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A COMPARISON AND CRITICAL EVALUATION  
OF THE SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT  
OF PAULO FREIRE AND IVAN ILLICH, WITH A  
PARTICULAR EMPHASIS UPON THE RELIGIOUS  
INSPIRATION OF THEIR THOUGHT

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I. THE PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Two different and radical approaches to social and educational reform have been proposed in recent years. One is the theory of change through "conscientization" expounded by Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator now in exile from his native land. The other is the theoretical and practical program for deschooling and restructuring a "convivial society" presented by Ivan Illich, the co-founder of the Centro Intercultural de Documentacion (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Today these two thinkers are at the center of controversy in many countries of the world. Their ideas are well known in both Latin and North America. Recent educational reform proposals in Peru have been influenced by their thought. The writings of Illich have been discussed in the past five years in the United States and Canada, where he has often appeared for lectures, conferences, and symposia. Paulo Freire, though less well known in North America than in

Latin America, is more and more a center of discussion for educators in Canada and the United States.

Since the publication of their writings beginning in the latter part of the 1960's, critical evaluations of Freire and Illich have appeared in reviews and articles. Yet no extended criticism of the thought of either Illich and Freire has yet appeared. Also, though many writers often group Freire and Illich together when discussing radical thought, no extended comparison of their thought exists at present. This study has provided both a comparison and a critical evaluation of the social and educational thought of Freire and Illich.

A most fruitful means of making comparisons and contrasts between Freire and Illich is an examination of their respective religious visions and the influences these visions have had on all areas of their thinking. Both men are Roman Catholics. Though religious ideas are found in all of Freire's works, he has become increasingly theological and religious in his thinking ever since he took up work as an educational consultant with the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland. Though Illich has formally resigned from the Roman Catholic priesthood, he still remains a Catholic deeply committed to the proposition that the Christian Gospel is a sound policy for today's world.

This dissertation shows that the respective visions of Freire and Illich have influenced their thought in various areas: their philosophy of man, their social criticism, their revolutionary doctrine, and their educational criticism and theory. Though some reviews and articles on these thinkers have alluded to this dimension of their thought, no in-depth study of their thought has been presented from this vantage point. This dissertation shows that a study of Freire and Illich with this orientation produces interesting points of comparison and contrast between these two men.

## II. RESOURCES FOR THE STUDY

This dissertation examines all the available writings of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich. The major writings of Freire are Educacion como Practica de la Libertade (1967), Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), Cultural Action for Freedom (1970), Education for Critical Consciousness (1973). For an understanding of Freire's religious thought, a number of articles are extremely important. These include: "The Educational Role of the Church in Latin America" (1972), "A Letter to a Theology Student" (1972), "Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating" (1972); and "The Third World and Theology" (1972). The major works of Illich are Celebration of Awareness (1969), Deschooling Society (1970), Institutional Inversion (1972), Tools for Conviviality (1973).

The religious dimension of Illich's thought is especially brought out in two articles: "Deschooling Society" (1972) and "How Can We Hang on to Christianity?" (1972).

The author has benefited from attending lectures given by Freire at Fordham University in 1972. At this time, he also discussed with Freire certain aspects of Freire's thought. The author also benefited from attending lectures given by Illich at CIDOC in 1972 and 1973. During these visits to CIDOC, the author also had personal conversations with Illich about Illich's background and his relationship to Paulo Freire.

The rather extensive literature on Freire and Illich has been carefully examined. Especially helpful in this regard were the writings which have emanated from the Seminar on Alternatives to Education held at CIDOC in 1969-1970. Both Freire and Illich were chief participants in these seminars. It was within these seminars that Illich conceived his plan for deschooling society. The author of the dissertation is a participant in the current CIDOC Seminar which is attempting to define limits to industrial growth. Participation in this seminar has given the author additional insights into the current thought of Ivan Illich.

### III. DIVISION OF THE STUDY

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. Each chapter treats an important aspect of the thought of Freire and

Illich. Chapter 1 presents Freire and Illich as two religious reformers. A biographical sketch is provided of both men, with special emphasis on their religious vision. Chapter 2 develops the religious philosophy of man to which both Freire and Illich ascribe. Chapter 3 develops the main lines of the social criticism in which both Freire and Illich engage. The religious dimension of this criticism is indicated. In Chapter 4, Freire and Illich are compared and contrasted with regard to their theories and strategies for achieving revolution in society. Chapters 5 and 6 develop the educational criticisms and theories of Freire and Illich. As has been already pointed out in this abstract, the underlying thread tying the various parts of the dissertation together is the religious dimension in the thought of Freire and Illich.

#### IV. MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The Catholic background (Chapter 1) of Freire and Illich has provided both men with a religious vision of man and the world. Both Freire and Illich affirm a belief in a transcendent being with whom man can enter into a personal relationship. They take the message of the Christian Gospel with utmost seriousness. They appeal to the example and to the words of Jesus. They consider God as a person who is active in the world,

aiding man in his struggle against oppression. Freire and Illich have different views on the role that the Church should take in social and political struggles. Freire espouses a prophetic theology of liberation which sees the Christian message as a call to Christians and the Churches to become actively involved in political struggles, even to the point of participation in violent revolutionary activity. Illich, on the other hand, sees the Gospel as a call to poverty, nonviolence, and renunciation of excessive production and consumption. According to Illich, the Churches would not be true to their mission if they involved themselves in social and political struggles. Individual Christians should become involved in these struggles but not in political revolutions for these do not bring about truly radical changes in society.

Both Freire and Illich are radical Christian humanists (Chapter 2). They are Christian humanists because at the heart of their thought is a Christian view of man. Man is a finite creature of God. The capability of reflection and freedom of choice is part of man's essential makeup. Man is responsible for his actions. Men should live together in a brotherhood of equals. Men both can and should live a life of close relationship to God. Freire and Illich are radical humanists because they call all human institutions into doubt and question on the basis of whether or not these institutions allow for the full expression

of man's being and activity.

The author found certain weaknesses in the philosophy of man espoused by these two thinkers. Both men postulate a human essence, preceding all human experiences, potentially creative but repressed and oppressed by manipulative and addictive institutions. Both men appear to ignore that portion of their religious tradition which speaks to the intrinsic corruptibility of man. Neither Freire nor Illich address themselves to the evidence that behaviorists have proposed in formulating their view of man. Objection is taken to the excessively utopian and romantic view of man presented by these thinkers. This view fails to account for present oppressive and manipulative structures and holds out illusory hopes for a future Golden Age.

Both Freire and Illich engage in radical social criticism (Chapter 3). Illich's social criticism began with his criticisms of the Roman Catholic Church. He criticized the institutional Church for its failure to provide an atmosphere in which human freedom and personal responsibility could develop. "The Church had institutionalized religious and spiritual values and thus prevented man from achieving true religion. Illich sees this same process of institutionalization of values taking place with regard to other important human values; for example, learning and health.



Freire in his social criticism focuses upon the element of oppression which exists in society. Oppressive relationships are seen to be destructive of the true essence or being of man. The forms of oppression that Freire speaks of are those chiefly of a social and political nature. In more recent writings, he has directed his attention to religious oppression and to the oppressive dimension of technology.

At the heart of the social philosophy of Freire and Illich lies their Christian vision of man. This vision affords them a general point of departure by which they can criticize many truly oppressive and manipulative elements in society. Yet it does not <sup>force</sup> afford them an adequate criterion for determining specifically what institutions are oppressive or manipulative. Freire's social analysis is simplistic in dividing societies into oppressors and oppressed. Illich does not make adequate distinctions between convivial and manipulative institutions.

Freire has introduced certain Marxist elements into his social criticism. He sees oppression in terms of a struggle between the ruling classes and the masses. He has come to accept the inevitability of the revolution as perhaps the only effective means of achieving the radical changes necessary in Latin America. Man is fundamentally defined by his praxis-- his reflection and action upon the world. Though he has accepted

elements of Marxism, Freire, like many other leftist Latin American Catholics, remains committed to the Christian Gospel.

Both Freire and Illich are preachers of revolution (Chapter 4). Yet a great difference exists between the type of revolution that each man proposes. Freire, as has been already indicated, advocates political revolution for oppressed peoples. Freire himself has not participated in revolutionary action, but he has come to view this as necessary, especially in Latin America. Education is given a great role to play in forging the revolution. Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) has been <sup>correctamente</sup> rightly described as a handbook for revolutionary education and activity.

Illich's revolution is termed a "cultural" or "institutional" revolution. This revolution will be preceded by the collapse of industrial society. Voting majorities will come to power and will use legal means to reconstruct the "convivial society." Illich has been moved in his latest writings to describe this future society in socialistic terms. Voting majorities will impose limits to industrial growth in society.

Both Freire and Illich appeal to the Gospel to justify the revolution which they propose. Freire explicitly argues that participation even in a violent revolutionary struggle can be justified and even called for by the Christian Gospel. He judges the proposition "that rebellion is an act against God" to be a

myth imposed upon the masses by the ruling elites. He presents God as a person who both calls men to fight against oppression and to struggle with his help for true liberation. He depicts Jesus as a radical who challenged the oppressive ruling elites of his time. He <sup>reprende</sup> chides the Church for its illusory thinking that it could remain neutral in the social and political struggles of our time.

Illich's call to revolution has all the appearances of a call to join a Christian crusade against pollution, consumption, and growth. The heart of the Gospel message for Illich is the call to poverty, nonviolence, and renunciation. Illich calls the Sermon on the Mount the most rational policy for our world today. Contrary to Freire's view, Illich sees no direct role for the Church as an institution in this religious and nonviolent crusade. The Church is a place for personal and communal spiritual activities. Illich sees no justification, religious or otherwise, for political revolution. This type of revolution does not touch the essential problems of society, which concern the manipulative and addictive nature of modern industrial society.

The most serious problem with Freire's revolutionary theory is its naiveté. Freire discusses revolution without discussing any particular social and historical contexts. He appears to be generalizing upon his Brazilian experiences. He is like the

crusader who, after the good and brave fight, stands ready to generalize his theories and strategies to the situation of all oppressed peoples. Freire's analysis of Brazilian society of the early 1960's into oppressors and oppressed does not do justice to that historical situation. The extension of this social analysis as a universal theory of social analysis and as the basis for a theory of revolution is even more unacceptable.

Illich's revolutionary theory and strategies also contain some serious weaknesses. Illich appears to exaggerate the extent of the industrial crisis. This is a significant weakness because Illich's cultural revolution is possible only with this breakdown. Illich also exaggerates the power of law to bring about radical social changes. Vested interests and class conflicts in society are not seriously treated in Illich's revolutionary theory. Illich's interpretation of the Gospel as entailing the non-involvement of the Churches in political and social struggles can be seriously challenged.

Both Freire and Illich are most widely known as critics of education and schooling (Chapter 5). Both men criticize schooling and educational practices for impairing the freedom of men to take responsibility for their own learning. They criticize educational practices for maintaining the present rigid class structure in society and for preventing true brotherhood among men.

For Illich, schools have alienated men from their own learning potential by making learning a product which only the school can produce for the student. Freire calls for an education for critical awareness, while Illich urges the deschooling of society.

The religious vision of Freire and Illich can be a useful instrument for examining their educational criticisms. Freire describes three forms of religion, each of which has a corresponding form of education: traditionalist, modernizing, and prophetic or radical. Illich sees operating within the schools the same harmful processes he saw operating within the Church. A professional class comes between students and true learning. The schools determine what true learning is. Education has become a commodity which is mass produced.

Both Freire and Illich call for a revolution in education in the name of freedom. But neither of them provides a satisfactory explanation of the freedom to learn and its limitations. Illich's views in this area are contradictory in that he both calls for an absolute freedom to learn and proposes a convivial society in which great restrictions will necessarily be placed on the freedom of individuals. Nowhere does he adequately reconcile these contradictory claims. A similar contradiction is found in Freire. He advocates that all individuals in the process of education must be free; but when he speaks of his pedagogy of revolution,

he agrees with the ideas of some revolutionaries who call for <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>diminution</sup> curtailment of human freedom in order to advance the cause of the revolution.

Both Freire and Illich call for a revolution in education in the name of equality. Both contend that it is the schools which maintain present inequalities in society. Other radical critics have made similar assertions. Illich has modified somewhat his radical proposal of deschooling society as the necessary condition for achieving an egalitarian society. He now feels that some schools can be admitted into the convivial society, but the balance of learning in this society should favor informal types of education.

The strongest criticisms that are made of Illich in this area are those that contend that his program of deschooling society would harm the group; namely, the poor, which he is most desirous of helping. It is contended, and rightly so, that in a deschooled society the rich would be in a better position to provide an education and thus the gap between the rich and the poor would become even greater. It is criticisms like this that no doubt have been responsible for leading Illich to embrace socialism.

The revolution proposed by Freire and Illich in education is also made in the name of fraternity. Both contend that education

should promote autonomous and creative interrelationships among persons. The teacher-student relationship should be one of equality not one of deference, paternalism, and authoritarianism. Education, according to these thinkers, should not be marked by a strong competitive ethos because this goes counter to the demands of true fraternity.

Both Freire and Illich can be classified as normative or prescriptive theorists of education (Chapter 6). At the heart of the educational philosophy of each man is a view of human learning which corresponds to the true nature of man which they have expounded. Illich extolls that learning which is incidental or freely chosen. He views compulsory education as detrimental to this type of learning. Illich offers little empirical evidence for his claim that most learning is incidental or casual in nature. He also fails to make any kind of a distinction between true and false learning and between experience and knowledge. He also fails to distinguish the various types of learning that have been proposed by educational philosophers.

Freire's theory of learning is contained in his discussion of conscientization. This has been defined as

...the process in which men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives, and of their capacity to transform that reality through action.

Freire develops levels of consciousness of which critical consciousness is the highest level. Freire's view of learning bears some resemblance to Dewey's description of learning as the reconstruction of experiences. Freire emphasizes the dialogical or dialectical nature of learning, a concept which he used frequently but does not adequately describe.

One problem with Freire's theory of learning is that it appears to presume the easy transition from knowing to acting. Another problem with Freire's conscientization concerns the problem of indoctrination. Freire has strongly urged in writing and in lectures that his method does not entail indoctrination. Given the lack of education among oppressed people and given the obvious political purposes of the coordinators of Freire's culture circles, it would appear most difficult for this method to satisfy the demands for objectivity and appeal to rational argumentation.

With regard to the organization of learning in a future society, Illich shows more imagination than Freire. He describes the various networks that would replace schools. These include the free access to educational objects, such as books, radios, microscopes, and televisions. A second network is a skill exchange wherein students who wished to master a skill could contact a model who would demonstrate it for the learner. The third network is peer-matching on the basis of common interests.



This peer matching would be done through a computer. A fourth network is a system of independent educators. These educators would pursue jointly determined, but difficult, intellectual tasks. These networks are imaginative, but Illich appears to make the education of all men sound rather simple when he describes it in terms of access to things and people. These concrete proposals are mere skeletons with a minimum of muscle.

#### IV. CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

It is easy to be impressed with the goals that both Freire and Illich set for society and for education in society. Many of these goals, like motherhood and holiness, are <sup>irrefutably</sup> unassailable. But at the same time, it is also easy to be dissatisfied with their description of tactics and strategies to achieve these goals. Neither reformer speaks persuasively to the problem of implementation. Perhaps, by definition, utopian schemes must be couched in generalities, rather than in specifics.

There is also a certain circular quality in the thinking of Freire and Illich which appears to be a necessary attribute of utopian thinking. Both argue that the emergence of the New Man will come about with the emergence of the New Society and the New Education. But this New Society and New Education also depend on the emergence of the New Man. Illich asserts unconvincingly that he is not proposing a Utopia with its New Man.

The utopian quality of the convivial society has not escaped the attention of those who have either read about it or heard Illich speak about it.

Both Freire and Illich speak rather vaguely about revolutionary change in society and in education. Both appear to be potential revolutionaries. As revolutionaries, they have the responsibility to be more specific about the implications of their talk about revolutionary change. Unless both men give attention to the strategies of change in society and in education, it is hard to resist the temptation of classifying them as disillusioned social and educational reformers playing at revolution.

The author of this dissertation, <sup>ainda que</sup> though he in some ways sympathizes with the utopian visions presented by Freire and Illich, must confess to a certain <sup>aprensão</sup> uneasiness with this type of thinking. Reform in education and in society, it would appear, does not come through revolutionary transformation. It is his belief that improvement in the human condition, when it comes, is most often the result of the accumulation of many small changes.

mas Freire  
tem certeza  
assim.

This unoriginal analogy adequately sums up the difference between these two divergent views on social change:

Consider <sup>a humanidade</sup> mankind cast adrift in a leaky boat on the middle of a vast sea. Some of us in the crew believe that by <sup>reparando</sup> patching and repairing, we can continue and possibly reach the further shore. Others of us

contend that we can gain that objective only by the destruction of the old boat and the building of a new and more efficient craft. Clearly, all of us would prefer the new craft; but I, for one, am more than inordinately worried about the period ensuing between the destruction of the old boat and the time we crawl triumphantly onto the new.

An Educational Philosopher Looks at  
Paolo Freire

Maxine Greene

As an educational philosopher much concerned to find ways of promoting self-consciousness, authenticity, and clarity of thought, I see in the work of Paolo Freire many implications for a phenomenological approach to the teaching of teachers-to-be. As someone equally interested in current efforts to identify meaningful content for what we are calling "educational studies," I perceive in Freire's writings exemplary instances of content which is integrated and, at once, culturally significant. Not only does he achieve a "reciprocity of perspectives" derived from a range of social sciences as well as from philosophy; he constitutes, by means of those perspectives, an educational domain in which persons can be freed for critical thinking and communication--for the kind of reflectiveness which may in time transform their worlds."

I read Freire as a phenomenologist because of the stress he places upon consciousness and the importance of each individual becoming aware of his own life-world. Consciousness, for him, refers

to the multiple ways in which the individual confronts his world. These include such activities as perceiving, thinking, and believing, activities by means of which objects, events, and other human beings are presented to the experiencing person. Consciousness is always of something--something which then relates to the act of consciousness involved as the meaning of that act. An example might be the case of the tenement residents and their perceptions of the drunken man walking on the street. The man presented himself to those asked to discuss the scene as "a decent worker and a souse like us"; and this was the meaning of their perceiving that particular scene. The life-world refers to the/ways in which the individual experiences his society and his culture. It is a world he accepts as "given" and takes for granted unless he is offered an opportunity to "pose problems" with respect to it and transform what he took to be unquestionable into meaningful themes. These themes--aspirations, motives, objectives--are then opened to study; horizons, up to then scarcely visible, are explored. "Thematic investigation," writes Freire, "thus becomes a common striving towards awareness of reality and towards self-awareness, which makes this investigation a starting point for the educational process or for cultural action of a liberating character."

My conception of educational studies is such that "awareness of reality" and "self-awareness" both are focal. And I would

like to find a way of communicating to students a concept of education as "cultural action of a liberating character." This is not to presuppose that American students are oppressed in the manner Brazilian students are oppressed. Obviously, we have to distinguish between the "culture of silence" imposed upon exploited rural populations and the peculiar powerlessness experienced by many American youth. Nevertheless, we are all familiar with growing tendency among young people (and their teachers) to perceive themselves as being processed or manipulated by bureaucratic systems over which they have no control. We know well that one of the characteristics of the technetronic society is the structure of social control which makes it increasingly difficult for the individual to feel himself to be a "Subject" who is truly free to choose. We know too, perhaps particularly within the institutional world of education, how difficult it is for people to believe that the "given" can be fundamentally changed.

A very common response to this, even within schools of education today, is to opt for a concentration on "affective" education or for the kind of education focusing on "sensitivity," "encounters," and the nurture of trust. Very frequently, this kind of concentration leads to the neglect of cognitive studies, which are seen to be implicitly manipulative. Not only do the teachers concerned deliberately reject any stance which suggests that they feel like "authorities"; they reject the authority of subject matters and of

anything resembling cognitive norms. They opt for privatism or what Freire calls "subjectivism." "They cherish what seems to me to be the romantic idea that the way to free oneself from the depredations of a system is to withdraw into one's innerness, to feel rather than to reflect. Those who take this attitude towards the education of teachers appear to believe that only the teacher who is liberated in this sense can move other students to authentic expressions of themselves."

Freire's is the revolutionary answer. "It is not enough for people simply to feel their needs; they must go on to understand the causes of their needs. This demands critical reflection upon the reality they themselves are conscious of experiencing in the interests of transforming that which dehumanizes and deprives." To me, this is the point at which Pedagogy of the Oppressed becomes most highly relevant to "educational studies." Our concern too is to enable teachers to become reflective about the social reality in which they live their lives. One of our prime efforts is to arouse them from mere immersion in that reality. We want them to pose questions about the "given," what they have taken for granted about culture, social institutions, schooling, and the rest. We want them to become aware of the historical situation in which they themselves exist and of the past which can become theirs if they learn how to conceptualize it. And then, because their knowledge is and must be a type of praxis, we hope they will begin to surpass what is in the

name of a reality more humane.

"If teachers-to-be can be involved in the posing of questions with respect to the causes of their reality, whatever it is and has been, the problems of "cultural invasion" and "manipulation" can be met." In our fields, surely, we have to face the complicated problems masquerading as problems of minorities, or ethnic groups, or the "deprived." Freire challenges us to realize what we are doing when we objectify people in this way or subsume them under abstract terms. Doing so, he enables us to perceive possibilities some of us have never thought about before. He makes us realize the dignity of each man's potential consciousness, each man's conscientization; and if we can feed this realization into our own practice, we and our students are likely to be transformed.

Finally, there are the perspectives Freire opens up with respect to the social sciences when he talks of viewing different themes in specific manners "by each of the social sciences to which <sup>each</sup> is related." He might well be discussing an effective, integrated foundations class where the teacher no longer suffers from the pressure of competing disciplines. The point again concerns where it all begins: the life-world of each distinctive individual involved --and the need, the compelling need, to make sense.