



Paulo Freire—Philosopher of Adult Education

Freire's early poverty helped create his lifework. For him, not the 'banking concept' of education but 'problem posing' makes oppressed peoples perceive the way they exist in the world and how to find themselves

The faculty lounge on the twelfth floor of Fordham University's Lowenstein Center has a spectacular view up and down Manhattan island and the diluted neo-Bauhaus decor favored by waiting-rooms in big airports. But not much of either was visible one evening late last February because people occupied all available chairs and any open spots on the gold-and-ochre carpet. They hadn't come, however, to admire the lighted city outside or the standard abstract paintings inside but to hear Paulo Freire, the Brazilian philosopher of education, who is one of the two or three Catholic Christians since the Renaissance to have achieved a sizable and non-parochial reputation as an educational pioneer.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968), which expounds Freire's method of adult education, is widely described as a revolutionary design for an ideal world. That method has been used successfully in Brazil, Peru and Chile, and Freire's work is now the subject of doctoral dissertations in theology as well as in education. If his name isn't yet so well-known in the United States, at least it's familiar enough, especially among radical critics of contemporary education, to have drawn that full house to the Fordham lounge.

Although there was some determined crawling about that evening for advantageous positioning of tape recorders, this crowd was eager and good-natured. For the most part,

though, it wasn't middle-aged in fact and not at all so in spirit. There were some older people, including casually dressed priests and nuns, but it was predominantly a gathering of young men and women whose uniform was that of the counterculture. But if the more exotic among them, like one bearded figure lost in the brown and yellow folds of an ankle-length Moorish robe, had come expecting to be told how to run a revolution, they were probably disappointed because the lecture remained at a rather severely abstract level.

Yet surely no one was disappointed with the person and presence of Paulo Freire himself. For one thing, with his heavy head planted close to his shoulders and his steel-gray beard, he looked like a bespectacled Socrates in a business suit—but a chain-smoking, Brazilian Socrates who remarked companionably about the cup of coffee at his elbow: "Without coffee it is difficult for me to talk."

When he did talk, it was with a calm directness that established a quick rapport with his audience. No doubt this ability to create a sense of friendly intimacy is characteristic of Freire, whose admirers are apt to refer to him possessively as "Paulo." That relaxed atmosphere also prompted the less inhibited listeners to help out with the exposition. Did Freire, searching for the phrase to describe

a particular social fact, murmur in some perplexity, "Struggle class? Class struggle?" Then a burly, garrulous West Side activist, who had been distributing leaflets earlier in the evening, would boom encouragingly, "Both!"

Interventions of this sort seemed to gratify Freire, who likes to insist that students and teachers must always learn together. "We exist explains I exist," he told the young people at Fordham. "I cannot be if you are not. I cannot know alone. For me to know, it is necessary for you to know." It is perhaps because Freire's English is uncertain that his ordinary sentences are apt to come out sounding like significant epigrams. "I do not believe too much in speeches," he said as he began that evening. "More and more I believe less." And he added, looking around serenely, "I love to emphasize obvious things."

What he emphasized in fact were the major themes that appear and reappear in his speeches and books that include, besides *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a 1967 predecessor, *Education as the Practice of Liberty*, that has been translated into Spanish but not yet into English. Before trying to sort out these ideas, we ought to stop for a moment over Freire's personal history because it has strongly conditioned his life's work. In this, he's like John Dewey, a thinker from whom Freire has learned a great deal. For Dewey once said of himself that what he had learned from books "has been

technical in comparison with what I have been forced to think upon and about because of some experience in which I found myself entangled."

While still a child, Freire found himself entangled in experiences that were instructive but bitter. He was born in 1921 in Recife, in Northeast Brazil, where three-fifths of the 25 million people were still illiterate when Freire introduced his methods there ten years ago. In a foreword to the English version of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Herder and Herder, 1970), Professor Richard Shaull of Princeton Theological Seminary writes that Freire's family was reduced to real poverty during the world-wide economic depression that started in 1929. This distress is said to have inspired the eleven-year old Paulo Freire to make a vow that he would dedicate his own life to relieving the hunger and servitude of the poor.

If that vow helped turn Freire to the work of education, it was probably a natural taste for philosophizing that led him first to studies in the history and philosophy of education, areas in which he taught at the University of Recife where he took his degree in 1959. Shortly afterwards, in the 1960's, reform movements were stirring various zones of Brazilian life. They were represented in government, for example, by João Goulart, who became President in September, 1961, despite the army's lack of enthusiasm for him. And it was during these years that the Brazilian Bishops Conference sponsored a Basic Education Movement (MEB) that launched a nationwide effort to eliminate illiteracy while simultaneously heightening the peasants' social and political awareness (see AM., "The Church and Conscientização," 4/27/68) through the pages of a primer called *Viver e lutar* ("To Live Is to Struggle").

About this time, Freire, by now the father of a growing family, began to devise his own methods of adult education along with a philosophical rationale for them. His aims were like those of the Brazilian bishops' program, that is to say, teaching the poor both to read and to appreciate the possibility of improving their wretched circumstances.

Freire believes that one way in

which the oppressed are kept domesticated is through the mass media's propaganda. He proposed, therefore, to use images of another sort precisely to awaken and liberate the poor. So it's not surprising that when the generals, outraged by all these subversive goings-on, overturned Goulart in the spring of 1964, they also suppressed the MEB and jailed Freire for 70 days. After his release he was, as Shaull puts it, "encouraged" to leave Brazil. He went first to Chile where he spent five years refining his theory and applying it to the literacy campaigns instituted by Eduardo Frei's Christian Democratic government. Later, Freire spent some time at Harvard's Graduate School of Education and came to be appreciated by people like Jonathan Kozol, currently the chief spokesman for the free school movement in this country. Nowadays, Freire lives in Geneva and works for the World Council of Churches' Office of Education. But jet travel makes it possible for him to carry his message round the world to meetings and seminars like those held at Fordham last winter.

This message has two parts, theory and practice, that Freire would insist must not be separated since each is incomplete by itself. When he was working in Chile in 1966, the Ministry of Public Education there produced a set of materials implementing his pedagogical ideas. It was called a "psychological-sociological method of teaching adults" and included a teachers' manual, a series of graded readers and a packet of 25 charts designed both to teach the alphabet and to develop people's "consciousness of their own value as human beings." This last is the famous *conscientização*, a capacious term signifying the kind of reflective understanding of problems that will issue in effective action. Although Freire himself points out that he neither invented nor popularized this expression, it's now as closely linked to his thought as democracy was to Dewey's.

That whole Chilean teaching apparatus carried a subtitle, *la raíz y la espiga*, which, for our purposes here,

we might translate as "the root and the flowering." Then, prescinding from what the Chilean ministry may have intended, we can take *root* as a symbol of Freire's theory and *flowering* for the practice flowing from that philosophy and say something about each.

On first acquaintance, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is apt to strike informed readers as a Cook's tour through the master-concepts of the writers who have influenced Freire. The footnotes in *Education as the Practice of Liberty* are a better guide to those influences than the references in *Pedagogy*, but, in any case, the origins of Freire's leitmotifs are so clear that they can't be missed, even in the latter book.

To begin with, Freire fully accepts the Greek (and Christian) concept of man as a being essentially defined by the powers of reflective thought and free choice. For him, as for Aristotle, knowledge and liberty are the true goods of the soul. We are most human when we are free and most free when we can choose. Freire, as his work and writings show, is dominated by the desire to make these humanistic values fully available to every one. He is consequently critical of both capitalist and Communist societies because he believes that neither allows for the maximum self-development and growth in freedom of all men and women.

One need not be a Christian, of course, to have this kind of generous concern for universal humanistic education. Dewey enunciated it in a celebrated sentence from *School and Society*: "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children." Mao Tse-tung put a similar ideal into a Marxist perspective when he claimed that the revolution would provide education for that 90 per cent of the Chinese people whose "sweat and blood" had created a culture in which they had no share. In Freire, however, this basic orientation has distinctively Christian roots. That might not be immediately clear from *Pedagogy*, which quotes Marx, Lenin, Mao, Castro, Che Guevara, Lukács and Fanon (as well as Camilo Torres and John XXIII), but not the Gospel.

Nevertheless, if one peers just a bit below the surface of this text, one discovers certain characteristically Christian emphases, and these are made explicit in some of Freire's speeches and published letters. He surely wants a radical reordering of society, but thinks this is possible only if there is co-operative dialogue between the haves and the have-nots. That, in turn, requires friendship for there can be no dialogue between antagonists. Freire's rhetoric of reform deals, consequently, not with fire and sword and the breaking of chains, but with some recognizably Christian concepts and metaphors. "Men in communion liberate each other," he writes in *Pedagogy*. "Salvation can be achieved only with others." And he advises teachers of the poor to respect and trust each of their students and not attempt to impose middle-class culture upon them.

What the fortunate of this earth really require is a radical change of heart, and Freire likes to describe this in terms of the Easter imagery of rebirth. "The man who doesn't make his Easter, in the sense of dying to be reborn, is no real Christian," he said in a talk in Rome two years ago. "That is why Christianity is, for me, such a marvelous doctrine." In fact, he set the whole work of revolution within a religious dimension when he wrote to a young student of theology: "The Word of God is inviting me to recreate the world, not for my brothers' domination, but for their liberation" (*Catholic Mind*, September, 1972).

For in this harsh, real world, the men and women who make up the mass of silent oppressed are unable to realize their human potential for free, intelligent activity because their natural and social environments are so brutal. These are the people of the Third World, which, as Freire told his Fordham audience, isn't so much a geographical as it is a theological and political concept. It is the world of all the voiceless, suffering poor, whether these be Arab *fellahin* or Peruvian *campesinos* or migrant workers in the United States. Since they all need liberation, Freire is convinced that his theory and method, although generated by his Brazilian experiences, have universal validity and applicability.

The existence of these oppressed populations is, of course, a fact, but Freire's Marxian conceptualization of that fact is over-simplified. He divides society too neatly into just two categories: an oppressive minority running affairs for its own profit and the oppressed majority who are not allowed to think or choose for themselves. But as reviewers have pointed out, this distinction is inadequate because some of the oppressed are themselves dominators and exploiters of the others. Freire does recognize this, but isn't sufficiently impressed to alter his analysis.

Instead, the analysis goes on to indict a device that Freire believes the oppressors employ to keep down the oppressed. This is what he calls the "banking concept" of education because it aims to deposit in passive recipients only those ideas and attitudes that the ruling class judges proper, while discouraging independent thinking. Freire finds this notion only too generally accepted. "People think schools are temples where they can find a chaste, untouchable knowledge," he complained at Fordham. "Fantastic!"

He would replace this banking concept by a "problem posing" education in which "men develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves." That is to say, knowledge must grow out of experiences that are genuine transactions with reality. And this, of course, is the central thesis of Dewey's instrumentalism, which sees man caught up in an evolving universe that constantly confronts him with problems. These difficulties stimulate real thinking and true (or good) ideas are those solutions that work in practice. But the banking concept would also be rejected out of hand by a much older tradition, as a student of educational history like Freire knows. Plato, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas all insisted that the chief agent of authentic learning is the student himself and that the most the teacher can do is to co-operate in that process.

Freire cherishes this idea of the

teacher as co-operating. He puts it into the context of Martin Buber's thesis that education best takes place in an I-thou setting of authentic dialogue between two persons who respect each other and learn together—"The encounter," as Freire says in *Pedagogy*, "of men in the world in order to transform the world." Put this vaguely, the notion may induce skepticism in veteran teachers. It's easier to appreciate, however, if one remembers that Freire is thinking particularly of adult education. Those who teach adults should have, he says, the attitude of comrades, not masters. For they will fail if they are patronizing, manipulative or authoritarian.

Their job is to co-operate in a process of liberation that has two phases: understanding and action. First of all, students and teachers must reflect upon the actual world in which they find themselves. For, as Freire put it in that Rome talk: "Even a peasant is a man, and any man wants to explain the reality around him." But this moment of speculative knowledge is not enough. It must be followed by practical efforts to improve the human condition through shared enterprise in science, art, technology and the solving of problems in human relationships. It all comes down to what Emmanuel Mounier, the French Christian personalist once said: "A thought which does not lead to a decision is an incomplete thought." Not false, to be sure, but incomplete. Freire doesn't quote these words but he does acknowledge Mounier as an influence, and he does constantly emphasize the importance of what he calls *praxis*. For as he wrote to that theology student, one can't try to change man without touching the world in which he lives.

These are the centerpieces of Freire's thought and one might wonder why such familiar concepts have so great an allure and why they interest young people who usually detest classic teachings. It may be, of course, that a pragmatic theory seems more novel in Latin America than in the United States. Moreover, Freire is in that powerful tradition of revolutionary reform for which not only Danton and Marx but the American Constitutional Convention spoke. He likes, in

fact, to infuse even standard concepts with a radical flavor. Thus "theory" becomes the phase of denunciation of evils, and "practice" the phase of announcing changes, while the two together constitute Utopianism or working for a better world. To tell the truth, Freire's fondness for philosophizing sometimes leads him to overweight a simple idea with an enormously elaborate speculative framework. His complicated explanation of "the codification of generative themes" in the pictures he used to teach reading and spark discussions is one case in point. Passages like this would have benefited from a good dose of British analytic salts.

But such passages don't suffocate Freire's essential themes, which he organizes into something more than a mere amalgam of other men's ideas. In *Education as the Practice of Liberty*, he adverts once to Whitehead's criticism of any education that merely transmits "inert ideas." It's fair to say that the influences Freire has absorbed are in him far from inert. He is himself well aware of what he has done, and elsewhere in the same work he makes a revealing selection of a line from Dewey's *Democracy and Education*. It comes from a passage in which Dewey ruminates on the nature of creative thinking and remarks that the materials Newton used were not original ideas but familiar, even commonplace ones. "Only silly folk," Dewey continues in the sentence Freire quotes, "identify creative originality with the extraordinary and fanciful; others recognize that its measure lies in putting things to uses which had not occurred to others." This is a good account of what Freire has done. The appeal of his theory consists precisely in the ensemble he has made from his sources and his putting this to work in the service of a noble ideal. For perhaps the most powerful attraction Freire's writings have is in the authentic humanitarian passion that vitalizes and unifies them. Besides, as young reformers know, Freire has practiced what he preaches. That practice is the flowering stalk rising from the root of his theory, and it illustrates and clarifies the philosophy. The materials published by the Chilean ministry are a reliable guide to

this pedagogy, for Freire has recommended them to students of his methods.

Those methods aim, as we've already noted, to do more than teach reading to adult illiterates. They're also designed to get these people thinking about the actions they might take to cure the physical and social ills besetting them. The very first line of the first reader announces firmly: "This book will be our friend." A serious friend, though, who examines chapter by chapter the conditions of life, often hard enough, as it is known to peasants and workers. At times, indeed, the primer assumes a school-teacherly moralizing tone. The discussion of *El Alcohol*, for instance, bluntly describes this commodity as poison and says it's a mistake to suppose it makes one strong. On the contrary, the bull and horse, the lion and elephant all have great strength and endurance, and they drink only water.

But Freire would himself probably prefer to have people arrive independently at these sobering reflections after pondering over them together. Discussions of that sort are stimulated by the colored slides and charts used by teachers trained in Freire's methods. The charts, for example, are bold, vigorous drawings illustrating aspects of village or work life or recording the development of technology with sketches of hunters, woodsmen, carpenters, field-workers, ditch-diggers, millers and water carriers. For usually the first problems to be solved by the poor of developing countries are technological ones—bringing water to the village or improving agriculture.

Generally a single word is also emblazoned on these cartoons so that those studying them will learn letters, syllables and words, while being prompted at the same time to reflect upon the picture's theme. Those themes are poignant enough. *Fábrica*: the factory in the background behind a fence of cruelly pointed iron bars with a barefooted waif perched on its ledge while two melancholy men study the sign, "No Openings." *Camino*: peasants trudging along a road or riding a burro while a sleek car whizzes by.

Guitarra: not being played but just ogled in its splendid isolation in a shop window by people who can't afford guitars. *Yugo*: a farmer about to yoke a very disheartened-looking ox. Another picture has no label but shows a peasant plowing under a dramatically fierce sun. *Sindicato*: a meeting of workers. *Casa*: these workmen coming home at evening.

You can't sift through these 25 charts without getting some sense of what Freire has done. He combines the concrete imagination of great pedagogical innovators like Froebel and Montessori with the Utopian vision of the great prophets of social reform. One can lose one's footing, of course, on each of these ideal heights, which is why John F. Kennedy defined himself as an idealist without illusions. But while such caution is eminently logical, still in the real and often illogical world the boundaries between ideals and illusions are sometimes ragged.

It's clear from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that Freire knows, for instance, that once the poor have gotten on a bit they frequently assume the least admirable characteristics of the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, he remains convinced that this dismal development can be avoided by a truly human education, and so he also remains deeply hopeful and therefore deeply Christian. "There is only one way for me to find peace," he said at the close of that 1970 talk in Rome, "to work for it, shoulder to shoulder with my fellowmen. . . . I am not yet completely a Catholic, I just keep on trying to be one more completely, day after day. . . . I just feel passionately, corporately, physically, with all my being, that my stance is a Christian one because it is 100-per-cent revolutionary and human and liberating, and hence committed and Utopian . . . love that cannot produce more freedom is not love."

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