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Rebels With a Cause: Myles Horton and Paulo Freire

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This article is about two courageous leaders of adult basic education: Myles Horton and Paulo Freire.

Most terms that serve as labels are emotionally charged and imply a stereotype. Included in this vast group of labels are the words "radicals" and "revolutionary." Those who support the status quo often try to affix these labels to those seeking pervasive social change. The purpose is to imply association with (and to rekindle fears of) former militant groups. However, some men wear these labels as badges of honor. Myles Horton and Paulo Freire are two such men. Their ideas and actions shatter the negative conceptions of these terms and give them positive connotations.

In his *Reveille For Radicals*, Saul Alinsky describes radicals as the small group of believers in mankind who have a genuine feeling for their fellowman and who are interested in achieving the greatest common good for all people. In addition to desiring a prosperous economic condition for everyone, radicals seek a world where each individual's worth is recognized and where his potentialities can be realized.

Alinsky further asserts that this real equality of opportunity for all cannot be attained unless men have the freedom of their minds and unless privilege and power are challenged wherever they exist. Refusing to rely merely on rhetoric, the radicals strike fervently at injustice. In their quest

to establish the preeminence of human rights over property rights, the radicals emerge as the defenders of the people's interests. Believing in the fundamental Jeffersonian principles of democracy, "radicals build the world of men's dreams."¹

Myles Horton and Paulo Freire are two Alinsky-style radicals who located what they believed to be the generic root of a problem, analyzed its implications, and acted accordingly.² Each was an adult educator who operated in a different milieu with different techniques. Each, however, sought to bring about the same objectives of helping people better the quality of their lives and of removing unconscious restricting shackles.

HORTON: *Enliven and Enlighten*

Myles Horton worked with the poor adults in the South. Starting with the poor Appalachian whites, Horton founded Highlander Folk School in Grundy County, Tennessee, in 1932. Throughout its history, Highlander served as a catalyst for bringing together people, ideas, and resources. The school and its staff occupied a position in the vanguard of the fight for social, political, and economic equality in the South. During the 1930's and 1940's, this struggle was focused within the labor movement, and Highlander served as a training institution for labor and community

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organizers. In the 1950's, however, Highlander rejected the drift of labor's mainstream to the right, and Horton moved Highlander more deeply into the South's swelling civil rights movement. Realizing that the leadership for the civil rights movement had to come from within the black community, Horton channeled the resources and talents of Highlander into a supportive role for the most active civil rights groups and individuals. By 1964 Horton was trying to broaden the civil rights movement into "a means through which all oppressed people in America could effectively challenge their oppressors."³ Thus, Highlander's entire history is a series of episodes of "educating for a revolution that would basically alter economic and political power relationships to the advantage of the poor and powerless."⁴

Highlander's educational philosophy centered around the principle that people are capable of making their own decisions. People resent and rebel against educational institutions that try to impose values or decisions upon them. Highlander sought to reduce people's dependency by better

¹ Saul D. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), p. 33.

² Stanley M. Grabowski, ed., *Paulo Freire: A Revolutionary Dilemma for the Adult Educator* (Syracuse: ERIC Clearinghouse, 1972), p. 37.

³ Frank Adams and Myles Horton, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander* (Winston-Salem, North Carolina: John F. Blair, 1975), p. 179.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 23.

encourage them for more active citizen participation in an unimpaired democracy. Seeking to liberate the future out of the constricting present, Highlander worked with local people as they attempted to improve their own communities and to solve the problems which originate from the ubiquitous conflict situations in the daily lives of the poor. Using an immediate specific problem that had been proposed and defined by the group, Highlander encouraged those with analogous problems to interact in the hope that a broad movement for social change would emerge. At Highlander the students developed their innate problem-solving abilities and learned to transfer these abilities to other situations. Upon returning to their local communities, these learners became leaders in helping others become aware of their abilities. By helping people in this manner, Highlander fulfilled its mission of bringing about "what ought to be, rather than what is."³

Curriculum development at Highlander followed the Danish folk school model—first to enliven, then to enlighten. At Highlander music enlivened. Group singing served as a unifying tool as well as a means of communication for the poor. Singing about the realities and commonalities of their life situations served the important psychological functions of creating a casual and cooperative atmosphere and of developing a spirit of invincibility.

Classes on specific problems enlightened. Classes were

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developed to solve problems that were defined by means of group discussions. In this way education developed naturally from the people themselves, and Highlander's curriculum was always within the experiences of its students. Highlander, thus, "concentrated on helping people look to themselves to find their own potential and their own solutions."⁴

The Highlander staff provided the expertise for curriculum development. This experienced and well-trained group listened while the poor talked. After the poor had verbalized their needs, the staff developed a program. This program was then scrutinized by the group. If they felt that it would satisfy their needs, the formal educational program began.

In all cases, curriculum was based on the "one axiom that never changes at Highlander: *learn from the people; start their education where they are.*"⁵ Collective problem solving served as the means for satisfying the poor's appetite to learn and for actively involving them in their own education. Education at Highlander, therefore, became a process for stimulating democracy rather than a dedication to preserving academic discipline.

Thus, Highlander is an idea and a process. It is the idea that people

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have within themselves the potential to solve their own problems. It is the process by which individuals come to realize that their problems are shared by others, that problems can be solved collectively, and that their individual problems are not solved until the common problem is eradicated for all. Solutions to these problems come about not by using specific academic data but rather by acquiring and applying the general skills of problem solving. Therefore, "education at Highlander is a synthesis of person, group, time, place, purpose, and problem" in an attempt to expand and vitalize democracy by ending society's "dialogue of non-equals."⁶

FREIRE: Encourage Critical Consciousness

Paulo Freire worked with the peasants of Latin America. His philosophy is heavily influenced by Latin America's historical social-class rift. Freire believes that the poor have been denied their basic human rights as a result of being oppressed by the upper classes and that the poor can achieve their humanization by becoming aware of their selfhood, looking critically at their social situation, and taking action to transform their society. By identifying and discussing their com-

mon problems, the poor can help educate each other and pave the way for meaningful social change.

The plight and dehumanization of the poor stem from their oppression. The oppressed have been alienated from their own decision-making and have been convinced of their intrinsic inferiority. Their oppressors have propagated a system of myths which support the status quo and which discourage any real questioning of the Establishment. Society's entrenched institutions promote and perpetuate these myths. Once indoctrinated by these myths, the unorganized oppressed accept the values of their oppressors and seek to emulate them. Accepting the mythical belief that the established system offers them security, the oppressed fear freedom and are afraid to risk change. Overwhelmed by the force of their restricted situation, the oppressed withdraw into the syndrome of silence. The oppressed thus become objects who are acted upon and who fatalistically accept their exploitation.

Education, according to Freire, has been a major institution for perpetuating the oppressor's dominance. Education is never neutral. Either it is an instrument to facilitate conformity to the present system, or it is a process for helping people to deal critically with the realities of their world. To mold the oppressed into adaptive automatons, the oppressors implement the banking concept of education. This teacher-centered technique encourages authority and dependence by misconstruing knowledge as a gift to be bestowed

³Ibid. p. 214.
⁴Ibid. p. 209.
⁵Ibid. p. 206.

⁶Ibid. pp. 207, 183.

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by a superior elite of trustees upon a manageable group in the form of selected deposits. By undermining the creative powers of the oppressed, education becomes a tool for "indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression."

The ending of dehumanization requires that the oppressed become conscious of their domination and fight to end it. Rehumanization is an educational process accomplished through a "humanizing pedagogy in which the revolutionary leadership establishes a permanent relationship of dialogue with the oppressed."¹⁰ Rejecting the banking concept, the leaders utilize problem-posing education to help the oppressed identify and reflect upon the injustices of their society. This educational process attempts to demythologize society, open men's minds, and arouse their consciousness.

Freire's curricular process employs problem-posing education to encourage man's ability to critically perceive the world in which he exists. This method relies on dialogue between the teachers and students to stimulate critical thinking, creativity, and reflection upon reality. By means of dialogue, the oppressed "name" their world, and the students and teachers exchange viewpoints.

This process allows the educators to gain insights into the idiomatic meaning of the language and allows the people to identify their thematic problems. After the themes have been identified, the teachers codify them and return them to the people as problems to be solved. Then an invigorating discussion of the problems allows the oppressed to simultaneously combine action and reflection. Emerging from their slavish docility, the oppressed are able to generate new perceptions, develop new knowledge and themes to investigate, and nurture the critical consciousness that is a prerequisite to meaningful social change.

The eradication of oppression requires drastic action. "The solution is not to 'integrate' them [the oppressed] into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become beings for themselves. . . ." The pedagogy of the oppressed . . . is a task for radicals who can "follow the path of dialogue and of communication."¹¹ The people need revolutionary leaders to help them to internalize the image of their oppressors and to formulate a plan of liberation.

The leader's initial task is to empathize with the people and to assimilate their culture. With the application of problem-posing education, the emerging leaders and the people simultaneously find themselves through each other. Through this cultural synthesis the plans, goals, and actions of the leaders and the people can become mutual. They can then work together to eliminate the twin demons of oppression and

domination.

Similarities

Horton and Freire share a significant number of ideas. They both have a deep and unwavering belief in the principles of democracy. They maintain that:

1. Democracy must work from the bottom up.
2. The people must have input into the decisions that affect their lives.
3. A community's problems are in reality malignant microcosms of the broader social order.
4. Radical leaders must trust and have faith in the people.

Horton and Freire contend that an entrenched *Establishment* is foiling the smooth operation of true democracy and is perverting democracy's full development. They agree that:

1. Many of the oppressed have been propagandized into fearing a struggle into the unknown.
2. The *Establishment* propagates myths which dissuade the people from taking strong actions to rectify their oppressed conditions.
3. Traditional education is controlled by the *Establishment* and is used to disseminate myths and propaganda.
4. The *Establishment* penalizes ideas that threaten the status quo.
5. Major social and economic reforms are necessary.

Because the *Establishment* has subjugated the people and denied them their inalienable share in democracy, Horton and Freire consider it imperative that the oppressed be aroused and made cognizant of their predicament. The level of consciousness can be raised when:

1. The oppressed become conscious of the elements in their environment that are causing their plight.
2. Action, reflection, and knowledge are combined in order to get meaningful results.
3. The problems of the oppressed are translated into issues with possible solutions.
4. The oppressed begin to analyze and reflect upon their own experiences.

Horton and Freire believe that an integral step in the process of awakening the critical consciousness occurs when the oppressed become aware of their own dignity. Both feel that:

1. People resent being dependent and want to achieve dignity by doing things for themselves.
2. Although people already know many valuable things, their confidence, self-concept, and reasoning ability have been undermined by the *Establishment*.

Horton and Freire argue that organization and cooperation offer the oppressed the greatest potentiality for obtaining control of their own lives and for gaining a voice in the structuring of the future. They hold that:

1. Action stems from conflict situations.
2. The oppressed must organize for action.
3. All social problems are interrelated and must be fought collectively.
4. Only through organization can the oppressed precipitate radical social change.

The oppressed require a leader to help them organize. This organizer's effectiveness is contingent upon meaningful two-way communication with the oppressed community. Horton and

¹⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970), p. 65.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 55.

¹² *Ibid.* pp. 61, 161.

Freire propose the following guidelines for this *communication* (and for magnifying the congruence between the cultural milieus of the organizer and the people):

1. Radical leaders and teachers must work *with* the people and not *for* the people.
2. The previous values of the oppressed must be respected.
3. People understand only in terms of their own experiences.
4. Radical leaders must start at the developmental level of their group and work within the experiences of their people.
5. Indigenous community leaders must be identified, and their leadership traits must be fully developed.
6. Communication is a two-way process that occurs only when the experiences of the two parties overlap.

Horton and Freire prescribe education as the prime remedy for initiating societal change. They share the following educational views:

1. Education is a process.
2. The banking concept of education fosters dependency while problem-posing education encourages critical, creative, and reflective thinking.
3. People are eager to learn relevant things that can help them deal with the real world.
4. Every human being has the ability to reason, solve his own problems, and look critically at his world.
5. Once people have mastered the problem-posing process, they are capable of independently analyzing their world.
6. Education is a tool for making sense out of the world and for preparing people to take action.

Implications and Significance

Horton and Freire both strive for the personal involvement of the learner in a non-threatening supportive environment. Education is viewed as a natural and required life function. Using a learner-centered approach which emphasizes discussion, dialogue, and communication, they gear the curriculum to make use of (and to enhance) the life experiences of their learners. Realizing that they can only facilitate and not control learning, they respect the inherent wisdom of their clientele and its ability to assume the responsibility for learning. Both view education as a process of making their followers more aware of their world and of equipping them with the tools to independently seek the knowledge they need. Both also encourage their clientele to test their learning in real life situations. Finally, both are primarily concerned with the humanistic goal of helping their clientele move closer to self-actualization.

However, unlike most humanists, Horton and Freire have moved schooling outside of the traditional institutional setting. They have deschooled society in the Illichian sense. Humanists like Rogers propose progressive reforms within the educational system. More extreme authors like Postman and Weingartner deal with ways to subvert the educational system in order to keep it from ruining people. Horton and Freire, on the other hand, take the implications of humanistic education a step beyond the formal educational setting and apply them to the real adult world.

The two most prominent themes that permeate the works of Horton and Freire are their respect for the human dignity of their clientele and their love for democracy. Using these as guiding principles, each responded to his indigenous circumstances with his own conception of how to expand man's freedoms. Finding the traditional educational system of the Establishment wanting, these radicals developed their own philosophies and methods for the most meaningful type of education for their clientele.

Our task is neither to emulate their exact deeds nor, necessarily, to amend their ideas. Instead, perhaps, it is to perceive the challenges that Horton and Freire offer us. Neither reacted to his unique situation in the traditional, expected, and predictable manner. Each used his creativity, insights, intelligence, and disdain for human suffering to design a workable and effective method for aiding the oppressed. Likewise, each of us can capture this spirit.

Our obstacles can also be conquered with the application of meaningful thought, creative questioning, compassionate insight, a humanistic philosophy, a fighting spirit, hard work, and respect for the people with whom we are dealing.

Summary

Myles Horton and Paulo Freire worked in different settings but both are concerned with ameliorating the conditions of the poor. Both view education as the force for liberating the oppressed. An analysis of their philosophies and methodologies provides a heuristic synthesis of the characteristics of learner-centered education. The manner in which they apply this problem-posing educational process has significant implications for implementing humanistic ideas and for arousing social reform. Because of their unrelenting quest for human rights, equality, and freedom, Horton and Freire have earned the honorable label—radical.

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