

THE POLITICAL "LITERACY" PROCESS = AN INTRODUCTION

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When I accepted to write this article for the Lutherische Monatshefte I took its theme as a challenge. The very fact of having recognized it in such a way obliged me to assume before it a critical attitude and not a naive one.

This critical attitude implies, in its turn, the penetration into the very "intimacy" of the theme, in order to unveil it more and more. So, the article, in being the answer that I seek to give to the challenge, becomes another one for the readers. This is because if my attitude with respect to the theme is the above-mentioned, I find myself engaged in an act of knowing, which demands not only the knowable object, but also another cognitive subject like me.

To know, which is always a process, implies a dialogical situation. There is not, strictly speaking, "I think", but "we think". It is not "I think" which constitutes "we think", but, on the contrary, it is "we think" that makes it possible for me to think. In the gnoseological situation, the knowable object is not the term of the knowledge of one of the cognitive subjects, but their mediation.

The theme that I have before me, as the nucleus of my reflexion, cannot become the end of my act of knowing, because it is the object which establishes the cognitive relationships between me and the readers as cognitive subjects too. So, I would really like to invite them to assume this role and not to refuse it, thus becoming mere recipients of my analysis.

This means that, to the extent in which I am writing, I cannot be a pure narrator of something which I consider as a given fact, but on the contrary I have to be a critical mind, curious and unquiet, constantly seeking, along with the readers who have to recreate the effort of my search. The only difference between me and the readers, with regard to the theme itself, is that while I am before it, engaged in its clarification, and better and better fixing my perception of it, the readers will be also before it, on the one hand, but on the other hand before my understanding of it, which is expressed in my article.

It does not mean, however, let me emphasise again, that the readers must admit that their effort is diminished, thus subjecting themselves with docility to my analysis. Their effort, on the contrary, in a way is larger than mine, because they have to penetrate simultaneously into both the theme itself and into my understanding of it.

In fact, to read as an act of studying, is not an intellectual pastime, but a serious and committed action in which the readers seek to clarify the opaque dimensions of the object of their study. It is in this way that to read is to re-write and not to memorize the contents of the reading. We have to overcome a naive understanding with regard to the act of reading and studying as an act of "eating". From the point of view of this false conception, which I call the "nutritious conception of knowledge",* those who read and study have to do so in order to become "intellectually fit". Hence, the use of expressions like "hunger for knowledge", "thirsty for learning", "appetite or not appetite for knowledge", "to drink wisdom", etc. It is the same mistaken vision that we can easily find behind, in, and at the same time, illuminating educational practice as an act of transferring knowledge. In such a practice, the educators are the possessors of knowledge, while the educatees are as if they were "empty pots" which should be filled by the "deposits" of the educators. In this way, the educatees put nothing forward for questioning, since their attitude is nothing other than that of receiving passively the knowledge which the educators hand out to them.

If knowledge were something static and consciousness something rather empty, occupying some space within man, the above-mentioned educational practice would be a correct one. But it is not the case. Knowledge is a process and consciousness is "intentionality" toward the world. Because of this, the process of creating knowledge is another process.

At the human level, knowledge implies the constant unity between action and reflexion on reality. As presences in the world, men are "conscious bodies" who transform it by acting and thinking, which makes it possible for them to know at the reflexive level. Precisely because of this, we can take our own presence in the world, which implies always the unity action-reflexion, as the object of our critical analysis.⁺ In such a way we can know how we knew in former experiences, by standing back from them. The more

* See SARTRE, Jean Paul : Situations I, Librairie Gallimard, Paris, 1959..

⁺ This possibility of exercising a critical reflexion on our own last experiences by standing back from them, makes it possible for us to develop what I call the perception of the last perception. (Pedagogy of the Oppressed). In the last analysis, this perceptive activity constitutes a "theoretical praxis". On this, see the extraordinary book Dialectica de lo Concreto by Karel Kosík, Grijalbo, Mexico, 1967.

N.B. There is a German edition of this book.

we are able to unveil why we are as we are, the more it is possible for us to reach the reason of reality, overcoming the naive understanding of it by a critical one.

This is precisely what we, myself and the readers, have to do with respect to the theme of this article. At the moment in which I write, as well as at the moment in which the readers read what I am writing now, we have to exercise that critical analysis referred to before. That is, we have to have as the object of our reflexion our experiences or the experiences of other subjects in the field that we are trying to understand better. Thus it will be possible for us, in different moments, and not necessarily at an equal level, to begin to perceive the real meaning of the linguistic context : the political "literacy" process, in which the noun literacy appears metaphorically. Considering the presence of this metaphor, it seems to me that the best way to begin our analysis is to study the concrete phenomenon which made possible the very use of such a metaphor. That is, to discuss, even if not to any great extent, the adult literacy process, from the linguistic point of view, on which the metaphor referred to is based. It implies, methodologically, some previous considerations about the different practices in the field of adult literacy that, in their turn, condition the different ways in which illiterates are understood.

The antagonistic practices, which reflect those forms of perceiving illiterates, are fundamentally two in number : the first one, the practice for "domestication" of men; the second, the practice for their liberation.*

After describing the first of these practices, in some of its main characteristics, in the light of my experience in Latin America, I will discuss how I see the second of them.

The first one, as a "domesticating" practice, no matter whether the educators are conscious of this or not, has, as its central connotation, the manipulating dimension in the relationships between the educators and the educatees, in which, obviously, the second are the objects of the action of the first. In this way, the illiterates, as passive beings, are to be "filled" by the words of the

* It does not mean that the mere fact of developing such a practice is enough to liberate the oppressed; it means that such a practice helps the liberation because it is able to criticize men on the subject of their reality.

educators, instead of being invited to participate creatively in the process of learning. The "generative words",* which, as I almost said before, are chosen by the educators, within their cultural frame of reference, are presented to the illiterates as if they were something isolated from life. As if language-thought were possible without reality. On the other hand, in such an educational practice, the social structures are never discussed as a problem which should be unveiled. On the contrary, they are mythologized by different kinds of action which emphasize the "false consciousness" of people. Nevertheless, in making the criticism of this practice, I think it necessary to point out that the conscious bourgeois educators - no matter whether they are teachers at primary schools, at adult literacy schools or professors at universities - can do nothing but engage themselves in such a kind of action.

It would be a naive attitude, as I stated before, to hope that the power elites develop a form of education which would be able to make it viable for people to discover social injustices in a critical way.

Such a conclusion demonstrates, then, the impossibility of a neutral education,⁺ whose understanding needs to be explained. For a naive mind, a statement like this can make me appear to be saying that education, in not being neutral, should be a practice through which the educators do not respect the expressivity of the educatees of their right to choose and learn how to choose by choosing.

In fact, however, education cannot be neutral because it is always an action either for the "domestication" of men or for their liberation. Only in the first case is it, as we have seen, a "domesticating" practice. In the second hypothesis, on the contrary, education is a procedure in which the educator invites the educatees to know, and to unveil reality, in a critical way. So while education for "domestication" seeks to improve the "false consciousness" of

* In a syllabic language, the "generative words" are those which, by being decomposed into their syllables, make possible the creation of other words by the combination of the syllables. Let us take as an example the Brazilian word favela : slum. If we decompose it into its syllables, we can have the following syllabic families :

fa-fe-fi-fo-fu

va-ve-vi-vo-vu

la-le-li-lo-lu

Now, by combining these syllables - and sometimes without the combination - we can have : fava : a kind of bean; fe : faith; fala : speech and also, the verb falar : to speak, he speaks; luva : glove; vilã : village; fivela : buckle, etc.

With this one word it is possible for the illiterates, in the first night of their learning, to recognize at least twenty words in Portuguese, instead of receiving them from the educator.

On this aspect, see FREIRE, Paulo : Cultural Action for Freedom, Center for the Study of Development and Social Change, and The Harvard Educational Review, 1970.

people, in order to make easier their adaptation to reality, education for liberation cannot be an effort through which the educator imposes liberty on the educatees. This is because, while in the "domesticating" education there is a necessary dichotomy between those who manipulate and those who are being manipulated, in the liberating education there are not subjects who liberate and objects who are liberated. In this process, dichotomy cannot exist between its poles. So, the first process is itself a prescriptive one; the second, dialogical.

Because of this, education for domestication is an act of transferring knowledge while education for liberation is an act of knowing and a method of transforming action which men must exercise on the world.

In this way, the literacy process, seen from the liberating point of view, is an act of knowing, a creative act, in which the illiterates exercise the role of cognitive subjects, as well as the educator. In this way, the illiterates are not considered as "empty pots", or mere recipients of the educator's words. From the critical and liberating point of view, the illiterates are not marginal beings who need to be recuperated, but men who are prevented from reading and writing in the social reality in which they are. Instead of being considered marginal beings, they are perceived as they really are, that is, as dominated men, castrated in their right of transforming the world. In this way, while in the literacy process as a domesticating practice, the "generative words" are chosen by the educators, in the literacy process as an act of knowing, they come from the illiterates themselves through the investigation of what I call the "minimum linguistic universe" of people.*

If we begin to consider now the problem of political "literacy" it seems to me that our point of departure must obviously be on the one hand, the analysis of what is a political "illiterate" and on the other hand, the discussion about the political "literacy" process.

If the illiterate, from the linguistic point of view, is he who does not know how to read and write, the political "illiterate" - no matter whether he knows how to read and write or not - is he

* FREIRE, Paulo : Educação como Prática da Liberdade, Paz e Terra, Rio, Brazil, 1967-68.

This book has editions in Chile, ICIRA, and Uruguay, Tierra Nueva. At the moment, it is being translated into French.

who has a naive perception of men in their relationships with the world; a naive understanding of social reality. For him, reality is a mere given fact, something which is what it is and not something which is becoming. One of his tendencies is to deny concrete reality, thus losing himself in abstract visions of the world. By doing so, he only escapes from his historical responsibility. If he is a scientist, he tries to hide himself in what he calls the neutrality of his scientific activity. But, by escaping from the objective world, he is not only helping the preservation of the status quo, but also making easier the dehumanizing manipulation of the world which he refuses..

If he is also a Christian, he establishes the impossible dichotomy between worldliness and transcendentality - another way of escaping from objectivity. His conception of history, for that reason, is a mechanistic one and, sometimes, also fatalist. History for him is only what was and not what is now, and what is going to be. The present is something which must be normalized and the future, the repetition of the present, which means the maintaining of the status quo.

Sometimes, however, the political "illiterate" perceives the future, not as the repetition of the present, but as something pre-established, pre-given. Both are "domesticating" visions of the future. The first one "domesticates" the future to the present, which must be repeated; the second reduces it to something inevitable. Both deny men and so deny history itself, which cannot exist without men.

Hence, both suffer the lack of hope. The first one coincides with reactionary practices; the second, in becoming reactionary also, is one of the mechanistic distortions of marxist thought.

The political "illiterate", experiencing a feeling of impotence before the "irrationality"* of the alienated and the alienating world, seeks to take refuge in the false security of "subjectivism". Sometimes, instead of taking refuge in "subjectivism", the political "illiterate" devotes himself to activist practices. In none of these cases can he understand men as presences in the world; men as beings of praxis, that is, as beings of action and reflexion on the world.

It is interesting to note how the false idealist conception of praxis manifests itself at the level of the naive consciousness of the political "illiterate".

* FREIRE, Paulo, Cultural Action for Freedom

The dichotomy between theory and practice; the universality of a knowledge free from historical conditioning; the role of philosophy as an explanation of the world and an instrument for its acceptance; education as a mere exposition of facts and the transference of the heritage of a chaste knowledge; all of those are beliefs which the naive consciousness of the political "illiterate" always repeats. Ideologized in a domesticating reality, such a consciousness did not even arrive at the objective idealism of Hegel,* in which work appears as the transforming action which men exercise on the world as their formation, even though praxis for Hegel was still an activity of the mind.

For such a kind of consciousness it is difficult to understand the real impossibility of theory without practice; thought without transforming action on the world; knowing by knowing; theory which only explains reality and neutral education.

On the other hand, the more the naive consciousness of the political "illiterate" is sophisticated, the more it is refractory to a critical understanding of reality.

So, sometimes, it is easier to discuss man-world relationships with Latin American illiterate peasants, or the error of creating a dichotomy between manual and intellectual work, than to do the same thing with a politically "illiterate" intellectual.

Such an intellectual would say that the fundamental difference between him and the peasants lies in his possibility of reacting to the "manipulation", because he knows, while the peasants are absolute ignoramuses. So, for him, the peasants' capacity of understanding and expressing themselves would be nothing but the demonstration of their intellectual inferiority.⁺

In the light of all this, I think I can categorically repeat what I have stated before, that the metaphorical expression political "illiteracy" reveals the lack of a critical or dialectical understanding of men in their relationships with the world.

* HEGEL, The Phenomenology of Mind

⁺ I had the opportunity to hear something like this some time ago from a Latin American "educator", who occupied a high position in an International Organization. This is also the typical way of thinking of the colonizers with regard to the colonized. See MEMMI, Albert, The Colonizer and the Colonized, Beacon Press, Boston.

Like linguistic illiteracy, it also implies a learning process that, in its turn, can be either for "domestication" or for liberation.

It seems to me very important, however, to underline that such a kind of learning does not necessarily demand special courses. What I want to say is that, no matter what the field of specialization of the educator, he will be emphasizing the false consciousness of the educatees, or, on the contrary, their critical consciousness.

In the first part of the article I spent some time analyzing the literacy process for "domestication". I would like now to continue to discuss in a general way what I think that education must be, from the critical point of view. That is, an education that, by demythologizing reality, makes it possible for the educator and the educatees to overcome their political "illiteracy".

I will also come back, from time to time, to some of the aspects about which I had the opportunity to speak before. I hope, however, that such back-references, instead of irritating the readers, help me and them to better clarify our common theme.

I will start by stating or re-stating that, without going beyond the conception and practice of education as a mere transference of a knowledge which only describes reality, we will block the emergence of the critical consciousness, and so underline political "illiteracy".

We have to overcome this kind of education - if our choice is a liberating and a humanizing one of course - by another form of education in which to know and to transform the reality which is "being given" as the object of our knowledge, are reciprocal demands. In this way, education for liberation, as a true praxis, is simultaneously, an act of knowing and a method of transforming action, which men have to exercise on the reality that they seek to know. So, education or cultural action for liberation is a social praxis, as a method of this praxis is to make and re-make itself in the very process of its being.

There is a point of fundamental importance to be clarified in the overcoming of the "domesticating" educational practice by the liberating one. I refer to the impossibility of a real liberating praxis if the educator is not able to become completely different from his bourgeois colleagues.* While the bourgeois educator, as I

* I would like to point out that some forms of behaviour on the part of bourgeois educators precede the bourgeoisie itself.

said before, is always the educator of the educatees, the educator for liberation has to "die" as the unilateral educator of the educatees in order to be born again as the educator-educatee of the educatees-educators. On the other hand, he has to propose to the educatees their "death" as unilateral educatees of the educator-educatee. Without this mutual "death" and this mutual new birth, education for liberation is impossible.

It does not mean, nevertheless, that the educator disappears as an inductive presence. Education as an ideological instrument for the preservation of the status quo as well as a method for the transformation and knowledge of reality, always implies such an induction. In the second case, however, the initial induction is ceding little by little its place to the synthesis in which the educator-educatee and the educatees-educators become real subjects of the process.

What really is important for such an educator is to be warned that, at the moment in which he initiates the process, he is preparing himself "to die". He has to know that, in order to become a true educator for liberation, he must stop being an educator in the sense of the bourgeois practice. Only with his "death", whose process he himself has to start, is his new birth possible on the one hand; on the other hand, the new birth of the educatees as his educators.

He is an educator who has to live the deep signification of Easter

Such a passage (which bourgeois education cannot conceive of by reason of its nature) has to be made by revolutionary and humanist education. If it refuses to do so, it no longer exists as a revolutionary and a humanist kind of education.

For this reason, one of the tragic mistakes of the socialist societies - with the exception of China, through the Cultural Revolution, and Cuba in many aspects - is that, in a general way, they have not been able to overcome the "domesticating" character of bourgeois education by the liberating one of education as a social praxis. So, they confound socialist education with the reduction of marxist thought - a thought which in itself cannot be caged - to "tablets" that people have to "digest". In this way, they fall into the same "nutritious" practice which characterizes bourgeois education. This is because the bourgeois ideology persists in a strange kind of idealism that can be expressed like this: once the transformation of society is achieved a good world is automatically created and so, this good world cannot be questioned.*

* Such an anti-dialectical way of perceiving reality coincides with those "bureaucracies" that, in their rigidity, prevent people from developing critical minds.

Then, obviously, the educators of and for this good world repeat, in their praxis, the educators of and for the "good bourgeois world!" They are "herr professors" like the bourgeois educators. The relationships which they establish with the educatees are vertical ones as well as those between the bourgeois educators and the educatees. For this reason, they find themselves very far from the educatees in the relationships with whom the knowable object is their possession, instead of being the mediating factor between them and the educatees. They dichotomize teaching from learning and divide the world between those who know and those who do not know, that is, those who work.*

So, by perpetuating school as an instrument for social control,^X such educators forget unfortunately a very important statement of Marx, in his third Thesis on Feurbach: "The educator himself needs educating". The bourgeois myths which they have introjected prevent them from putting in practice the warning of Marx.

In this way, such societies, as well as the bourgeois ones, underline political "illiteracy" through an educational practice that de-dialectizes thought.

There is something, however, that I have to clarify, as much as possible, in order to avoid a possible misunderstanding in which I may have been involved since the beginning of the article.

I refer moreprecisely to the role of consciousness in the liberating practice. In this way, I hope to make it clear that it is not possible for me to accept, from a dialectic point of view, the naive dichotomy between consciousness and the world.

In fact, both subjectivity and objectivity are interpenetrated in such a way that it is possible to speak about the "incarnation of subjectivity in objectivity."⁺ When we break such dialecticity we

* See DAUBIER, Jean, Histoire de la révolution culturelle prolétarienne en Chine, Maspero, Paris, 1970.

X About this, see the essays by Ivan ILLICH, CIDOC, Cuernavaca, Mexico, and also FREIRE, Paulo, Cultural Action and Conscientização, Catholic Inter American Cooperation Program, CICOP, Washington, 1970.

+ FIORI, Ernani Maria (Brazilian philosopher, at the moment Professor of Philosophy at the Catholic University of Chile) Educational and Conscientização, Catholic Inter American Cooperation Program, CICOP, Washington, 1970.

fall into the illusions of idealism (subjectivism) as well as into the mistakes of objectivism.*

Thus, the Brazilian word "conscientização",⁺ with which I usually name the process by which men prepare to insert themselves critically into the transforming action, must not be understood as an idealist manifestation.

What we really attempt to do with the process of "conscientização" is not to attribute to consciousness the role of creating the world, but, on the contrary, that of recognizing the static "given" world as a dynamic "giving" world.

In this way, "conscientização" implies a constant clarification of what stays "hidden" within men, while they act in the world without critical reflexion.^x

I know very well that "conscientização", in implying a critical reflexion on the world as it is becoming as well as the annunciation of another world, cannot prescind the transforming action in order for the annunciation to be concretized.

I know very well that only through such an action is it really possible for men to create the world announced in that criticism.

I know very well that the simple overcoming of the naive perception of reality by a critical one is not enough for the liberation of men.

I know very well that the teleological character of "conscientização" demands the real praxis. But, I know very well also that in being "conscientização" the revelation of what is opaque in

* "There are two ways of falling into idealism : the one consists of dissolving the real in subjectivity; the other in denying all real subjectivity in the interests of objectivity."
SARTRE, Jean Paul : Search for a Method, Vintage books, New York, 1968, pag.33.

⁺ In different works such as Educação como Prática da Liberdade, Extensão ou Comunicação ?, Sobre la Acción Cultural, Cultural Action for Freedom, and Pedagogy of the Oppressed, I have discussed the problem of conscientização.

^x All that I want to say in this statement is that the original attitude of men in their coming close to the world is not a critical one, but on the contrary naive. This means that, in such a coming close, men do not adopt an epistemological attitude to the world taking it as an object of their capacity for knowledge.

See FREIRE, Paulo, Cultural Action for Freedom.

the "background awareness" of consciousness,* it constitutes an important instrument for the actual transforming action of men on reality, which, therefore, begins little by little to be unveiled in the clarification of those "hidden" dimensions.

"Conscientização", on the one hand, is not based on a consciousness here, and a world there, and on the other hand, does not attempt such a separation. On the contrary, it is based on the correlation consciousness-world.

By taking such a correlation as the object of their critical reflexion, men will be illuminating those opaque dimensions which result from their coming close to the world. Hence, the founding of the new reality, indicated in the former criticism, cannot exhaust the process of "conscientização". In fact, the new reality has to be taken as the object of a new critical reflexion. To consider the process of the new reality as something which must not be touched is as naive and reactionary an attitude as to affirm the untouchability of the old reality.

"Conscientização" as a critical attitude of men in history, will never be finished. If men, as operating beings, continued to "adhere" to the "operated" world, they would be submerged in a new "opacity."

"Conscientização", which occurs as a process at a given moment, has to continue as a process in the moment which follows, in which the transformed reality shows a new profile.

In this way, let me repeat, the political "literacy" process, like the linguistic one, can be a practice for the "domestication" of men as well as for their liberation. In the first case, on no account is the exercise of "conscientização" possible, while the second one is in itself "conscientização".

Hence, the dehumanizing meaning of the former, and the humanizing effort of the latter.

*"To the degree to which critical consciousness has been absorbed and coordinated by the affluent society, the liberation of consciousness from the manipulation and indoctrinations imposed upon it by capitalism becomes a primary task and prerequisite. The development not of class consciousness but of consciousness as such, freed from the distortions imposed upon it, appears to be the basic prerequisite for radical change. And as repression is flattened out and extended to the entire underlying population, the intellectual task, the task of education and discussion, the task of tearing, not only the technological veil but also the other veils behind which domination and repression operate - all these "ideological" factors become very material factors of radical transformations." MARCUSE, Herbert, The Obsolescence of Marxism. From : Marx and the Western World, Edited by Nicholas LOBKOWICZ, University of Notre Dame Press, USA, 1967, page 417.