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# Age

EDITED BY BARRY HILL

## 'When I met Marx I continued to meet Christ on the corners of the street'

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PAULO FRIERE is one of the few contemporary educationists whose ideas are being discussed throughout the world. His book *Pedagogy Of The Oppressed* has been translated into 10 languages.

Until 1964 he was a professor in Brazil, co-ordinating a national plan to fight adult illiteracy. A Christian and a Marxist he was imprisoned and exiled by the junta Government. He became a professor at the University of Chile and a consultant to UNESCO's Institute of Research and Training in Agrarian Reform and was until recently a visiting fellow at Harvard University. He is now a special consultant to the World Council of Churches and lives in Geneva.

Pedagogy is a theoretical book but it is based on Friere's experience with Latin American literacy programmes. It is mainly concerned with the political education of peasants, but Friere's discussion of freedom, knowledge and education practice give it wider implications.

His term for the process of creating critical personal and social awareness is "conscientisation" — from his native Portuguese. His principle criticism of traditional education is that it proceeds as if the learner has nothing to contribute and as if the teacher knows all. He calls this the "banking" concept of education and argues that it invites "deposit" learning — or

teaching based on propaganda and slogans rather than teaching designed to make people actively free.

Friere talks of "problem-posing education" where teachers are in "dialogue", or equal partnership, with students.

He believes in starting with what people know about their own lives. With peasants learning to read, for example, he might begin with the word "slum". The word leads on to group discussion and at the same time is a root (in Spanish) to many other words. The method is open-ended, argues Friere, and based on hope and faith in man. "If I do not love men I cannot enter into dialogue," he writes.

— BARRY HILL

IN AUSTRALIA, Friere wants to talk with Aborigines, unionists, Women's Liberationists, students and educators. Despite the luxuriant beard he is a small man, quietly spoken, with soft eyes, who huffs his cigars very delicately. He arrived from Geneva in a neat fawn suit. He was asked whether he ran the risk of becoming a sort of guru...

Ah, yes, indeed. One of my pre-occupations is to fight against this, to demythologise myself. You know, it is so difficult, because when I try to be what I am — a common man — many people think that it is me being a simple man and it reinforces my myth. So I don't know what to do. When I have time to spend with people, after some hours, the myth disappears and I become myself...

What aspects of your work are relevant to a Western industrial democracy like Australia?

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What aspects of your work are relevant to a Western industrial democracy like Australia?

The problem of the manipulation of consciousness — of the alienation of us under the impact of the different ways we have in this kind of society to



so-called "public opinion." In this kind of society we have the feeling that we are free, but we are not. We are conditioned every minute, every day by what the television says . . . when someone says to me: "Are you sure, Paul?" I say "Yes, I listen to it on the television; I heard it" as if to say "God told me". We dress, eat and think as the television says. We read the news without perceiving we are eating news . . .

One of my points of emphasis is how to understand this process and how to work against it. We have less of this in Latin America than in Australia, Europe and the United States.

Another point is the systematic education we have in the so-called First World. This is the education I criticise as "banking education". It's very common. Of course, I know I was criticising education in Latin America but I also knew I was criticising education in the U.S. In the last analysis when we think of education we have to think of power. Education is a political act . . .

It also involves a certain theory of knowledge. Generally, knowledge is perceived as if it were something complete in itself. So the educator is he who knows what it means, who possesses knowledge, and the educatee is one who doesn't possess knowledge; the task of the educator is to transform those who don't have the knowledge . . . When I criticise this epistemology, saying knowledge is not something in itself because knowledge is a process, which implies the praxis of human beings on the reality, which means that knowledge cannot be transferred, that knowledge has to be made and remade, I think I am touching one of your problems in Australia . . .

There is also the question of consensitisation, which is not something which belongs to the Latin American people. It's a human process . . . which demands engagement, political, ideological clarity.

One mistake in understanding consensitisation is subjectivism — to think as if consciousness created the objective reality and that in order to transform the objective reality it is only necessary to transform our consciousness. It is one of the illusions many Christians have — the "illusion of thinking that in order to have a just society we have to change the heart of the thinker first, that when we have an angelic humanity we can create a beautiful world. It's a terrible dream and an impossible one . . .

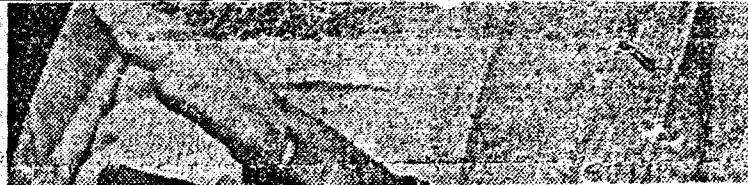
**What does that mean for the education of children?**

Ah yes. For children you must first of all respect their levels of maturity, from the psychological point of view. But you also have to give children the opportunity to experience themselves, to create and to recreate, to use their hands, their bodies, their souls and not to give them prescription, or rules, but to invite them to participate, to learn from their mistakes, to encourage them to think. What is important is not to teach subjects, but for children to learn how to think.

When I was a professor in Brazil, I was never preoccupied with finishing the official teaching programme . . . My preoccupation was an odd one; it was to discuss with the students what it means to ask a question — from the point of view of a theory of knowledge.

**What questions should children be encouraged to ask?**

One deficiency of my career is not



to have been a teacher of children. After university I taught in secondary school, but that is all . . . I have read a lot, however, and of course I have my personal experience. I got married 30 years ago. This was the most important and beautiful thing I did in my life. My marriage was more important than The Pedagogy Of The Oppressed because if I had not got married I would not have written the book. I had a beautiful experience with my five children . . .

The curiosity of children is so important. If we cut off their curiosity I think we castrate them. So the same process I described with adults can be developed among children. For example, we never said "no" to our children without giving reasons "why".

**Is power the most important theme a teacher in dialogue with pupils should be concerned with?**

It is one of the reasons for dialogue. But dialogue with children must be about everything which interests the child. Maybe a child wants to have dialogue about flowers. If it interests him, then maybe it will be about power . . .

**To what extent can educators enter into real dialogue with pupils or adults?**

It depends on the free space we have in different societies. I'm sure that you have much more free space to work than in Brazil. That is, some educators can do much more, individually, with students than a professor can do in Brazil . . .

So maybe an Australian professor can begin the year with students by saying: "Look, I don't have a programme to give you. I think we can organise our programme because the seminar does not belong to me. The seminar belongs to us. We are here as subjects of knowledge, subjects of the process of knowing, so let us work together to create our programme."

**Is it fair to say that your work is concerned with the Third World — not with issues that unite the whole world right now?**

I never sought to create a system which would explain everything. For me that's very difficult. It does not mean that the books do not make some general statements . . . but you are right. When I wrote the book, I was convinced that it would be a special Latin American edition of 5000 copies. I thought I was writing something for Latin America, based on my experience in Latin America and the sophisticated language is explained by the fact that I thought only students and teachers would read the book. I never thought I would be read in Australia, for example. I was absolutely wrong.

**You are a Christian who uses Marxist ideas. How do you resolve the two?**

I always receive this question. For me — no problem. Since I was a very young man, very naive, I have not accepted that being a Christian means that a man must be a reactionary . . .

Another thing: I had a very difficult childhood. I experienced hunger. I know what it means to be hungry . . . I always say to be hungry is when you don't know when you can eat.

I had to hunt, to fish, to kill birds with my sling shot. And yet there were two things I never had; first of all I never thought that God was responsible for death. And, second, I never lost a sense of intimacy with God — as a kind of colleague, not as a kind of master . . .

When I was a young man, I went to the people, to the workers, the peasants, motivated, really, by my Christian faith. At that time, when I was very young — 20 or 21 years — I talked with the people. I learned how to speak with the people — the pronunciation, the words, the concepts. When I arrived with the people — the misery, the concreteness, you know! But also the beauty of the people, the openness, the ability to love which the people have, the hope of the people, the friendship . . .

The obstacles of this reality sent me — to Marx. I started reading and studying. It was beautiful because I found in Marx a lot of things the people had told me — without being literate. Marx was really a genius. But when I met Marx, I continued to meet Christ on the corners of the street — by meeting the people.

**What are the limitations of your books?**

The first limitation is the language. Besides what I said before — that it was written for a very few people in Latin America — when I wrote it I was a petit-bourgeois intellectual, a petit-bourgeois professor — in spite of all my experience with the people. When I wrote it I had not made my Easter; that is, I had not died as a petit bourgeois intellectual and been born again as one of the people. Now I am trying to write — not simplistically, but simply in a way that intellectuals and the common people can understand.

**Is revolution worthwhile? Is it not inevitable that we finish up with a Stalinist Russia or similar campaigns to those in China?**

Look, first of all I think we cannot idealise revolution. One of your tendencies is not to think of the injustices we have in bourgeois society — of the number of people who did not eat today or the number of children who did not go to school but to think instead of the distortions of the revolution.

Secondly, our tendency is to idealise, to think of the revolution as something spiritual. I always say revolution cannot create paradise. Revolution is history within history. Revolution is made by human beings and not by angels and God . . . China is not paradise. It cannot be because China is history and by being history China will have its mistakes. I have to see historically — from the human point of view — what we have in China — not to expect there or Cuba or anywhere, a kind of heaven . . .

**Is it difficult to keep in touch with the people when you work from Geneva? Would you like to finish with world tours and go back to the earth?**

Ah, look, it is my dream. It is my dream, one of my dreams. But you cannot do what you really want to do . . . I miss Latin America. When I go to Latin America, I feel alive — as I do in Africa.