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# Rethinking Conscientisation

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*Paulo Freire's concept of conscientisation has been the subject of considerable debate since the early 1970s. The interpretation of conscientisation as a process of 'consciousness raising', whereby individuals move through a sequence of distinct stages, is widespread. This article critiques the 'stages' model and advances an alternative perspective on conscientisation. Rejecting an individualist view of critical consciousness, the author concentrates on the link between conscientisation and praxis, and reassesses Freire's ideal in light of the postmodernist notion of multiple subjectivities.*

When the work of Paulo Freire first began to attract international attention in the early 1970s, a new term — 'conscientisation' — found its way into educational discourse. Almost immediately, this concept was embraced by many as a miraculous solution to problems of oppression and exploitation. Freire's success with adult literacy initiatives in Brazil and Chile was taken as evidence by those who became 'converted' to Freirean principles that conscientisation could rapidly and dramatically change people's lives. From the beginning, however, Freire emphasised the importance of understanding conscientisation in light of his wider philosophy and in relation to the context within which the term was applied. Conscientisation quickly became the object of much confusion as well as fascination.

Over the past two decades, numerous scholars have commented on the notion of conscientisation, and many attempts have been made to apply the concept in First World educational settings.<sup>1</sup> On one popular view, conscientisation consists in the movement of individuals through a succession of distinct stages, with each stage being defined by certain attitudes and behaviours. This paper suggests that the 'stages' model is inherently flawed, and offers an alternative position — one which draws a direct link between conscientisation and praxis. The interface between Freire's modernism and the postmodernist critique of subject-centred reason is briefly examined. An individualist interpretation of critical consciousness is rejected, and the postmodernist notion of multiple subjectivities is brought to bear on a reworked concept of conscientisation.

## FREIRE AND THE STAGES MODEL OF CONSCIENTISATION

Although his name has become synonymous with the concept, Freire was not the first person to use the notion of conscientisation. The original Portuguese term, 'conscientizacao', came into being during a series of meetings between

professors at the Brazilian Institute of Higher Studies (ISEB). While the concept had immediate appeal to Freire, and obvious relevance for his emerging pedagogical theory, it was Helder Camara who first popularized the term 'conscientizacao' and gave it currency in English (Freire, 1974, p. 575).

In his early writings on the subject, Freire relates conscientisation to socio-historical conditions in Brazil (see Freire, 1972a, pp. 57–71; 1976, pp. 17–20). Essentially, conscientisation represents the movement towards 'critical' consciousness from a state of either 'magical' consciousness or 'naïve' consciousness. Magical (semi-intransitive) consciousness predominated in rural areas. 'Introverted' peasant communities — isolated from political and industrial changes taking place elsewhere in Brazil — suffered exploitative working conditions, poor nutrition, alarming levels of infant mortality and disease, and low life expectancy (Freire, 1972a, pp. 35–36). Illiteracy was widespread. Freire (1976) describes the worldview typical of individuals in these communities thus:

Their interests centre almost totally around survival, and they lack a sense of life on a more historic plane . . . semi-intransitivity represents a near disengagement between men and their existence. In this state, discernment is difficult. Men confuse their perceptions of the objects and challenges of the environment, and fall prey to magical explanations because they cannot apprehend true causality. (p. 17)

The transition to 'naïve' consciousness corresponded with infrastructural changes in Brazil which began after the abolition of slavery at the end of the nineteenth century. Change accelerated during the First World War and further intensified after the Second World War, with increasing development of urban areas, and with the emergence of a popularist (rather than land-owner) leadership (Freire, 1972a, pp. 63–68). Freire (1976) notes:

Naïve transitivity, the state of consciousness which predominated in Brazilian urban centres during the transitional period, is characterized by an oversimplification of problems; by a nostalgia for the past; by underestimation of the common man; by a strong tendency to gregariousness; by a lack of interest in investigation, accompanied by an accentuated taste for fanciful explanation; by fragility of argument; by a strongly emotional style; by the practice of polemics rather than dialogue; by magical explanation. (p. 18)

Magical and naïve states of consciousness are contrasted with critical consciousness, which is characterised by:

depth in the interpretation of problems; by the substitution of causal principles for magical explanations; by the testing of one's 'findings' and by openness to revision; by the attempt to avoid distortion when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analysing them; by refusing to transfer responsibility; by rejecting passive positions; by soundness of argumentation; by the practice of dialogue rather than polemics; by receptivity to the new for reasons beyond mere novelty and by the good sense not to reject the old just because it is old — by accepting what is valid in both old and new. (p. 18)

Freire suggests that critical consciousness is characteristic of 'authentically democratic regimes' (p. 18), but provides little elaboration on the countries or social systems he has in mind.<sup>2</sup> His work with adult illiterates, of course, was intended to exemplify a democratic, dialogical, critical approach to pedagogy. His hope, however, that a large proportion of the Brazilian population might become critically conscious was stifled by the military coup in 1964, and Freire was compelled to move on to other countries.

The focus on three levels of consciousness has been taken by many as evidence that Freire intended the notion of conscientisation to be conceived in terms of a 'raising' of consciousness through clear, definitive stages. A detailed example of this 'stages' model of conscientisation is provided by William Smith (1976). According to Smith, conscientisation is 'a developmental process which can be divided into three distinct stages: magical, naïve, and critical consciousness' (pp. 41–42). At each stage, people interpret and act upon the world in different ways. Smith categorises characteristic responses of magical, naïve and critical individuals to three key questions:

what are the most dehumanizing problems in your life? (NAMING); what are the causes and consequences of those problems? (REFLECTING); and, what can be done to solve those problems? (ACTING). (p. 42)

In 'naming' their world, magically conscious individuals tend either to deny that they have problems or to avoid them by situating them in the past or elsewhere (p. 46). In reflecting upon their circumstances, such individuals typically explain the conditions they endure through reference to 'God's will', fate, or bad luck (p. 48). Using examples from his experience with Ecuadorian farmers, Smith notes that people at this level of consciousness often either sympathise with their oppressors or live in fear of them (p. 49). Causal explanations of difficulties are frequently simplistic. For example, peasants might say: 'We can't study because we don't have any money', but not go on to ask *why* they are impoverished (p. 50). Passive acceptance of harsh social conditions, rather than critical analysis and transformation, is the order of the day for those at this stage of consciousness.

People at the 'naïve' level see reform within an existing social system as a major task. Where problems are identified, individuals (rather than social structures or systems) are often blamed (p. 52). Naïve individuals sometimes attempt to model their oppressors' behaviour and distance themselves from their oppressed peers. Violence within families and among groups of people at this stage of consciousness is not uncommon (p. 58). Overcoming difficulties becomes a matter of using the system rather than changing it.

Critical consciousness is characterised by an attempt to transform oppressive social structures (p. 60). Self-esteem increases, and an understanding of and sympathy for one's peers ensues (pp. 61, 63). Connections between different oppressive structures are identified (p. 64). Self-actualisation becomes possible, and cooperative dialogical relationships are sought (pp. 65–67). The critically conscious individual is willing to take risks in resisting oppression (p. 66).

For Smith, the process of conscientisation is strictly sequential: 'One does not begin as critical and become magical, nor move from magical to critical, nor move freely between the three stages. Development is a progression from

magical to naïve to critical.' (p. 79). This idea owes much to the work of Kohlberg and Mayer, who talk of development through 'invariant ordered sequential stages', where all individuals are assumed to follow the same developmental path (p. 78). Environmental and personal factors influence the extent to which individuals progress through the stages of development, but the stages remain the same in all cases (p. 78). On Smith's model of conscientisation, not all people will necessarily reach the stage of critical consciousness, but those who do must move through the stages in order: an Ecuadorian peasant who exhibits the qualities of magical consciousness, then, cannot 'skip a stage' and move directly to critical consciousness. Magical consciousness is considered the least desirable (lowest) level and critical consciousness the most desirable (highest) stage, with naïve consciousness in the middle. Hence, under this framework conscientisation can legitimately be seen as a process through which one's consciousness is *raised* from one level to the next.

The notion of 'consciousness raising' has attracted some vicious attacks over the years. Few have been more forthright in their denouncement of this idea than Peter Berger (1974). For Berger, the interpretation of Freire's original term, 'conscientizacao', as 'consciousness raising' represents a 'very apt translation' (p. 112). In Berger's opinion, Freire's literacy work in Brazil was premised on the assumption that the consciousness of the masses was inadequate for understanding and transforming oppressive conditions; Freire and his co-workers therefore intervened in the lives of oppressed adult illiterates in order to assist in raising their consciousnesses. This means that consciousness raising is 'a project of higher-class individuals directed at a lower-class population' (p. 113). Berger accuses Freire of setting up a cognitive and ontological hierarchy, with illiterate peasants portrayed as less fully human than those organising literacy programmes. Despite the ostensibly democratic character of Freirean methods, in Berger's view,

it is hard to imagine a more 'elitist' program (and, for that matter, a more 'paternalistic' one) than one based on the assumption that a certain group of people is dehumanized to the point of animality, is unable either to perceive this condition or rescue itself from it, and requires the (presumably selfless) assistance of others for both the perception and the rescue operation. (p. 116)

Freire's approach to adult literacy education is akin to an act of *conversion*, where one group imposes its truth on others in order to save them (p. 118). Berger concedes that one person's consciousness might be said to be 'higher' or 'more useful' than someone else's on specific topics or within particular settings (p. 116). He points out, however, that 'the peasant knows his world far better than any outsider ever can' (p. 117). Different people make sense of the world in different ways; it is, therefore (Berger concludes), impossible to talk of raising someone's consciousness since no one can be said to be 'more conscious' than anyone else (p. 118).

Freire's pedagogy has also been censured as an example of cultural invasion. According to Bowers, the Freirean ideals of critical reflection, praxis and liberation reflect a Western, modernizing mode of thought (Bowers, 1983, p. 937) where change is equated with progress (Bowers, 1986, p. 150) and the



moral authority of individualism is taken for granted (Bowers, 1983, p.938). Bowers repeatedly describes the Freirean project as a form of 'consciousness raising' (see, for example, Bowers, 1983, p.941; 1986, pp.148, 151; 1984, pp.387-388), and argues against the intervening character of Freire's literacy work. Supposedly empowering, Freirean adult literacy programmes colonise the consciousnesses of illiterates (Bowers, 1986, p.149), overturning their traditional belief systems. Bowers contrasts Freirean assumptions with the world-view of the Chipewyan of Canada. Despite pressures to become assimilated into Western patterns of thought, the Chipewyan have retained an integrative, pragmatic, non-intervening approach to knowledge (Bowers, 1983, pp.939-940). Freire's stress on gaining distance from 'the natural attitude toward everyday life' (p.941) is in direct opposition to the Chipewyan stance of 'not wanting to be in situations that lead to the questioning and renegotiation of beliefs' (p.941). In encouraging participants to 'raise' their consciousness to a more critical level, Freirean literacy programmes represent an invasive 'continuation of Western domination' (p.950).

According to Harris (1979), the essential idea behind consciousness raising is that

some people's consciousness has been arrested and fixed at some point, and that others, with raised consciousness of a situation, can step in and help the former to understand the situation properly. Or, to put this just a little differently in the Marxian terms we employed earlier, some people have false consciousness, which can possibly be put right by those whose consciousness is not false. (p.171)

Seeking to defend Freire against Berger's criticisms, Harris argues that consciousness raising is desirable in situations where it can be shown that people do not (critically) understand the situation in which they live or grasp what is in their best interests (p.171). For Harris, some ideas provide a better reading of reality than others. Given that the dominant ideology in capitalist societies serves to distort reality, those with higher consciousness are justified in attempting to provide the conditions for enlightening others with a less critical understanding of the world. Contrary to Berger's assertions, however, there is no reason why critically conscious individuals need come from the 'higher' or 'educated' classes. Quite the opposite, Harris claims: such individuals are more likely to emerge from the 'exploited and deceived' classes (p.171). Berger forgets that consciousnesses are formed within relations of domination where certain interests are privileged over others indeed, 'part of the disguise and mystification lies . . . in the implanting of the consciousness that one actually does, freely and actively, define one's own situation, and that one is perfectly well aware of what the realities of the situation are' (p.172). Consciousness raising does not imply the imposition of one's views on others; rather, the aim is to encourage people to examine their world in a different way (p.174). Provided dialogue is employed in place of monologue, and in so far as the starting point for any programme is the lived reality of learners,

consciousness raising can . . . be seen . . . as a viable alternative to education, allowing as it does for people to gain undistorted knowledge by interacting with the

world in terms of their *own* interests . . . The distortions normally brought about by the social dimension of knowledge production should be eliminated, such that people can come to perceive their world as it really is. (p. 176)

### AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION: CONSCIENTISATION AND PRAXIS

The stages model of conscientisation, particularly as exemplified in the work of Smith, is methodical, systematic and convenient. It allows us to categorise people according to their level of consciousness, and to explain their attitudes and behaviours in terms of pre-identified characteristics. Educators appear to have an important role to play in seeking ways of assisting people from one stage to the next. Once a person has reached critical consciousness, he or she has 'made it' for life: those who reach this stage of consciousness continuously display the most desirable qualities of conscious development and cannot regress to earlier stages.

This portrait may exaggerate some features of the stages model but I believe it indicates the logical direction of such an approach to conscientisation. In this section I suggest that it is the very systematisation of the stages theory which gives rise to difficulties: a mechanical theory of consciousness emerges, which goes against the grain of Freire's dialectical perspective on reality. Making a direct link with the notion of praxis, I argue, takes us closer to Freire's initial intentions in using the concept of conscientisation.

Under the stages model, there is a categorisation of individual characteristics at each stage. For magically conscious individuals in Smith's scheme, denial of problems, passive acceptance of one's circumstances, and simplistic causal explanations are common characteristics. Critically conscious individuals, by contrast, possess high self-esteem, take risks, empathise with their peers, and work dialogically with others. For each stage of consciousness, then, there are certain personal qualities — particular attitudes, modes of thinking, acting and behaving — which are distinct from the characteristics which are typical at other stages. These characteristics separate the stages from one another. In Smith's theory, there is no overlap between magical, naïve and critical consciousness. In depicting conscientisation as a process of consciousness raising, the stages model is also hierarchical: naïve consciousness is a higher stage than magical consciousness, and critical consciousness is higher than naïve consciousness. Critical consciousness represents the most (ethically) desirable mode of being, magical consciousness the least desirable.

Freire clearly intends critical consciousness to be quite separate from other levels of consciousness. He does allow, however, for a degree of overlap between magical consciousness and naïve consciousness. In *Cultural Action for Freedom*, for instance, Freire cautions:

Although the qualitative difference between the semi-intransitive consciousness and the naïve transitive consciousness can be explained by the phenomenon of emergence due to structural transformations in society, there are no rigidly defined frontiers between the historical moments which produce qualitative changes in men's

awareness. In many respects, the semi-intransitive consciousness remains present in the naïve transitive consciousness. (1972a, p. 65)

And in *Education: The Practice of Freedom* Freire notes with respect to naïve consciousness:

The magical aspect typical of intransitivity is partially present here also. Although men's horizons have expanded and they respond more openly to stimuli, these responses still have a magical quality. (1976, p. 18)

Naïvely conscious groups remain as dominated as those at the magical level of consciousness, with the myths perpetuated by oppressors continuing to exert a powerful influence over their lives (Freire, 1972a, p. 65). It is only when the potential for resistance to oppression among naïvely conscious groups is realised and the full flowering of critical consciousness emerges that the shackles of these myths are removed.

In Smith's analysis, the blurring of boundaries between levels disappears. The divisions between magical, naïve and critical individuals become tidy and clear-cut. There is little attention paid to the transition from one stage to another. Where Freire finds in naïve consciousness both aspects of the former magical stage and the seeds of potential resistance to oppression, in Smith's study the two stages are presented as discrete categories with distinctive defining characteristics. For Freire, the categories 'magical consciousness' and 'naïve consciousness' represent an attempt to capture the essence of general patterns of thought among contemporary and past social groups. In Smith's study, the focus is on individuals and the extent to which their attitudes and behaviours conform to pre-determined characteristics for given stages. Smith begins with the characteristics identified by Freire, making slight modifications in an effort to develop a systematic code for 'measuring' conscientisation. Alschuler summarises this approach in his foreword to Smith's study:

We needed to define conscientizacão . . . more concretely than Freire's abstruse philosophizing. We reasoned that if we could create an operational definition of conscientizacão, in other words, a way of measuring it, we would have reached a clear understanding of the term. And, we would have a method of accurately gauging the level of consciousness in situations before and after efforts to raise consciousness. (Alschuler, 1976, pp. vi-vii)

This systematization, while appealing to those disinclined to grapple with the complexities of Freirean philosophy, is fraught with problems. As has been argued elsewhere, the danger of domesticating Freire's theory and practice is ever-present in attempts to convert his pedagogy into a method or set of methods (Aronowitz, 1993; Roberts, 1996). Freire offers a distinctive *approach* to education, which is informed by a particular understanding of human beings, knowledge and the nature of reality. The goal of accurately 'measuring' levels of consciousness betrays a behaviouristic view of human consciousness and activity, and a technocratic conception of education. The professed hope that an 'operational' definition would provide a 'clear' understanding of



conscientisation is, I believe, ill-founded. This interpretation of conscientisation certainly simplifies the notion (by ridding it of its contextual and theoretical 'baggage') and perhaps furnishes a certain clarity in that respect. But, given Freire's explicit rejection of behaviourism and technocratic reductionism (see Roberts, 1996; Freire, 1972a), this is obviously not a form of lucidity he would support: in systematising conscientisation in this manner, the concept is arguably stripped of the very features which give it its educational significance. What, then, can be offered as an alternative interpretation?

Freire's discussion of magical consciousness and naïve consciousness is largely confined to two early works, *Education: The Practice of Freedom* (1976) and *Cultural Action for Freedom* (1972a). In his classic text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, new terms such as 'critical thinking', 'real consciousness' and 'potential consciousness' emerge, but there is little overt talk of magical and naïve stages of consciousness (see Freire, 1972b, pp. 65, 85). While references to naïve thinking continue throughout Freire's published works, the concept of 'naïveté' appears broader in later statements than the initial formulation in the books mentioned above. The need for a critical approach in understanding reality has remained a key theme in Freire's work throughout his publishing career. The important point, for present purposes, is that the categories of 'magical consciousness' and 'naïve consciousness' were developed by Freire in order to explain a *specific* situation (namely, the conditions which prevailed in urban and rural areas in Brazil during and before the early 1960s). Freire never intended these categories to be taken as universal stages of consciousness for all people, in all social contexts and in every historical period.

It is also instructive to note that Freire has usually avoided using the term 'consciousness raising' in his books, articles, and interviews. Given the relatively small number of exceptions to this, it is possible that where the term has emerged under Freire's name (e.g. Freire, 1975) it has been as a result of the translation from Portuguese to English. It is undeniable that Freire regarded critical consciousness as an ethically more desirable mode of being for Brazilian adults than magical or naïve consciousness. In this sense it could be said that he hoped illiterates would 'raise' their consciousnesses to a 'higher' level. But Freire avoids talk of the logical corollary to this, namely, the notion that some people are at a 'lower' level of consciousness than others. It would be more accurate, I believe (despite Berger's criticisms), to say that Freire saw adult illiterates as operating at a *different* level of consciousness to that which he regarded as necessary for their liberation from conditions of oppression. He is careful (again, *contra* Berger and Bowers) not to denigrate the people with whom he was working by declaring them 'lower' beings. His point in identifying magical and naïve modes of consciousness is that these forms of thought are shaped by, and serve the interests of, oppressor classes. If there is any group at risk of being 'denigrated' by Freire it is those who deliberately promote a view of the world which reproduces an oppressive social order.

While Freire's initial use of the concept of conscientisation in *Education: The Practice of Freedom* and *Cultural Action for Freedom* embraced many features of what I have called 'the stages model', subsequent (and other) work lends support to an alternative interpretation of conscientisation. In his essay 'The

Process of Political Literacy', for example, Freire suggests that conscientisation involves 'a constant clarification of what remains hidden within us while we move about the world' (in Freire, 1985, p. 107). He observes:

I know very well that implied in this critical reflection about the real world as something made and an unveiling of yet another reality, conscientization cannot ignore the transforming action that produces this unveiling and concrete realization. (p. 107)

Conscientisation, he continues, 'occurs as a process at any given moment' (p. 107). This suggests that Freire intends conscientisation to be seen not as a progression through a finite series of steps with a fixed set of attitudes and behaviours to be achieved, but rather as an ever-evolving process. Constant change in the world around us demands a continuous effort to reinterpret reality. In other writings, this idea is carried over to Freire's view of what it means to study: one must adopt a restless, curious, searching, questioning stance in reading, writing and thinking (compare Freire, 1985, pp. 1-4; Freire and Shor, 1987, pp. 10-11, 82-87; Horton and Freire, 1990, pp. 23-27; and see further, Roberts, 1993). To the extent that reality is always changing, one can never know the object of one's study absolutely: one's knowledge of the world, on the Freirean view, is necessarily incomplete (see Horton and Freire, 1990, p. 101). Freire does speak, however, of the need to strive for an ever-deeper understanding of the essence or reason behind the object of study (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 78; Freire and Shor, 1987, p. 82). Conscientisation consists in the constant search for that which lies beneath the surface. It is as if Freire wants us to peel back layer after layer of reality, searching all the time for a better understanding of the world. For Freire, knowledge is, in one sense, always *provisional*: it is that which we understand of reality as it exists at any given moment.

This construct of conscientisation stands in marked contrast to a theory based on distinct stages of consciousness. The stages model depends for its very intelligibility on the idea of sets of characteristics which endure for some period of time: there is no consideration of the possibility that people shift, from moment to moment, from one level to another. The process of moving from one stage to the next is gradual, difficult, and (for Smith) irreversible. On the alternative interpretation presented here, conscientisation occurs incessantly, provided one continues to interrogate reality. There is no end to the process: individuals probe layer after layer of understanding in their ongoing quest for knowledge.

I wish to extend this line of argument and draw a more overt connection between conscientisation and praxis. Praxis is the pivotal concept in Freire's ethical ideal. We humanise ourselves, Freire argues, to the extent that we engage in praxis. To prevent others from pursuing praxis is to dehumanise them. Praxis is 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1972b, p. 28). The pursuit of one's humanisation through praxis is, on the Freirean view, an inevitably incomplete process: the transformed reality which results from reflective action always presents a fresh set of (material or social) conditions, requiring further reflection (Roberts, 1989, p. 44).

Freire stresses the fluid nature of both objective and subjective reality. Not only are all aspects of the material world in motion; so too are consciousnesses always changing (compare Freire, 1976, p. 117; Freire and Shor, 1987, pp. 7–9, 82, 100–102; Horton and Freire, 1990, p. 101). Freire has frequently explained reality as a dialectical relationship between human beings and the world (see Freire, 1972b, pp. 70–73; 1972a, pp. 53–57; 1985, pp. 99–101). Rejecting both mechanical objectivism and solipsistic idealism, Freire emphasises the interaction between inner and outer dimensions of reality. We change the objective world through consciously directed activity, but our ideas are also shaped by material phenomena, processes and activities.

Freire has consistently warned against 'activism' (action without reflection) and 'verbalism' (reflection without action) (see, for example, Freire, 1972b, p. 60). Praxis is the *synthesis* of reflection and action. Freire speaks of conscientisation as 'the process by which human beings participate critically in a transforming act' (Freire, 1985, p. 106), and stresses: 'there is no conscientisation outside of praxis, outside the theory-practice, reflection-action unity' (p. 160). Conscientisation, Freire notes elsewhere, 'can only be manifested in the concrete praxis (which can never be limited to the mere activity of the consciousness)' (Freire, 1976, p. 147). I propose, therefore, that rather than separating the two concepts out, as many people attempting to apply Freirean ideas do, conscientisation and praxis ought to be seen as *necessarily* intertwined. Conscientisation, I submit, is the reflective component of praxis. Hence, when one engages in praxis, one is of necessity being conscientised. Conscientisation occurs in the transforming moment where critical reflection is synthesised with action.

Freire's use of the concept of conscientisation must be understood in relation to the original context within which it was applied. In promoting an alternative to the stages model, it is important to stress the *political* nature of conscientisation in Freire's early work (see Roberts, 1994). The goal was critical reflection upon, and active transformation of, oppressive social structures and practices within Brazilian (and, later, Chilean) society. 'Conscientisation', then, was tied directly to an explicit political agenda where it was assumed (a) that certain groups were oppressed, and (b) that praxis was necessary to overcome this oppression. The praxis championed by Freire was not simply reflective action designed to change *any* aspect of the world; rather, it was a specific form of praxis directed at transforming particular social conditions. Freire was quite open about the political intentions of his literacy work, observing that all education serves certain interests, and paid the price for success in encouraging adults to be critical of Brazilian reality with a stint in jail and enforced exile.

While identification of, and resistance to, political impediments to liberation through critically informed action has remained a dominant theme throughout Freire's writings, the range of areas to which this imperative applies has increased over time. In the past few years, Freire has acknowledged the significance of 'new' social movements (feminism, gay rights, ecological causes, etc.) in promoting awareness of, and in contesting, various forms of discrimination and exploitation (Freire and Faundez, 1989, pp. 65–67). The basic ethical principles underlying Freire's theory and practice, though, have

remained the same for the past 25 years. Freire assumes that all human beings have an ontological vocation of humanisation (becoming more fully human) (see Freire, 1972b, chapter 1). We humanise ourselves when we engage in critical, dialogical praxis. Throughout history the humanisation of some groups has been constrained by the actions of other groups. Where this occurs, the situation becomes one of oppression. In struggling to liberate themselves from oppression — through reflection, action and dialogue — human beings become 'Subjects' in the historical process, taking increasing control of their own destinies (see Freire, 1976, pp. 3–5). Conscientisation is the reflective moment which occurs in a liberating educational programme designed to dialogically address and transform conditions of oppression.

### POSTMODERNISM, INDIVIDUALISM AND CONSCIENTISATION

I have identified two constructs of conscientisation in Freire's work: a particular version of the stages model tied to an explicit political project, and a dialectical representation of conscientisation as a momentary reflective process. While the former conception is underwritten by modernist assumptions which become difficult to sustain in the contemporary postmodern climate, the latter opens up the possibility of a reformulated notion of conscientisation — one which is linked to the ideal of praxis but sensitive to recent criticisms of universalist thought and subject-centred reason. In this section I argue against an individualist interpretation of critical consciousness, and reinterpret conscientisation in light of the postmodernist notion of multiple subjectivities.

Where modern thought has placed the unified, autonomous subject at its centre, postmodern social philosophy decentres the subject and rejects the ideal of a self-directing, self-knowing, individual agent. Postmodernists underscore the multiplicity of (sometimes contradictory) subject positions assumed by human beings (Weiler, 1991). We become, as it were, an amalgam of many different 'selves'. There is no 'essential' or 'unencumbered' self: all individuals are constituted within discourses or sign systems (Gee, 1993). In the face of these challenges to fundamental modernist principles, Smith's categorisation of individuals into neatly defined, closed 'boxes' (as 'magical', 'naïve' or 'critical') seems quaint and artificial. From a postmodernist perspective, it becomes impossible to conceive of a quintessentially magical (or naïve, or critical) individual. Smith's portrayal of conscientisation as a *linear* progression through successive, irreversible stages is equally worrying given the postmodernist view of history as discontinuous, disorderly, and non-sequential (cf. Benhabib, 1991).

These concerns also apply, to a certain extent, to Freire's early writings on conscientisation. Elements of Freire's work resonate with ideas advanced by postmodernists in fields such as literary criticism and cultural studies. However, the metaphysical, ontological, epistemological and ethical principles which underpin Freire's pedagogy work are essentially modernist. The demise of subject-centred reason (Peters and Marshall, 1993; Oliver, 1991; Heller, 1990) poses particular difficulties for Freirean theory. Freire explicitly situates the knowing, praxical, dialogical human Subject at the centre of his ethic, and in the notion of conscientisation we find the educational manifestation *par excellence*



of this ideal. Education on the Freirean view should (among other things) enable people to perceive more deeply the contradictions of social life, probing beneath the superficiality of surface appearances, while simultaneously entering the historical process as critically conscious Subjects. Becoming critically conscious affirms humans as beings who create history and culture. The critically conscious person thus appears, at first glance, to be the very embodiment of the self-knowing, self-directing, self-contained subject so central to the Enlightenment project. Critical consciousness implies not only an ability to transform the world, but a *self-conscious, reflective, rational* process of change.

Bowers maintains that Freirean adult literacy programmes are built on an existentialist-humanist view of individualism, from which Freire derives the notion that 'rational thought should govern individual choice' (Bowers, 1983, p. 943). Freire begins with the liberal Enlightenment construct of the individual as a 'self-forming and directing being' (Bowers, 1986, p. 151). Building upon the shift from a medieval to a modern Western consciousness, which carried with it an attack on received traditions of authority (Bowers, 1983, p. 945), Freire's pedagogy privileges personal and social change over tradition and continuity. The constant problematisation of daily life implied by Freire's ethic, and by critical consciousness in particular, is, in Bowers' view, characteristically Western and unavoidably individualist. Freire moderates his ideal of critical reflection by 'saying that learning to think must lead to democratic and mutually responsible forms of community' (p. 937), but he does not resolve the tension between the authority of individual judgement and 'the forms of authority that give community a sense of coherent identity and purpose' (Bowers, 1986, p. 150).

Bowers' claim that 'consciousness raising' (to use the term he generally employs) is an individualist ideal is reinforced by the 'stages' interpretation of conscientisation represented in the work of people such as Smith and Alschuler. For Smith, conscientisation is conceived as a process of individual development. Further support for an individualist account of conscientisation is furnished by the wide variety of 'empowering' pedagogies which purport to be Freirean in orientation. Many of these concentrate on *self*-empowerment and draw tacitly if not directly on the same assumptions which underpin Smith's understanding of conscientisation. At stake is the ideal of an individual human being gaining greater control over his or her life through the acquisition or adoption of certain attitudes, modes of thought, and forms of behaviour.

The characterisation of conscientisation in individualist terms does not square with Freire's stress on the collective, dialogical nature of liberating reflection and action for transformation. From his earliest writings, Freire has emphasised the *social* character of conscientisation:

It is sufficient to know that conscientisation does not take place in abstract beings in the air but in real men and women and in social structures, to understanding that it cannot remain on the level of the individual. (Freire, 1976, pp. 146-147)

The notion of dialogue is central to conscientisation, as Freire conceives it, and must be understood in contextual, political terms. Dialogue, when viewed



specifically as an aspect of the process of conscientisation in Freirean adult literacy education, is not merely idle conversation, nor even simply an educative conversation in the general sense (i.e. a conversation through which learning takes place). Rather, it is explicitly directed towards identifying, analysing, criticising and transforming conditions of oppression. The importance of collectivity for Freire cannot be over-emphasised: without it, he warns, those who wield greatest power have a lever for fragmenting (and thus reducing the effectiveness of) struggles against dominant ideas and practices. Dialogue for conscientisation implies a certain unity of purpose, originating in (what Freire sees as) the very nature of human *being* itself: the ontological vocation of humanisation.

An individualist account of conscientisation is (or ought to be) ontologically untenable given what it means to 'truly' *be* for Freire. For being critical, dialogical and praxical — that is to say, being a Subject in the Freirean sense — is in large part what being human entails. An individualist reading of conscientisation (and Freirean theory more broadly) is also at odds with the Freirean concept of 'knowing', suggesting an epistemological tension as well. Freire argues that no one can 'know' alone: knowing requires the presence (though this does not have to be an immediate physical presence) of an 'other' to gain its authenticity. Conscientisation, apart from anything else, represents the process of coming to 'know' the world in a different way. One dimension of this process is acquiring a sense of oneself as a being among others — i.e. as a member of a class, or at least a group — such that personal difficulties come to be seen in their wider social context. This is a process of linking 'biography' with 'structure' (Mills, 1970) which is profoundly anti-individualist and which can only proceed authentically *through* a more collective (dialogical) approach towards education and the activities of daily life.

Smith and Alschuler might protest here that nothing in their analysis diminishes the importance of dialogue in Freire's ideal. One of the distinguishing features of critically conscious individuals is that they are dialogical. Naïvely conscious individuals analyse and confront the world in reformist terms, often shunning relationships with their peers and disavowing their class origins (see Smith, 1976, pp. 52, 58). Magically conscious individuals have no sense of themselves as beings *with* as well as *in* the world, and no conception of life on a more historic and social plane: their existence is defined by the struggle to survive rather than the need to flourish (compare Freire, 1976, p. 17). Yet, in locating the process of conscientisation within the discourse of individualism — and more specifically (in Smith's case) within the Kohlbergian approach to developmental psychology — a significant break from Freire's overall intentions in employing the term 'conscientisation' has already been made. Freire does not deny that individuals will (or ought) to change through the conscientisation process, but this must be seen alongside the wider phenomenon of *social* transformation. The 'I think' is only possible (Freire believes) through a corresponding 'We think'. Thus, to speak of conscientisation as a movement in patterns of thought or behaviour among individuals without tying this to a broader shift in collective consciousness is nonsensical from a Freirean point of view.

Bowers, however, would argue that the ethical assumptions underpinning concepts such as 'dialogue' in Freire's philosophy are Western to the core and thus *necessarily* individualist. This idea turns on a particular construction of 'the' Western tradition and Freire's relationship to this (and place in it). Bowers assumes that underlying or 'driving' all of Freire's theorising is a specific way of looking at the world: a mode of consciousness which can be described as 'the Western mind set'. At the heart of this mind set are certain presuppositions about (the value of) rationality, control, agency, and change. Dialogue may involve discussion between two or more people — and Freire may talk of the importance of fostering collective relationships, an awareness of class, and a sense of community — but, Bowers would say, the modes of human thought and action which occur within dialogical and communal settings are still centred on the individual.

While the characteristics of critical consciousness outlined in *Education: The Practice of Freedom* (Freire, 1976) bear some resemblance to ideals often associated with liberal individualism, Freire's statements must be read in conjunction with other sections in this text, studied alongside other writings, and examined in light of Freire's *practice* of conscientisation in his adult literacy work. Freire's ethic is not built on the idea of unified individuals making 'free', autonomous choices in a contextless vacuum. The notion of conscientisation, in fact, rests in large measure on assumptions which directly oppose this view. As human beings, Freire argues, we are always socially, culturally and politically 'situated'. Human consciousnesses are constituted within distinct ideological frameworks, through relationships with others and with an ever-changing world. The very justification for conscientisation depends on an acknowledgement that consciousnesses are never 'pure', but always shaped or conditioned. Freire speaks — in *Education: The Practice of Freedom* as well as in later books — of thinking, acting and knowing as *social* events (see, for example, Freire, 1976, pp. 134–135). He is adamant that we cannot think, speak, read, write, learn, or *be* alone. To *be human* is to be a social being. Humans are beings of relationships: beings whose very existence cannot be comprehended without reference to others.

Freire explicitly rejects the Cartesian notion of a self-identical, self-knowing 'I' and replaces it with the dialogical, socially constituted 'we'. Clearly, then, he does not embrace a 'pure', 'atomistic' notion of individual rational autonomy. Bowers would concede this, but argue that in placing the reflective Subject at the centre of his ethic, Freire cannot avoid fostering a certain form of individualism. The critical reflection in Freirean dialogue, Bowers would argue, presupposes an 'individual-like intentionality' (Bowers, 1986, p. 150). This, I believe, is a distortion of the Freirean ideal. It is true that Freire conceives of consciousness — and, by implication, reflection — as 'intentionality toward the world', but this is not an 'individual-like' intentionality. When we turn to the world to examine it, or attempt to step back from our immediate surroundings to perceive more clearly the nature of our problems, we do so with a reflective intentionality that is already, and necessarily, socially formed. Consciousnesses are created in a social world, through interaction with that world. We can strive to know or understand ourselves in relation to the world, but we cannot autonomously constitute ourselves as knowers. As McLaren and

Hammer (1989) argue, and this is consistent with Freire's position, human beings are *self-conscious* rather than *self-constituting*. While we do not individuate our own consciousnesses, we can nevertheless become *sufficiently* self-conscious to 'recognize our own constitution outside of the exigencies of our own volition' (p. 49). Crucially, it is our self-consciousness of the constitution of selves which *makes liberation possible* (p. 49).

An important element of conscientisation is precisely this: the development of a deeper (self-conscious) understanding of the ways in which we are *not* merely isolated, self-constituting individuals. Dialogue, the means through which this growing realisation emerges, can never be simply a collection of individual consciousnesses. Consciousnesses are socially constituted before dialogue even begins and they are *reconstituted* through purposeful communication with others. The ideas generated through dialogue are more than the sum of individual contributions: they are the *synthesis* of a dialogical relation, mediated by an object of study, between two or more partially self-conscious Subjects seeking to know and to transform the world.

Freire does not use the language of discourse analysis, but his theory of conscientisation — *when viewed in relation to his philosophy as a whole* — is compatible in many respects with insights from work in this area. All of us, Freire wants to say, operate within and through multiple discourses. (The term 'discourse' here is used in the broadest sense to mean 'a way of being in the world'.) Conscientisation is concerned with expanding the range of discourses within which people might actively (and reflectively) participate. This is not merely a shift in 'sign systems', but a change in the concrete practices of everyday life. There is thus a material as well as 'intellectual' basis to conscientisation. Being critically conscious implies a continuous process of transformation. People who undergo conscientisation are constantly being re-constituted, as they critically reflect upon reality, act, change both themselves and the world around them, reflect again on the new reality which results from transformation, carry out further actions as necessary, and so on.

The conscientised Freirean Subject is therefore a subject 'on the move', a being who both shapes reality and is shaped by it. The subject remains the 'home of consciousness' (Oliver, 1991, p. 178) in Freirean theory, though the consciousness which 'resides' in a given subject is never stable. The subject for Freire is neither completely self-constituting and self-directing nor a totally decentred network of crisscrossing desires (cf. Eagleton, 1985, pp. 71–72). Freire retains the view that people can resist oppressive structures, ideas and practices — consciously, reflectively and deliberately. Such resistance, though, which is at the heart of conscientisation, always takes place within ideological and political limits, must be forged dialogically with others, and is necessarily incomplete. The Freirean conception of agency — especially as represented in the notion of conscientisation — thus falls between a liberal individualist view and a fully developed postmodern position.

The postmodernist notion of multiple subjectivities suggests a reorientation in thinking about conscientisation. Individuals can certainly no longer be neatly categorised into 'personality types', nor adequately described as being at a (single) particular level of consciousness. For, on the postmodernist view of subjectivity, we live in and through a plethora of different discourses. Freire

would acknowledge that these discourses are frequently contradictory. If the original construct of conscientisation as a process of moving from a state of either 'magical' or 'naïve' consciousness towards 'critical' consciousness is reconsidered, a postmodernist perspective implies constant movement between the three levels. The assumption that one cannot display characteristics of more than one stage of consciousness in any given period becomes highly questionable.

Taking Freire's initial list of characteristics at each stage as a starting point, imagine the case of a Brazilian peasant supposedly at a magical level of consciousness. Under a strict stages model (such as Smith's), such an individual would not be expected to display any of the characteristics typical of critical consciousness. 'Depth in the interpretation of problems', 'the testing of one's "findings"', 'openness to revision', and the avoidance of distortion in the perception of problems are all features of critical consciousness (see Freire, 1976, p. 18). While peasants might not display these characteristics with respect to their understanding and evaluation of political problems, it is surely possible that such qualities would be in evidence in their management of land and crops. Making the most of the land involves balancing a complex range of factors pertaining to soil, plants, the weather, irrigation, crop rotation, and so on. The depth in interpretation of the various elements necessary for effective crop production is likely to have been considerable; many peasants would have 'tested' their 'findings' in employing different methods of using the soil from year to year; and revision of planting or harvesting procedures in light of experience would have been almost essential.

The notion of occupying multiple stage positions by displaying characteristics from several levels seems not only possible, but probable, given a moment's reflection on everyday experiences. Conceivably, a person might be classed as 'magical', 'naïve' and 'critical', depending on the sphere of his or her life under examination. People might display the qualities associated with critical consciousness within one discursive setting, while acting in typically 'magical' or 'naïve' ways in other situations. I may develop a sophisticated, critical understanding of party politics, yet at the same time explain events in my family life in terms of fate or the workings of some higher power. Or, I may exhibit all the qualities of critical consciousness in my professional life (e.g., as a teacher), yet display a naïve understanding of environmental issues. At any given moment, a person thinks, acts, feels, wants, etc. in particular ways, within a discursive framework which constructs limits and possibilities for being and doing. Almost simultaneously, however, a specific orientation towards the world can be transformed as people shift from one discourse to another, or move between different 'moments' within a single discursive setting.

There are thus no fixed stages of consciousness with clear-cut distinguishing characteristics at each level. People experience, engage and construct social reality in different ways within different discourses, material circumstances and historical moments. We do not remain permanently conscientised, or 'locked in' to a particular way of thinking; conscientisation takes place as a momentary process. The focus is no longer on a single, 'self-contained', self-knowing human subject directing his or her life in an increasingly critical fashion. If there is no essential self, then we can only talk of a person as he or she 'is' at any given moment engaging in reflective action. Through conscientisation, a person shifts



his or her 'position' in the world, though not in the ordered, sequential, behaviourist fashion implied by the stages model.

If the original impetus for, and purpose of, conscientisation is to be retained, particular emphasis must be placed on enhancing possibilities for moments of dialogical, critical reflection on conditions of oppression. To denude conscientisation of its political character and liberatory intent is to destroy the very purpose for which the term was initially employed. The postmodern turn in social theory (and in ethics and education especially) does not, to my way of thinking, rule out the possibility of *attempting* to understand — and act within and upon — the world in ever more critical ways. From a postmodernist point of view, however, any effort to act or think in a particular manner must be recognised as partial, incomplete, and possibly contradictory. Indeed, an important dimension of critically conscious activity is the process of reflecting on the embeddedness of one's own views within multiple discourses. This demands an exhaustive attempt to examine processes of discursive construction and the historical formation of subjectivities — especially those associated with modes of oppression and liberation. Critical theoretical analysis, political commitment, and social action may all be inevitably *provisional* in postmodern times, but this does not make them any less necessary. While nearly three decades have passed since Freire published his first thoughts on conscientisation, there is potentially much that might be gained in rethinking the concept as an educational ideal and in applying it as a powerful force for social change.

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### NOTES

1. See, for example, Lloyd (1972); Sanders (1972); Plunkett (1978); Gleeson (1974); Elias (1974); Shor (1980); O'Hara (1989); Kilian (1988); Burstow (1989).
2. This paucity of references to concrete examples of genuinely democratic social systems, with a large proportion of the population displaying characteristics typical of critical consciousness, has been remedied to some extent in more recent works where Freire cites the example of Nicaragua as a country which has made definite moves toward critical transitivity in its policies and practices immediately following the revolution in 1979. See Freire and Macedo (1987), pp. 106–107.

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