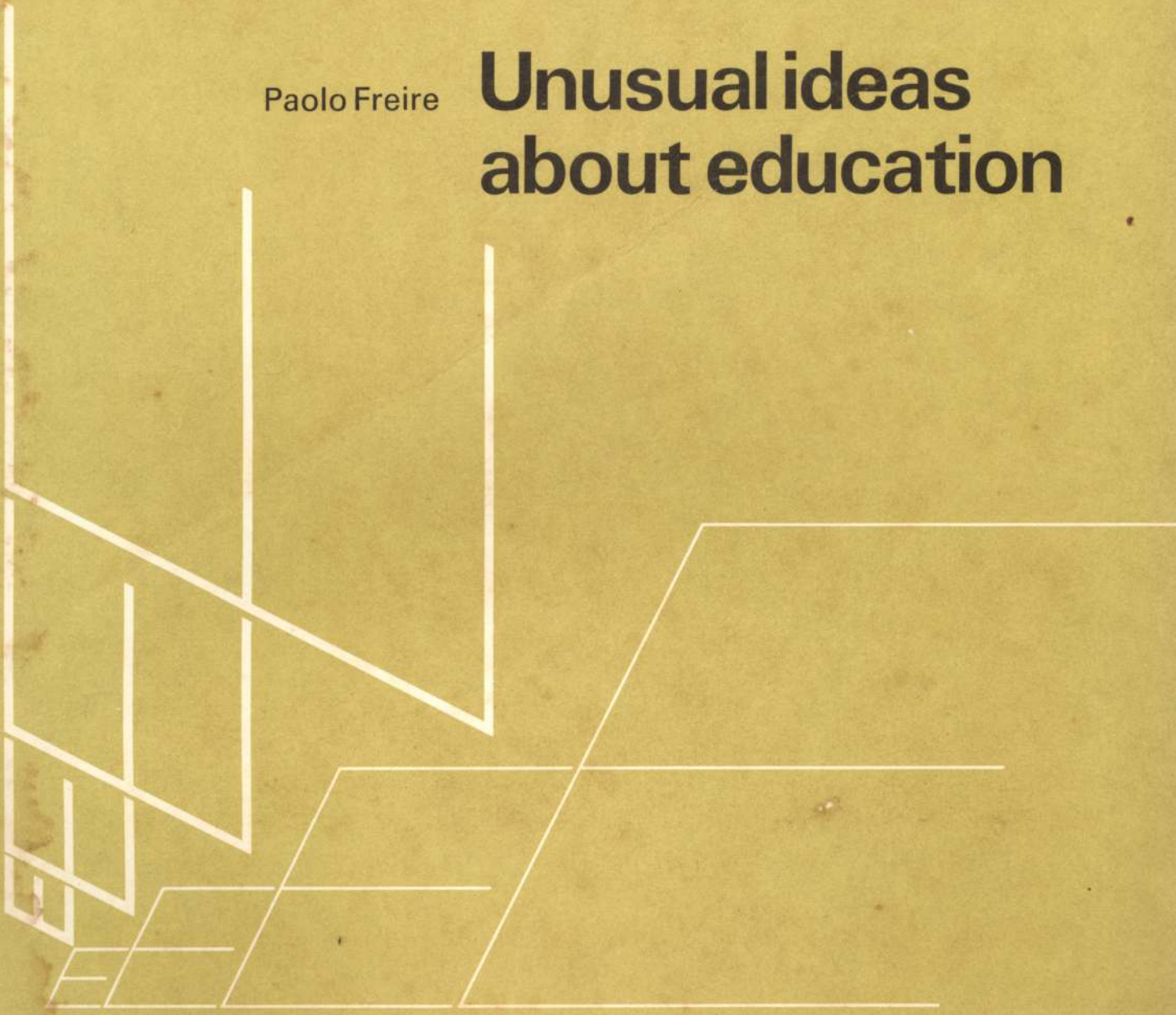


Series B : *Opinions*
No.36

International commission on the
development of education

Paolo Freire

Unusual ideas about education



Unesco

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INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION

SERIES B : OPINIONS

No. 36

Provisional translation

Original : Brazilian

UNUSUAL IDEAS ABOUT EDUCATION

by Paulo Freire

This document forms part of the second series of studies (Series A : Situation, Series B : Opinions, Series C : Innovations) prepared for the International Commission on the Development of Education which was established in application of Resolution 1.131 adopted by the General Conference of Unesco at its sixteenth session. Owing to its general interest, it will be made available to those concerned with the subject. The opinions expressed by the author are entirely his own and do not necessarily reflect those of Unesco.

U N E S C O

1971

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We are convinced * that the so-called commonplace is not always just the cliché suggested in its verbal expression. The commonplace on the contrary is very often found only in the formal expression of the language, and is therefore merely apparent. When language is "bureaucratized" into conventional formulae, it satisfies the need we sometimes experience of concealing in the cliché the importance of some theme which is awaiting its critical perception.

On other occasions there is not even the formal expression of the language - the verbal expression describing the fact becomes a commonplace from the very obviousness of the fact. Whichever the case, our principal task is to transcend the naivety which allows itself to be deceived by appearances; we thus acquire the critical attitude which breaks through the obscurity of the commonplace or of the apparent commonplace and brings us face to face with the fact until now concealed. This will be our attitude throughout this essay - that of seeking to apprehend the deeper meaning of facts and at the same time to strip them of their disguises.

Thus, the first apparent commonplace, on the critical analysis of which will depend the understanding of this essay, can be expressed thus: Education cannot be neutral. ***

If we claim to go beyond the naïve, formal interpretations of the human task of education, this cannot but be the starting-point of a critical or dialectical reflection. Lacking this critical spirit, either because we are incapable of perceiving the true role of education, or if we do perceive it we disguise it. We tend to ignore or to obscure the rôle of education which, in that it is a social "praxis" will always be in the service either of the "domestication" of men or of their liberation. Thus we almost always lose ourselves in verbalistic considerations on the subject of what is termed "the educational crisis"; or on the subject of the need for reforms in the didactic processes; in the face of the fundamental

* In accordance with our epistemological standpoint, the following text claims only to be a "knowable object" and not a completed piece of knowledge which we would attempt to "transfer" to the readers for good or for ill.

*** We have insisted on this point in various different studies. See Freire, Paulo : Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Herder and Herder, New York, 1970,

and : Cultural Action for Freedom, Harvard Educational Review, and the Center for the Study of Development and Social Change; Monograph Series, No. 1, 1970.

problems of structure, with which the educational process is concerned, we indulge ourselves in these amusements.

At other moments, alarmed by the inevitable choice we have to make between education as a domesticating praxis and education as a liberating praxis, we seek a third way - which is non-existent per se. We declare education to be neutral, as if it were not a human obligation, as if men were not beings in history, as if the teleological character of the educational praxis were not the factor which determined the non-viability of its neutrality. Furthermore, all we do in affirming this neutrality is to opt for domestication which we simply proceed to disguise.

Neutral education cannot, in fact, exist. It is fundamental for us to know that, when we work on the content of the educational curriculum, when we discuss methods and processes, when we plan, when we draw up educational policies, we are engaged in political acts which imply an ideological choice; whether it is obscure or clear is not important. To recognise that neutral education is not viable involves a critical form of thinking and of perceiving reality, and demands an ever-growing practice of that manner of thinking which continually revises itself, seeking always to overcome its opposite, which is the naïve manner of thinking. It is this requirement, stemming from critical thinking, which imposes on us the need of taking our earlier affirmation that education is not neutral, as a problem to be "unveiled" as a problem, and not seeing it as a set phrase or as a mere "slogan". It is this critical manner of thinking which always desires to go beyond the deceptive appearances, to seek the "raison d'être" of facts, and the relationships between different facts, within the totality of which they are a part. However, for the critical mind, the simple affirmation that "neutral education" is not viable should not stop at the level of merely being aware of the fact. The mere awareness of the fact does not constitute a full knowledge of it.³⁴ What is necessary is a penetration into the reality of which the fact is a dimension, so that mere opinion about it can be transcended by the precise knowledge of it through the apprehension of the "reason for its being."

For example, at the moment in which we see the educational act as the object of our critical reflection, and not as something we are merely aware of, we perceive that this act, temporally and spatially, does not restrict itself to the limitations of the description which the naïve consciousness sometimes makes of it. That is to say, it is not constituted solely by the effort which societies make for their cultural preservation.

* For this see : Nicol, Eduardo : Los Principios de la Ciencia, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 1965.
Freire, Paulo : Extensión o Comunicación ? ICIRA, Santiago, Chile, 1969, Tierra Nueva, Montevideo, Uruguay, 1971.

If we consider the case of the dependent societies, education is on the one hand the expression of their alienation, and on the other the instrument of a further alienation which is an obstacle to its being genuine. Thus the expression "cultural preservation", for the critical consciousness, is vague and obscure, and conceals something which needs to be clarified. In fact, the vagueness of the expression "cultural preservation" can be explained with exactness as the perpetuation of the values of the dominating classes who organise education and determine its aims. In that it constitutes a superstructure, systematic education functions as an instrument to maintain the infrastructure in which it is generated. Hence the non-viability of its neutrality. When education is oriented toward this preservation - and educators are not always aware of this - it is obvious that its task is to adapt new generations to the social system it serves, which can and must be reformed and modernised, but which will never be radically transformed.

It is impossible for the power-elites to organise, plan or reform education with the aim of laying open to question the essence of the social system in which precisely they are elites. Their real desire, on the contrary, must be, let us repeat, to "recuperate" the educatees, which is as much as to say, to adapt them to the system. Their ideas and values, their way of being, are announced as if they were - or should be - the ideas, values and way of being of all society, even though the popular classes cannot share them, perhaps because of their ontological inferiority....

It is without question that the concretising of these aims requires at one and the same time the "domesticating" character of this education and the explanation of it. As the social order is "sacralised", systematic education must necessarily become a powerful instrument of social control.³²

The point of departure of this domesticating education (which requires the de-dialectisation of thought) must be, paradoxically enough, in the very dialectisation which exists between the consciousness and the world, or in other words, in the relationship between man and the world. It is curious to observe that the act of de-dialectisation, of reducing thought to a state of naivety, must have the same radical origin as the dialectising and critical-making force of thought which is at the base of education as the praxis of liberty. None of these antagonistic forms of education or of cultural action can escape the consciousness-world dialectisation, even though their practices are diametrically-opposed with regard to this dialectisation. Thus, education or cultural action for domestication is bound to divide the consciousness from the world, and to consider the consciousness as an empty space within man which is to be filled with contents.³³

³² See the essays of Ivan Illich, and Everett Reimer : An Essay on Alternatives in Education, CIDOC, Cuaderno No.1005, Mexico.

³³ Freire, Paulo : Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Herder and Herder, New York, 1970; and "Education as Cultural Action", in Conscientization for Liberation, published by the Division for Latin America United States Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C., 1971; Editor, Louis M. Colonnese.

This separation, which results in the consciousness and the world being taken as statically opposed separate entities, implies the negation of the power of reflection of the consciousness, which is transformed into the empty space referred to. In fact, "world and consciousness are not statically opposed to each other, they are related to each other dialectically, within their original and radical unity. For this reason the truth of one is to be gained through the other; truth is not given, it conquers itself and makes itself. It is, at once, discovery and invention."^{xx}

This is precisely what education, or cultural action for domestication cannot claim. Instead, as an ideologising instrument it imposes the mythification of the world instead of its truth, through the truth of the consciousness which critically "unveils" this world. (Thus, the mythification of the consciousness - consciousness of the world.⁺)

It would then be an unpardonable contradiction on the part of the power-elites if they consented to the kind of cultural action on a large scale which considered social reality (which mediates men) as the object of their truly critical analysis.

This is because this type of cultural action implies an epistemological practice which would be the contradiction of the epistemological practice which characterises cultural action for domestication.

The epistemological practice of cultural action or education for domestication divides teaching and learning, knowing and working, thinking and doing, informing and forming, re-knowing existing knowledge and creating new knowledge. In this kind of action, knowing is receiving information, or stocking "deposits" made by others.^{xxx}

Hence this form of action has the characteristic - which it never loses - of being a mere act of transferring knowledge. In this act, the educator - he who knows - transfers existing knowledge to the educatee - he who does not know. In this practice, knowledge is a mere given fact and not a permanent process which entails the praxis of men on the world. In this strange epistemology, there is no knowable object, but complete knowledge which the educator possesses. Thus it is incumbent on him to transfer, bring, extend, give, and hand over to the "ignorant" educatee, the "knowledge" he possesses. In this way, the active character of the consciousness, when it is "intentionality" towards the world, becomes passive; it is this active character which on the one hand explains man's ability for "re-knowing" existing knowledge, and on the other his ability for creating new knowledge.

^x Fiori, Ernani : "Education and Conscientization", in Conscientization for Liberation, pp.126-127.

^{xx} We ironically term this type of action "banking education". Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

⁺ Thus, The mythification of the ~~consciousness~~ ^{world} - ~~consciousness of the world~~ ^{world of the consciousness -} implies the mythification of the ~~consciousness~~ ^{consciousness} - ~~consciousness~~ ^{consciousness} of the world.

This practice of "anaesthetising" or de-dialectising thought can also be seen in the emphasis laid on the "focalist" rather than the totalising perception of reality. This twisted view of the facts, which is not only unable to apprehend the relationships existing between them, but not even the relationships existing between the parts which constitute the totality of each of them either, is profoundly alienating. This way of seeking knowledge, which implies a conception of an immobile reality, can only lead us to a distorted view of things, which thus "empty themselves" of their unquestionable temporality. Thus, we never get beyond the superficiality of the phenomena which we do not manage to understand in all their complexity and dynamism.

We should underline that this way of acting is both alienating and "domesticating", no matter whether the educators are or are not conscious of this.

It is not difficult to come on the practice of "domestication" which we are analysing in systematic education, whatever its level. In the primary and secondary schools, in the university (and also in adult-education campaigns) we are witness to the transfer of knowledge, and not the search for knowledge, to knowledge as a given fact possessed by the educator, and not knowledge as a process, to knowledge as something without conditions, taken as chaste and universal, to the split between teaching and learning, to the understanding of reality as something immobile, where reality is seen as a given fact and not as a process or a state of becoming in order to be able to be.

We could add to all this the myth that science is neutral, that the scientist is impartial, the myth of what must necessarily come out of his lack of preoccupation with the aims laid on the results of his activity as a scientist.

Let us see, in more concrete terms, although not extensively, how, and in what areas, education figures as the practice of "domestication".

First of all, since the school is an instrument of social control,* it cannot be a theoretical context, dialectically related to a concrete or objective context in which facts occur. Instead of permanently seeking the reason for the existence of the objective facts, in order to theorise them, the school becomes an agency specialised in the formal enunciation of them. Its false point of departure implies the epistemological distortion we have already spoken of, in which to know is reduced to a mechanical dualism expressed in the transference-reception of given facts.

* Again we suggest the reading of the essays of Ivan Illich, the best expression of denunciation today of the myth of schooling. CIDOC, Cuernavaca, Mexico.

Thus the relations between educator and educatee are the relations of a subject to an object, which means that the latter is the mere recipient of the contents of the knowledge of the former. The educator, he who knows, he who separates the act of teaching from the act of learning, is therefore always the educator of the educatee, while the latter is always the educatee of the educator. This explains the anti-dialogical character of this form of education. This situation of anti-dialogue is not only present in the epistemological relationship already referred to, but is also present in the disciplinary relationship. The educator is the one who thinks, who says his word, who knows; the educatee has the illusion that he is thinking, through the thinking of the educator; he has the illusion that he is saying his word, in repeating what the educator says; he has the illusion that he knows, because the educator knows.* Inasmuch as the school cannot be a genuinely theoretical context; inasmuch as the educator is the transmitter of a knowledge which merely describes reality as a given fact; inasmuch as the educator declares that he knows what ought to be taught, and does not recognise that he learns as he teaches, it seems obvious to him that it is incumbent on him to choose the content of the educational curriculum. The educatee can do nothing but let himself docilely be filled with this content. "Because of this, in general, the good educatee is neither restive, nor indocile; he does not show doubt, he does not wish to know the reason for facts, he does not go beyond set models, he does not denounce 'mediocratising' bureaucracy, he does not refuse to be an object. The good educatee (in this type of education), on the contrary, is he who repeats, who refuses to think critically, who adapts to models, who finds it nice to be a rhinoceros."† (See Ionesco : Rhinocéros)

Before all this force of domestication, stands one really important question : Why is it possible for man, in spite of everything, to emerge critically, denouncing the ways of domestication? The answer to this basic question sends us back again to the problem of the consciousness, * of its reflective character (and not only its reflective character), of its intentionality.

If all this attempt at alienating, at de-dialectising thought "domesticates" the capacity of the consciousness for reflection and criticism, or of man to be a conscious being, it cannot however make this capacity disappear. Sooner or later, the power of reflection and criticism re-constitutes itself in the very process of its "domestication". This is why we are able to talk about the liberation of man, even when we have to say that this does not stem from the mere recognition that it is necessary, but rather from the praxis which transforms the

* Freire, Paulo : Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

† Freire, Paulo : "Notes on humanisation and its educational implications", mimeographed for the Seminar of Educ-International : "Tomorrow Began Yesterday", Rome, November 1970.

* Em português: A resposta a esta questão nos remete ao problema da consciência, de seu carácter reflexivo (e não só reflexo) etc

world in which we are not free. Contrary to education for domestication, education for liberation is an eminently utopian praxis. This does not mean that it cannot be carried out. The utopian nature of this type of education is expressed in the permanent state of unity which exists between the acts of denouncing and announcing which give it life. In fact, domesticating education, which satisfies the interests of the dominating elites and corresponds to their ideology, can never be utopian in the sense discussed here.

What denunciation can those who dominate make, unless it is the denunciation of those who denounce them? What can they announce except their own myths? What does their future as dominators consist of but the preservation of their present as privileged beings? Only education for liberation can be utopian, and because it is utopian, prophetic and hopeful. I cannot be prophetic or hopeful if my future is to be the repetition of a "well-conducted" present, or of this present simply "reformed" in some of its secondary aspects. Only those who are dominated can truly denounce and announce - denounce the world in which they exist but are forbidden to be, and announce the world in which they are able to be, and which demands their historical commitment in order for it to be brought into being. It is only they who have a future different from the present, an aspiration to be created and recreated. In their present as dominated beings can be found the plan of their liberation, which can be identified with the future which they must build.*

Contrary to education for domestication, education for liberation, utopian, prophetic and hopeful, is an act of knowing and a means of action for transforming the reality which is to be known.

The epistemological focus of attention changes radically from one to another of the opposing forms of education or cultural action.

While in education for domestication one cannot speak of a knowable object but only of knowledge which is complete, which the educator possesses and transfers to the educatee, in education for liberation there is no complete knowledge possessed by the educator, but a knowable object which mediates educator and educatee as subjects in the knowing process. Dialogue is established as the seal of the epistemological relationship between subjects in the knowing process. There is not an "I think" which transfers its thought, but rather a "we think" which makes possible the existence of an "I think". The educator is not he who knows, but he who knows how little he knows, and because of this seeks to know more, together with the educatee, who in turn knows that starting

* For this theme, see Freire, Paulo : Cultural Action for Freedom.

from his little knowledge he can come to know more. Here there is no split between knowing and doing; there is no room for the separate existence of a world of those who know, and world of those who work.

While in the domesticating practice the educator is always the educator of the educatee, in the liberating practice the educator must "die" as exclusive educator of the educatee in order to be "born" again as educatee of the educatee. At the same time, he must propose to the educatee that he "die" as exclusive educatee of the educator in order to be "born" again as educator of the educator.* This is a continual passage back and forth, a humble, creative movement, which both have to make.

Because educator-educatee and educatee-educator accept in communion with each other the role of subjects in the educational act which is a permanent process, the educator no longer has the right to establish the curriculum-content of education, which does not belong exclusively to him. The organisation of the curriculum, which must be regarded as a "knowable object" by both educator-educatee and educatee-educator, requires the investigation of what we usually term the "thematic universe"^{***} of the educatees. Taken as the point of departure of the process, the investigation of the "thematic universe" not only reveals to us the pre-occupations of the educatees, but also their state of perception of their world.

When the curriculum, whose structure is based on the thematic investigated, becomes for the educatees a series of problems to be "unveiled" as such, education for liberation takes the form of the permanent unity existing between the investigation of the thematic and its presentation as a problem. If, in the moment of our investigation - which is already cultural action - we come on the thematic and the levels of perception of reality, in the moment when the problematisation of the thematic is presented as a knowable object, the perception of reality

* See Freire, Paulo : "Politische Alphabetisierung Einführung ins Konzept einer humanisierenden Bildung", Lutherische Monatshefte, November 1970.

*** In the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, we give a whole chapter to this question. In addition, when we held the post of Unesco Consultant in the Instituto de Capacitación e Investigación en Reforma Agraria, ICIRA, Santiago, Chile, we co-ordinated a team to carry out an investigation of this type in one of the rural areas of Chile. When we left Unesco in 1969 as Visiting Professor at the University of Harvard, the investigation was continued. The final report was recently published with the title of : "Investigación de la Temática Cultural de los Campesinos de 'El Recurso'." Edited by Maria Edy Ferreira, and José Luis Fiori.

undergoes a change, and a new thematic emerges, through a new vision of old themes or through a perception of themes hitherto not perceived.

Thus, education (or cultural action for liberation, which it cannot fail to be) reproduces the dynamism which characterises the historical-social process. Its mobility depends on the mobility of the facts which must genuinely be known in the practice of education. It is only through an education which does not separate action from reflection, theory from practice, consciousness from the world, that it is possible to develop a dialectic form of thinking which contributes to the insertion of men as subjects in their historical reality.

In that it is utopian and demythologising, education or cultural action for liberation implies a constant risk which we do not always want to run, since we are tempted by the stability we fear to lose. In the long run, in preferring stability, immobility, self-censure, conspiratorial silence, all we do is renounce liberty because we are afraid of it. We shall thus not be able critically to have "unusual ideas about education", since thinking in this way is to be committed, and requires of us a greater risk : that of putting into practice some of the unusual ideas.