'Theory' and 'practice' in the sociology of Paulo Freire

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Our education is fraught with problems, the most prominent of which is dogmatism ... the children learn text-books and concepts which remain merely text-books and concepts ... The method of examination is to treat the candidates as enemies and ambush them.

Mao-Tse Tung

Paulo Freire's writings represent a stark reminder of the problems facing the Third World, whilst at the same time raising questions for 'The First' concerning its commitment to growth and opulence. The importance of his work rests in a refusal to accept as given commonly accepted dogmas and myths which are uncritically interpreted to explain the nature of social phenomena. Freire's recent publications Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Cultural Action for Freedom have created more than a mere ripple of interest in audiences of teachers and students already critical of existing practices and policies in education.

This article represents an introduction examination of certain main themes emerging from Freire's writings, and is intended as background material for those students and teachers who, after reading this brief account, may wish to pursue his work more deeply.

Background

Freire was born in 1921 in Recife, North Eastern Brazil, an area populated by peasants and redundant agricultural workers.
Main postulates

Freire integrates an educational with a political debate, rather than submerging one as a subsidiary to the other. The imagery in his writings suggests an analogy between an 'invaded' nation and an 'exploited' learner, who are similarly defenceless and dependent upon those who abuse their own monopolistic access to power. Two main postulates are advanced by Freire: first, that all men are potentially capable of active transformation of their own environments, and secondly, that to achieve freedom, men must actively struggle against those typifications or stereotypes made of them by their oppressors.

Freire criticises colonialism, neo-colonialism and Western education in that it create myths which explain poverty and illiteracy. Freire's methodology is strongly influenced by literacy campaigns in the North Eastern Region that his work came to represent a threat to the government, and he was later imprisoned after the coup in 1964, and subsequently exiled to Chile and imprisoned in a concentration camp. Freire observes '...one does not expect dialogue from a coup.'

Freire's criticism of educational policy in the Third World raises radical questions concerning 'how such people ought to be treated' become reproduced. Freire points out it is within processes which define people as 'culturally deprived', that they become treated as such.

Freire's criticism of educational policy in the Third World raises radical questions concerning policy makers' notions about the illiterate peasant or slum dweller who is defined as diseased, 'marginal' or 'subhuman.' An adult education programme which is based on such myths not only insults the adult, writes Freire, but also re-defines his role as 'misfit.' Policy which fails to consider the individual as a human being is 'mephiophilic': it merely treats man as a dead object, devoid of choices and capability. However, despite Freire's immediate concern with the Third World, Schull reminds us that Freire is passionate and critical of didacticism and as well as his educational philosophy are as important for us as for the dispossessed in Latin America. Their struggle to become free subjects and to participate in the transformation of their society is similar in many ways to the struggle not only of blacks and Mexican Americans, but also of middle-class young people. Particularly for many of these groups of people as immigrants, adults, and young students are exposed and at risk to official typifications which are based on notions of 'who they are' and what they 'need to know.' Consequently, the culturally deprived, the 'mature student', the 'married woman' or the 'bright child' spring easily to mind and are well documented in major government reports. Freire criticises traditional education as basic starting point of liberation, and although the contexts of the First and the Third worlds may be different, certain important questions and issues are of a similar nature. Freire underlines his argument by challenging us to make a distinction between '... education as an instrument of domination and education as an instrument of liberation.'

'Banking education'

Freire criticises traditional 'narrative' forms of education as oppressive and likens them to a system of 'banking'. He suggests that education which follows this mode '... becomes an act of depositing in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorise and repeat. This is the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the student extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits ... oppression - overwhelming control - is mecriophilic; it is nourished by love of death, not life.' His critique of Banking Education rests in the view that the teacher as 'narrator' encourages a one-way dependence of the student upon the teacher. The memorising and regurgitation of 'facts' creates, and maintains, a gulph between teacher and taught. Freire argues that such a process is 'anti-dialogical' and therefore anti-educational on the grounds that dependency presents a contradiction and an obstacle to authentic free thinking and real consciousness.

Freire maintains that Banking Education merely reflects the consumption-production ethics of capitalism, which equate teaching and learning with such terms as deposits, investment, input and output. Messaros writing of the 'problem' of leisure in capitalist societies reveals another side of this banking process: 'The only form of accountancy known to capitalism is a narrow monetary accountancy, while seriously tackling the problems of free time (not idle leisure) requires a radically different approach.' To subvert this narrowness Freire advances the simple and obvious: that which teachers and students may collaborate in exploring together new questions, possibilities and alternatives. He suggests that narrative education is restricted in that it is essentially anti-dialogical, creating a passive model of the student which robs him of the opportunity to experiment and share his world with others. Maxine Greene points out that Freire's writings pose an illuminating critique of traditional and 'absolutist' perspectives on the curriculum, which posit a notion of knowledge as 'out there' and external to the student. Such traditional definitions of the teacher and student imply that the teacher merely initiates or induces the passive student into the 'agreed' worthwhile pursuits. Greene suggests that the student '... must feel himself to be a knower - rather than a passive receiver of someone else's preconstituted definitions of what is worth while. If curriculum is solely concerned with depositing ... it becomes an alien and alienating edifice, a kind of 'Crystal Palace' of ideas...'

Furthermore Freire maintains that the student who is robbed of the opportunity of being creative becomes trapped in a 'cult of silence'. When a learner is defined as a passive object, a context is created wherein he becomes perceived as not only dependent, but also 'mute' in the face of...
'Conscientization' knowledge and power. Freire describes this predicament as the 'Culture of Silence' in which large numbers of people become trapped in the processes of their own deep alienation. Within such a context, Freire claims, it is impossible for the dispossessed who are forced to mimic the dictates of their paternal overlords, to have authentic voices of their own. Furthermore, he suggests, where men are conditioned to fear freedom in a state of utter dependence on his exploiters, there can be no autonomous or true consciousness. However, this is not entirely a passive theory of socialisation as one might suppose, because as Freire points out, men may be trapped in the poverty of their environment but it is within the contradictions of such traps that the seeds of radicalism emerge. Bartre explains this quite simply: 'The settler has only recourse to one thing: brute force when he can command it; the native has only one choice between servitude and supremacy.' Freire reminds us that centuries of exploitation have left the oppressed with an internalised view of power based on the sadistic models of their oppressors. He maintains that the oppressed house the oppressor within themselves because they know of no other model of power. Furthermore, he is at pains to point out that if revolutionary change is to be anything other than the mere repetition of one oppression by another, a radical pedagogy must be achieved wherein models of power are based on love rather than hate. It is only within the framework of such a pedagogy, Freire argues, that a truly revolutionary pedagogy must incorporate a recognition of this face in order to succeed. Freire is critical of so called Left Wing movements based on the sadistic models of their oppressors. He has recorded some of their comments: 'I realise now I am a man, an educated man', 'We were taught to relate words to objects before they have understood the nature of the relationship involved, and often punishment follows the failure to conceptualise such links. It could even be argued that a similar pattern is evident in the educational experiences of university students. Learning to read or teach and learn must therefore be redefined, Freire argues, than the traditional processes of identification and memorising of letters and objects for both students and teachers. He has previously referred to as Banking forms of learning. Freire advances the view that there is more to the processes of learning to read and write than the mere memorising, defining and identifying of words solely as representative of objects or abstractions. Many school children, for example, are taught to read and write that the dispossessed become able to read and write the dispossessed become able to formulate their own views of the world based on critical knowledge rather than naive opinion, and to question the validity of the typical or given nature of their situation. A crucial pre-condition for such a process occurs only where students and teachers collaborate and share their experiences in a dialogically open situation. Through de-coding, Freire writes, '... the learners gradually, hesitantly and timorously place in doubt the opinion they held of reality and replace it with a more and more critical knowledge.' Once an image or picture of the world has been evoked through dialogue the word Pawela itself is introduced and broken down into syllables. 'This is the decisive moment for learning. It is the moment when those learning to read and write discover the syllabic composition of words in their language.' Freire advances the view that there is more to the processes of learning to read and write than the mere memorising, defining and identifying of words solely as representative of objects or abstractions. Many school children, for example, are taught to relate words to objects before they have understood the nature of the relationship involved, and often punishment follows the failure to conceptualise such links. It could even be argued that a similar pattern is evident in the educational experiences of university students. Learning to read or teach and learn must therefore be redefined, Freire argues. He has previously referred to as Banking forms of learning. Freire advances the view that there is more to the processes of learning to read and write than the mere memorising, defining and identifying of words solely as representative of objects or abstractions. Many school children, for example, are taught to relate words to objects before they have understood the nature of the relationship involved, and often punishment follows the failure to conceptualise such links. It could even be argued that a similar pattern is evident in the educational experiences of university students. Learning to read or teach and learn must therefore be redefined, Freire argues.
education wherein man is defined as a passive receptacle rather than an active protagonist.

Phenomenological implications

A phenomenological perspective emphasises a need to return to the nature of phenomena in everyday life, that is, they are immediate and inter-subjectively experienced by members of society. The phenomenological perspective in Freire’s work rests in his attempt to derive meaning from theory and practice within the life experiences of the poor, that is, sharing and understanding the meanings which they give to their predicaments. It is from such understanding that Freire derives his methodology of conscientization, which attempts, through dialogue, to subvert the culture of silence.

Freire’s writings carry us back to the phenomenon of reaching and learning, and make problematic the nature of this apparently obvious activity. He examines obvious or taken-for-granted assumptions which, for many, have become accepted as second-nature, and explores alternative ways of ‘looking’. One is reminded of Gouldner’s statement concerning reflexive thinking, which might easily apply to Freire’s work: ‘A reflexive sociology embodies a critical conception of segregated scholarly roles and has a vision of an alternative. It aims at transforming the sociologist’s relation to his work’.

Three main factors could be identified as cornerstones of reflexive thinking in Freire’s writings. First, he does not accept uncritically, as given, the currently accepted explanations of phenomena; second, his writings emerge from his commitment to sharing the world of the ‘dispossessed’, and finally his conception of ‘alternatives’ are constructed within, and through, the action-reflection context of the methodology of conscientization. Roger Dale argues: ‘Phenomenologists see man not as a mere passive recipient of his world but an active interpreter and constructor of it. The phenomenological sociologist seeks to elucidate the processes whereby actors generate and maintain their view of the social world.’

The importance of Freire’s contribution to the sociology of knowledge rests in his timely introduction of the concept of reflexive consciousness in and of itself. Man standing on his own feet as an active enquirer, rather than a passive receiver of the ideas of others. He believes that all men are capable of sustaining a critical relationship with their environments, and that through reflection and action they will be able to de-mythify and de-ideologise oppressive knowledge. From the concept of a dialogically shared inter-subjective world, Freire advances a methodology of cultural action for freedom, that is ‘... the way in which we attack culturally our own culture. It is to take culture as always problematic and to question it without accepting the myths that ossify it and ossify us.’ For these reasons conscientization, as a reflexive process, is a ‘painful business’, because it demands not only our commitment but also a radical re-examination of self in relation to others. Freire acknowledges the phenomenological orientations in his work when he says: ‘The more one acquires conscientization (conscientizes oneself) the more one discovers reality, the more one penetrates the phenomenological essence of the object one has in front of oneself in order to analyse it.’

Critique

The intention of this brief critique is to point to issues and questions in Freire’s work which did not seem to have been fully elaborated upon.

Underlying much of Freire’s writing runs a strong vein of liberalism which places great emphasis on the power of real education as a rational force opposed to arbitrary forces of exploitation. Jerez and Hernandez argue that Freire’s writings represent a liberal perspective similar to that of the Jeffersonian model of man, as a civic participator, actively involving himself in school, club, union, work or church. For these reasons it would seem unclear why Freire’s work has become associated with the ‘de-schooling movement’. His subsequent model of co-operative man involving himself, with others, towards building a democratic society is more likely to support formal education than to oppose it.

Indeed it is through the integration of new involvement and problem posing perspectives in education that Freire attempts to achieve the dawning of a radical pedagogy.

It is Freire’s belief that educational processes are crucial in developing a revolutionary consciousness among the masses which is most open to debate. This is a central focus of his thesis and yet he fails to provide adequate elaboration of certain key questions associated with it. For example: what does he mean by ‘authentic’, ‘true’ or ‘real’ consciousness? To what extent can radical ‘late-rate’ peasants untrained in question resolutions and without organised military strategies be capable of resisting government troops? What kinds of political, industrial and agricultural policies should radical third world governments adopt in order to survive? It is through consideration of such questions that Mao has succeeded in his writings, where Freire has merely skimmed the surface. Though it might be naive to expect answers to these questions it would seem necessary to indicate that Freire’s thesis tends to simplify the complexities of the problems involved.

In overlooking these issues Freire exposes himself to certain criticisms. It is not clear how far social change can be achieved through ‘problem-posing’ education. Literacy campaigns led by intellectuals and radical students may themselves unwittingly create a new oppressive cult of conscientizing colonisers. Indeed, the methodology of conscientization as a cultural force will have little effect on those not predisposed towards radicalism. Similarly, oppressive regimes could make equal use of Freire’s methodology to achieve exactly opposite ends. Furthermore, certain left-wing groups might not wish to see Freire as the most desirable starting point for change in that Freire’s methodology is not only a slow moving process but also reflects a form of liberal ‘revisionism’. Freire points descriptively to problems but over-simplifies his explanation in a highly repetitive style, which raises two further questions. First, could he be accused of indulging in empty words, sloganising and mystifying: and second, as a corollary to the first point, is he himself in danger of becoming a cult figure?

Conclusion

The essence of Freire’s thesis rests in his faith in man’s potential to transform and transcend himself and his environment in dialogue with others. As he writes: ‘In other words the characteristic of the human species is its repeatedly demonstrated capacity for transcending what is merely given, what is purely determined’. Freire’s writing is, to coin a phrase, an examination of cultural processes and taken-for-granted practices which have historically and culturally trapped man, and violently intimidated those who have dared to speak out. The value of Freire’s work lies in the emphasis he places on the hitherto unexamined political nature of education, which has important implications for not only the Third, but also the First World. Freire’s work demonstrates...
great faith in the power of education as a liberating force as opposed to an agent of domestication. However, to achieve this end, the dispossessed require their own pedagogy. It is through such suggestions and through posing other models of teaching and learning that Freire advances radical alternatives to existing narrative forms of education. His thesis may indeed be interpreted as utopian. However, those who reject Freire's perspective in that it is naive and unrealistic, might perhaps consider the substance of the nature and faith upon which their own optimism and idealism rests. For to argue that his views are acceptable in theory but not in practice is to admit one's own failure to exercise control over such relationships.

Notes

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3 Richard Schualler's foreword to Pedagogy of the Oppressed.
4 P. Freire, 'A Few Notions about the word "Conscientization"'

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