

"Conscientization" is perhaps the most discussed word in education today, especially in relation to the newly-independent and other developing countries. Paulo Freire, now on the staff of the World Council of Churches, has propounded it as a means of liberating people from present systems of education which he regards as instruments of oppression and imposition devised by those who hold political and economic power. This is a transcript (slightly adapted) of a seminar on his ideas held at Wollaston in Australia, attended by persons engaged in general and Christian education. Between the writer's own reflections at the beginning and the end, it consists of questions, answers and remarks from the participants.

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Education for community and liberation

Clifford Wright

The challenge of Paulo Freire

Much of the background reading for the seminar centred around Paulo Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The early discussions at the seminar tried to clarify some of the key words employed by Freire in his writings and addresses — praxis, conscientization, domestication and liberation.

There is a great deal of misunderstanding about the word "praxis": it is not just "practice". It is like the misunderstanding about what John Dewey said, that you learn by experience and by activity. That is precisely what he did *not* say. You learn by *reflection* on experience and activity, and that is part of Dewey's understanding of freedom: to be able to reflect, analyse and plan. So praxis is not "practice" or being practical. It involves that, but it also involves critical reflection: it is action and reflection on reality in order to transform it. Freire is continually talking about bar-room intellectual revolutionaries: you are in a bar, drinking and discussing revolution, but you are not really involved. If you just reflect on it — which is the danger for academics — you have a barren type of intellectualizing. So it is a wedding of committed action and reflection in order to transform.

This is a continuing process: the action-reflection is continuous and does not just stop after one cycle, as it were. Freire talks about permanent revolution. In the cultural revolution in China, he sees an expression of this continuing revolution whereas there is a hardening of the people in the Soviet Union, apparently, where the Marxist documents become like the worst type of catechism. So it is an ongoing dynamic view, a real dialectical view of history which is involved in this concept of praxis.

Take the word "conscientization". The fundamental thing about conscientization, I think, can be understood partly in terms of the misunderstanding about it. Many people view "conscientization" in terms of subjective awareness —

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something that happens inside the person. It is like the naïve person who thinks that by changing someone's heart, his soul, this will of itself transform society. Freire, who has a profound personal commitment to Christ, used to be in this position, with this naïveté of thinking that if you change the inner consciousness of people they will really conscientize.

So conscientization is not just awareness-making. I made a fascinating visit to Comería in Puerto Rico in 1971 and saw the conscientizing process going on there. Some Dominican monks, a Methodist minister, a Methodist deaconess and a couple of nuns went into Comería, a town of about 28,000 people where a factory had just been closed down and the unemployment level was about 40%. It was a really terrible place, very run down even before this factory closed. These Dominicans and the Methodists united and brought people together in groups of about 40; they had a couple of thousand people in groups for two or three days, many of them unemployed, and they reflected on the faith and on their community, and began to grasp the significance of international monopoly capitalism.

They had a kind of university in the street, they had puppet theatres and created plays where they could say the most outrageous things, through the puppets, and through art forms and so on; they had a tremendous impact. I spoke to some of them and they said: "We have found a new Christ." So it was subjective, but it was also objective because they had an awareness, they were conscientized about the structures of the society in which they lived their lives. It is not just an inner consciousness, it is an awareness of power, too, that results from this. It is an overcoming of the myths that "I am nobody", that only the upper class have any knowledge, that the only people who can think are the educated people. Paulo Freire says that his impression is that there is not a great deal of illiteracy in Australia in terms of being able to read or write, but that the level of political illiteracy is great. It seems you have a political ideology imposed on people at the moment and there is the danger in conscientization that you transfer this to a different ideology.

That is where this subject-object nexus in the conscientizing process is very important to Freire and where he just defeats many of the rigid Marxists, because they impose a "catechism" on the people, so much so that they no longer think. Educationally, I think this is a fundamental point; Michael Bordeaux spoke about the classes he went to, the anti-religion, anti-God classes in the University of Moscow, and how they just read from 1920 documents and the students were not allowed to ask any questions, even when they had coffee break. That's imposing an ideology, whereas this is open-ended, really dialectical. It is the dialectical dialogue that is fundamentally Freire's position.

Now to "domestication". These words are obviously inter-related. A domesticated person in Freire's thought is controlled, modified, formed by powers, forces, people and structures external to him. He has no dynamic control of the outcome. He is manipulated and the outcome is predetermined. He is also marginalized. He is on the fringes, he does not belong in society. He is like some of the Aborigines in Victorian country towns in Australia, or some I saw in Kalbarrie — not really belonging in that society. That is the way they feel. Of course, he says that in fact they do well and truly belong, and the exploited really do belong. So the domestication of people is the controlled syllabus, the banking type of education, where the teacher comes in with his satchel full of these rich treasures that he deposits in the pupil, the recipient of these riches. This is a type of domesticating process, where the person himself does not make any real contribution. Freire goes into this — the educator must make his Easter. He must become an educatee with the people to learn *from* the people, and he must

not think that the only people who know anything are the educators. It means walking hand in hand in the search for understanding and transformation and so on, in terms of praxis.

Should we assume that the domesticated person is unhappy? Perhaps the domesticated person is happy in his ignorance.

Yes, many people prefer this. This is the necrophilic attitude, rather than the biophilic which is the pilgrimage, the adventure, dialectic, affirmation. The necrophilic is the shrinking away (I'm nobody, I can't do anything), the fatalistic view.

Does he see this domestication by other people always in terms of class or, as I would see it in Australia, not people oppressed by other people, but by the system, without minding it? Many of the wealthy people among whom I live are thoroughly domesticated to the system; they are not ready to ask questions about business practice — they profit by it, and they are not aware of other people. They are domesticated by the principalities and powers, rather than by other people. It is the worship of mammon that controls their lives.

"Liberation". The liberated person is the person with "gnosis", with knowledge, with real understanding — he is conscientized. This is fundamental, in Freire's thought, to the humanization of society, to being human in the most positive sense.

To be free to love is an inner subjective freedom, which he respects very deeply, and it is the best element in that naïve Christian. I believe in this, but in Neibhur's book *Beyond Tragedy*, in the midst of all the strife, you have a faith that is real, even without the transformation of society; so there is a reality in inner liberation. Freire spoke about himself, saying that recently he had experienced an inner confidence that is related to his faith in God, that is very deep and very real. It is really what he lives by and everything else has stripped away. It is beyond tragedy, beyond the threats of revolution, loss of property and all that. It is a real belief in resurrection, a personal thing. It is a liberation, this peace that the world cannot give. It is quite incomplete, especially in the biblical sense, if it is not related to the structures of society. It is an element of tremendous hope and of realism, for the liberated man is the man of faith, who has been conscientized about society and is working in the name of God, in the comradeship of God, for this liberation, and the revolution becomes an act of love. So liberation and faith become all interwoven in terms of personal faith and commitment, and confidence and wrestling with the unjust structures of oppression.

Freire does not seem to use the word "conversion" but talks a good deal about "making your Easter" which is really this act of identification with Christ. It is gratitude and response in real faith.

Points arising from general discussion

What is the real task of the school? What are the proprieties? How are the schools doing what they are doing? The content has not changed as much as the schools' approach.

Paulo Freire spoke about Germany, where it was "Herr Professor", who went in with his bag as his capital to deposit his authority. He says that some of them modify this procedure and have a much more open approach, discussing with the students. The actual content is still chosen by the professors and this is just a more interesting way of getting to the same result, but there is actually little basic alteration. In the University of Geneva where he is teaching, Freire

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spent months deciding with the students what they would study. He thinks it is possible to find an area of freedom within the present structure, and you must use this as much as possible, but do not be naïve and think you are really affecting the fundamental pressures of society.

His stance is a radical rejection of capitalism.

Every school is a political school, and this is what you have to face.

I think every system is neutral. It can be used by the people within it according to where they want to go. It seems to me that the assumption is that the schools are inbuilt against any change. They are set up for the *status quo* or the ruling classes, for the power structures of big industries, and so on.

It makes it sound as if there is a plot to domesticate the people.

It is only the experience of sheer injustice, sheer poverty, sheer hunger, and so forth that disturbs one. Unless one has that experience in some way, then in fact there is no jolting of an acceptance of what is. And a community as such does not want to be jolted because everybody has his niche. So you do not introduce things that are paradoxical and difficult to take in, you do not raise awkward questions, they make life too uncomfortable, and so we avoid them.

You made a statement that schools are part of the power structure. Could you be specific about this? How, within the structure of the school, its form and running, does this produce the exploited society?

My experience in the Victoria State system was that I was inspected each year, and unless I conformed well to what was expected of me and the children produced good examination results, I would not get promoted. I was a victim of the system in seeking promotion.

Society, not the school, dominates

But there must be some kind of control over the teachers. Is this domestication?

The Freire description of schools says they are based on failure rather than success. At every stage of the child's progress he is classified, and if he succeeds he goes on for another classification, and if he fails he is a dropout; the plums are reserved for those who manage to get right to the top.

We are teaching children that it is a fight, tooth and claw — the race goes to the swiftest. Those who already have an economic advantage will go right to the top and get there quicker. The education system is so planned that you climb up that ladder as high as you can go, and then step off easily on to the equivalent rung of the economic ladder.

Contrast this with what educationists say about what they are doing for the child and the changes they make in the class to give the child a more rewarding experience; but the test comes when the system determines how the end results will be described. I think one of the most interesting trends is the one described in a book called *Success without Failure* where a person who is basically a psychotherapist says how children can be helped to experience success at their own level; but having acknowledged the good that is in the suggestion, one now asks how far these suggestions would work out in the existing system. The barriers are breaking down on this one. We do not have to wait for revolution, but there is a backlog to be overcome.

It is not the school but the society in which we live that is doing the domesticating, and Freire is expecting too much of the educational system.