institute of Adult Education of Dar-es-Salaam University would have a kind of map showing the levels of perception of people, of reality. Not, of course, a rigid map, because by the fact that the Institute would be increasing the action, these levels must necessarily change. The first person, for example, elected to be the reporter will be changed in certain ways by his or her praxis of being reporter of that meeting, because he or she had a different praxis before. But in the last analysis, at the same time in which you would be helping other institutions to work with the people, you would be trained in order to train educators. One thing is to clarify some aspects of adult education and some objectives of educational research. The other thing is to organize seminars for future educators based on this. This enables you to say to the students: "Now we will begin to discuss the experience made during research in area A in Dar-es-Salaam. We would like to discuss with you how people in this research reveal their perception." You can then begin analysis, clarifying point by point the ideological and political choices.