

A Critical Understanding of Social Work

Paulo Freire
Marilynn Moch (translator)

INTRODUCTION

It was not Paulo Freire's brilliance that landed him in prison in Brazil or that caused his exile for so many years. It was his unstoppable commitment to putting his theories into practice, to acting in accordance with what he wrote and what he believed. It is this commitment, articulated in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and his subsequent books, that has inspired and guided educators and community workers.

Freire is an educator, not a social worker. But he has worked with social workers throughout his life. Social workers have been his students, his colleagues, and his friends, not only in the early years in Brazil, but ever since. Social workers, including myself, have been his students in his many workshops in the United States and throughout the world. We have been among those striving to implement his pedagogy in the classroom and in the field throughout Latin America, Africa, and the developing countries, as well as in the United States and Europe.

But in the speech that follows, the second half of a plenary presentation at the International Federation of Social Workers' bian-

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Translated from the original Spanish by Marilynn Moch, PhD, ACSW.

nual conference in 1988, Paulo Freire's ideas are directed specifically to us. He shares with us his "thoughts," as he calls them (for he prefers dialogue to lecture) on what it means to be a social worker. His ideas, I believe, should be included in the curriculum of every school of social work.

Freire's presentation was oral, spoken in Spanish but in a form that in his native Portuguese-speaking Brazil is referred to as "Portanol." This compounded the usual difficulties associated with translations. Freire's schedule posed a second difficulty. After so many decades of struggle, he finally received an appointment as Minister of Education for the State of Sao Paulo. As a result, he had no time to either translate his presentation for us or thoroughly review my rendition. He did read it, however, and approved this publication. The awkwardness of the translation is entirely my own. Some of the awkwardness is deliberate to avoid placing his thoughts within our own stereotypes of response and to force us to struggle with the ideas he presents. Some is inadvertant, reflecting my own inadequacy, for I am not a professional translator. I claim ownership of the former. I will leave it to the reader to decide on the latter.

Marilynn Moch
translator

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My friends and participants in this meeting, it is with emotion and pleasure that I come here to speak with you while I think aloud about some of the issues of pedagogy that have to do with social work.

First, I want to say that I began my career as a university professor, a long time ago, when I was quite young, in my home town of Recife, teaching in the school for social work there. I would also like to say that among those social work aides (my students), I had good friends, not only in Recife, but also in Rio de Janiero and San Paolo, in the end of the '40s and the early '50s. Without naming the circumstances and names of my friends throughout Brazil, from the extreme southern part of the country to the extreme north, I would like in this worldwide congress of social workers to give my testi-

mony as to how much I learned from some of those social work aides with whom I lived in my youth.

The educator plays with knowledge, theory, and politics. The role of the educator, the dream of the educator, is the permanent transformation of the world. The direction of the dream of the educator is toward the creation, the invention, of a society without injustice. I might also speak of the role of the educator as a preserver. The direction of the dream is to preserve whatever is possible of the status quo of the society in which the educator lives and works. It is objectively correct to get in touch with what is good in one's society. As such that is a force for a sort of preservation of the society.

And now, my friends, regarding social work specifically, I have been thinking about social work practice. Social work practice, whether casework, group work, or community organization, is inherently and substantively educational—pedagogical. There is a particular pedagogy natural to social work where the social worker is in the forefront in the search for a clearer understanding in coming to know certain subject matter. Social workers are conditioned by the structure of the society in which they live, in which they are formed. Social workers uncover and make explicit a certain dream about social relations, which is a political dream. In the end, social workers are also political beings, and their work has to do with esthetics, it has to do with ethics, and it has to do with understanding, as much as any educator, like me, for example, who teaches at the university.

In this sense, therefore, the social worker, as much as the educator, is not a neutral agent, either in practice or in action. One of the inclinations that we sometimes have—and this is an offense, an illegality, that we imbibe in our technological society—is to think that the social worker is a very specialized person, a technician, who works in a compartmentalized technical area, and who has a sort of protection within this area, a sort of aggregate of rights, as a particular social group, to stand apart from the political battles of society. For me, this is impossible. It is an error. Social workers are compromised if they become convinced that they possess a technical expertise that is more to be defended than is the work of other workers.

Now, in this moment, when I am as personally convinced of the impossibility of a neutral presence for the educator as for the social worker, I would like to closely examine the possibilities for the progressive social worker. I would like to make some comments now regarding some of the qualities that I see in a progressive social worker. I will exercise my right not to consider the qualities of the preserving social worker because I find that to talk about them is to talk about the preserving educator, or thinker. Since I am not one of them, I leave this task to one who is. I will bring forth here some five or six qualities that come to mind, although the order in which I refer to them does not imply any greater or lesser importance.

The first observation I would like to make regarding these qualities, or these virtues, is the following: these qualities are not qualities one receives as a gift or that one is born with. No, these qualities I am going to talk about are nurtured by us in our practice, or they are not nurtured, because we have to make them happen. And I tell you that to nurture the qualities necessary in our work is not easy. We ourselves constantly resist certain progressive directions on the intellectual level and contradict ourselves on the level of practice.

The first virtue, or quality, that I would cite for a progressive social worker is the convergence between what is said and what is done. And it is not easy to work on diminishing the distance between discourse and action. It is much easier to talk than to do. Because it is easier to talk than to do, to continuously and consistently practice progressive social work is not enviable. It is a precarious position to persist in calling on love, in calling on life, to persist in affirming the possibilities we human beings have of overcoming our situation through practical actions to transform the world.

It is impossible for a social worker to continue being progressive when he or she only talks progressive but acts conservative or reactionary. For example, how is it possible to be progressive, but at the same time to be racist or sexist? I cannot accept speaking progressively and at the same time feel proprietary toward my wife. It is irresponsible. I cannot consider myself to be progressive and at the same time restrain the curiosity, the restlessness, of those among whom I work. I cannot consider myself a progressive and regard working-class people as naturally incompetent to advance them-

selves, and that therefore my effort is needed to advance them. I cannot be progressive and consider myself better than people who live in slums. So then, to diminish the distance between what I say, what I affirm, and what I do, I believe, would require an effort every single day. It would require a progressive obsession.

And this is not even easy to measure when there is fantastic interference between the ideology and the weight of the ideology, at the level of reflex and at the level of intellect. For example, I understand, that I do not own my wife. But at the level of my historical and cultural experience, the sexist ideology within which Latin America is planted, as a marvelous but not exclusive example, everyone is sexist. Even the women must struggle against much the same model. This cultural force, this cultural and historical experience which is social and which is also class-based, interferes in such a manner in me that I can be very progressive in discourse, and my actions can be reactionary.

I do not know about Europe, but in Latin America, it is a very impressive exercise to listen to the speeches of candidates and to observe their actions after they are elected. A candidate for governor, for example, will make fantastic progressive speeches, using the language of the political left. After the election and in the days following, the candidate's practice has nothing to do with the previous speeches. This distance constitutes exactly the incoherence that cripples the practice of progressive social work, of progressive pedagogy.

Another quality that I believe to be indispensable for progressive social workers is not only to stimulate and to develop a permanent critical curiosity toward the world in themselves, but also to do so in those with whom they work. I am convinced that curiosity is a restless search of knowing better that which is known and of learning that which is not yet known. In the historical process, this curiosity constitutes the shoulders of history. Curiosity is the method by which that other animal, who we were, began to transform itself into that human being which we are, and that which we are creating today. For me, it is impossible to be human without curiosity, without questions. The question is in the foundation of human existence. One of the sad things, for example, is how we sometimes become accustomed to the absence of the question. For example,

pedagogy, as it is generally practiced today, is exactly a pedagogy of the answer. It is not a pedagogy of the question. Professors enter the classroom on the first day of the term, for example, and talk, giving answers to questions that have not been asked by the students. And sometimes, the professors simply follow those who asked the original questions that provoked the answers they give today, again without questions. How limiting this is! So then, to maintain the intellectual curiosity in oneself as a worker and to stimulate the curiosity among those with whom we work is for me an indispensable quality for a progressive social worker.

As a quality or a virtue, this curiosity has a corollary that the progressive social worker ought to have. This corollary is a permanent search for one's own competence. It is impossible to work progressively in favor of changing the world, in favor of a transformation of the world, without competency. Progressive social workers have to be responsible, have to be rigorous, have to work to establish as much as they can, scientifically, their own understanding of the phenomena of the society in which they work. For this reason, then, they ought to have a critical curiosity, for they must gain a great deal of understanding. The question is not scientism but knowledge. So then, competence, the search for competence, constitutes a fundamental quality for a progressive social worker.

There is another quality that is extraordinarily important to me, and that is the virtue of tolerance. I do not know whether you, in your surroundings, in your societies, have observed how intolerance pushes against progressive social work with such force that it makes it reactionary. For me, tolerance is the glue with which we can live with those who are different in order to be able to fight against our enemies. This is tolerance. I cannot fight against people who are simply different from me but who have an objective that at least appears like the objective that I have. Therefore, I must meet with them without consideration of the differences in order to have the strength to fight against those who truly have objectives and ideals antagonistic to mine. So then, tolerance is fundamental.

Above all, another quality I would speak of today to the social worker on the front lines, out in the world, is the quality, also difficult, of living in impatient patience. I would like to say that patience alone is a disaster, I believe, for the educator, for the social

worker. The social educator that says, for example, to the victims of sexism, to the downtrodden, to the exploited, "Have patience, you will rule in heaven," is to me a reactionary. This type of patience only helps those who exploit and oppress and turns back history. But on the other hand, it is the same with pure impatience. Pure impatience carries us to declare the transformation of society as if it resided in people's heads. Society is transformed when we transform it. And we transform it when the organized and mobilized political forces of the popular classes and workers throw themselves into history to change the world, and not in someone's head. So then, in its turn, pure impatience forgets that in history, one does what is possible and not what one would like to do. The big problem for us is how to know what is possible today. And that brings us to another excellent quality of progressive social workers, which is an understanding of the limits of social work practice. To ask, "What are the limits in my practice?" And those limits are social, ideological, cultural, political, and historical.

In consideration of all of these qualities, I would speak about one last quality of an intellectual and political nature that progressive social workers ought to cultivate, to develop, to perfect, in their practice, and that is an understanding of what is historically possible. As I perceive history, it is not something that happens necessarily, but something that will be made, can be made, that one can make or can refrain from making. I recognize, therefore, the importance of the role of the subjective in the process of making history or of being made by history. And this, then, gives me a critical optimism that has nothing to do with, on the one hand, a critical pessimism and an immobilizing fatalism; and, on the other hand, nothing to do with history marching on without men, without women, that considers history outside. No, history is not this. History is made by us, and as we make it, we are made and remade by it. Thank you.

REFERENCE

- Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: The Continuum Publishing Corporation.

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