

The examined life is not worth living

George Molnar

The sort of tests which involve graded assessment of students for purposes of certification, I'll call *examinations*. Examinations characteristically, though not invariably, issue in little or no feedback on the details of the performance to the student. For purposes of present discussion I shall not in general distinguish between the various types of examination found in tertiary educational practice. I'm concerned mainly with what all examinations have in common.

1. What do examinations measure?

There is no clear agreement on what examinations are supposed to measure. The formulations recorded in the specialist literature are variable and mostly vague, e.g. exams test 'knowledge and quality of mind';² the student's ability at a stipulated time to 'give proof of a certain well-defined knowledge';³ it has even been suggested that exams measure moral and psychological fibre.⁴ Two things however stand out: first, examinations would be bereft of justification if they were not supposed at least to measure cognitive achievement; and, second, exams are not supposed to measure certain other things, such as what year it is, what university one is attending, what subject is being examined. There exists however direct and very clearcut evidence that exams measure all of these things. This evidence thereby counts against the claim that exams measure knowledge or cognitive competence.

The Robbins Report⁵ ten years ago showed that in British universities candidates tended to be classed in categories that remained constant within particular universities and faculties. While statistics alone do not establish that these fixed proportions are predetermined, additional evidence indicates just this. In the Arts faculty of Sydney University there is at least one department where the normal curve of distribution is used explicitly as a criterion of proper marking. My experience as an examiner is limited to eight years in a middle-sized department. Even here I've seen enough to convince me that for large batches of scripts something like the normal curve of distribution is used as an implicit criterion of proper marking. Continental studies of exam scripts show that the pass/fail line is frequently drawn according to fixed proportions and independently of variations in the quality of scripts. The investigator summed up his results in these words:

*Pass-fail decisions at fixed percentages are, in fact, not the outcome but the very intention of examination processes.*⁶

The bearing of this conclusion on the question of what exams measure is clear enough. The grade awarded to a given script varies depending on the quality of the other scripts in the same batch. Grading is *comparative*, as any honest examiner reflecting on his or her

practice can confirm. So exams do measure what year it is.

Moreover, the fixed proportions themselves tend to vary between faculties and universities. Thus it is well-known that there are systematic discrepancies between Arts and Science faculty results.⁷ Science faculties award many more firsts but also fail more people proportionally than do the humanities, and these variations are unrelated to such predictors of performance as matriculation results. The reason has to do with the greater spread of marks actually used which occurs in Science subject examinations, compared with Arts subjects. The two sorts of marks are not comparable, and exams do in fact measure what subjects the candidate is taking.

Again, if grading is comparative, the comparison lies between the candidate and those in his/her group, rather than being a comparison of the candidate against the generality of students. Since there's not the slightest evidence that classes at various learning institutions are comparable, exams also measure what university the candidate is attending.

There is ample evidence that exam-induced anxiety adversely affects the performance of all but a small proportion of students (the exceptions are students in the highest performance categories).⁸ There is even evidence that the quality of the handwriting affects the marking.⁹ So exams also measure how upset students are, and what calligraphic skills they have. In the light of all this, what is left of the claim that exams measure the cognitive competence of the candidate by some non-comparative, objective standard? That claim is shown to be foundationless.

2. How reliable are examinations?

The evidence here is even stronger and older. Experimental studies going back to 1888¹⁰ show that marking is a highly unreliable process. The classic study by Hartog and Rhodes¹¹ reported mean ranges per candidate of from 7 grades to 18 grades per paper (four papers in English), with an average correlation between markers of only 0.44. In maths, the mean range per candidate was 34.7 marks. Similar disastrous outcomes were obtained in experiments in which papers were marked and remarked after a while. In numerous cases examiners failed to better a correlation of 0.5, in some cases going as low as 0.28 which does not significantly differ from chance. But even taking the highest correlation that can be reasonably expected¹² between two examiners (or one examiner on two occasions), namely 0.85, there are still 16 per cent of candidates subject to a pass/fail difference between examiners. And with less than maximum correlation, which is likely in practice, this proportion can go very much higher (50 or even 70 per cent). Averaging the marks of different examiners does not really help, since it tends to result in a convergence of the mean scores of various candidates making the separation into grades appear even more arbitrary than it now seems.

Examiners differ widely, among themselves and from occasion to occasion. The reason is not that they employ different general standards or have differing ideas of what is required of them. In the Hartog and Rhodes study the mean mark given by different examiners did not vary greatly - it wasn't that one examiner marked consistently high and another consistently low. Powell and Butterworth¹³ have suggested an explanation. They argue that students bring a variety of abilities to examination and the variations stem from the attempt to assess all these in a single dimension - by giving a mark. This would account for the experimentally established unreliability of exams.

3. Why are examinations needed?

What are the justifications usually offered for having exams? This is not the same as asking what functions exams actually have. The position here - as with many of our social practices - is that the

real function is hidden and what is overtly pointed to is a set of supposed uses of the practice which allegedly provide its justification. I want to examine this overt ideology of exams.

The first and most influential argument in favour of having exams is put as follows by Prof. C. B. Cox:

... exams have an essential social purpose... Examinations serve a function for society at large in attesting to standards of academic performance ... it is inherent in professional work ... that the public is not in a position to judge the quality of performance which it must take on credit. Passing examinations before entering a profession is, thus, a necessary protection for the public.' Before we call in a doctor, we want some proof that his studies have not been confined to witchcraft. Before a headmaster appoints a teacher of French, he needs proof that a candidate has reached an acceptable standard. If a specialist is wanted for sixth form work, it is a great help to know that one man has an upper second class honours degree, and another only a third. The simple truth is that these class divisions represent very real differences in performance, as anyone who has taught and examined for a few years will know. A complicated society depends on such safeguards and classifications. To abolish exams would leave us altogether too vulnerable.¹⁴

We have seen that one essential premise of this argument - which is here dogmatically asserted as being the 'simple truth' - is in fact false. Exams do not measure nor attest to 'standards of academic performance'. If exams do not measure the quality of performance they ipso facto don't measure abiding competence, and therefore don't provide the public with protection against incompetence.

Second, it is not true that the lay public's inability to judge professional performance is 'inherent in professional work'. Such inability does not, even today, extent to judgement of the result of performance. Lay people are capable, and do, form opinions on the skill of professionals who thereby acquire a reputation which even as things now are does more to influence their standing than educational certification. (Have you any idea of what final results your dentist achieved? Is it because of his exam results that you patronise him?) In any case the lay public's present inability to judge professional performance depends crucially on a system of education which allocates resources entirely to the training of a few specialists while leaving the bulk of people ignorant of the basics of the professional field (medicine, law, or what have you). It is only in the context of a culture which systematically fosters the imbalance between lay persons and professional experts that the public is vulnerable.

Finally, the argument commits the common fallacy of trying to prove too much. Even if it were shown that tests of competence are needed to protect the public against exploitation by charlatans, it does not follow that such tests need to be associated with the learning process, and hence it does not follow that the 'protection of the public' justifies examinations as we have defined them and as they exist. We shall see later that some of the deleterious effects of exams arise precisely from their being associated with the learning process.

A second defence of exams is that they 'make people work hard'.¹⁵ This too is usually asserted without evidence. That is because, as Powell and Butterworth write, 'there is very little evidence for the general truth or untruth of this claim.'¹⁶ Professor Cox argues:

Much opposition to [exams] is based on the belief that people work better without reward or incentive, a naive view which flies in the face of human nature. All life depends upon passing exams.¹⁷

Unfortunately, no details on the theory of human

nature in question are given. Of course, we are in deep waters here: the whole complex issue of material versus moral incentives lurks just beneath the surface. Perhaps this much can be said: in circumstances where students do not select their studies on the basis of an interest in the subject, but are on the contrary faced with an imposed curriculum which they have to master at the cost of incurring a variety of life-long penalties, in such circumstances examinations may perhaps act as an effective incentive to work. But to generalise from this to 'human nature' is reckless to say the least. It is analogous to passing from observation of a prison workshop to the conclusion that human beings by nature will not work unless armed guards stand over them.

A related point is that the 'work' which is exacted from students under threat of failure in exams etc may be qualitatively different from the work done by spontaneous learners. One would need to have a lot of evidence on long-term retention, and other matters, before accepting the simplistic hypothesis according to which there is an effectively homogeneous process called work which students facing exams do and those not facing them evade. We know at any rate that the 'work' which exams cause people to do is just the work (often of a few weeks' duration) required to pass exams, and it remains to be proved that this is the same as intellectually fruitful 'work'.

Another defence of exams is along the lines of 'life's like that'. J. Chadwick has written of the Cambridge finals exams:

There are of course people who go to pieces under that sort of pressure; which is another way of saying that a First is not simply a certificate of academic brilliance, and most employers would like to be warned if a prospective employee can only be trusted provided he has plenty of time and no pressures on him. In most professions, life is not like that.¹⁸

It's questionable how far life's like an exam situation in any profession. However, the crucial point about this sort of argument is that it puts forward as a valuable aspect of exams that they prepare and condition candidates to situations of tension, and thereby foster their capacity to maintain required levels of performance despite the evident suffering entailed. That this sort of conditioning is in the interests of 'prospective employers' I do not doubt, but what the argument altogether fails to show is that it is in the interests of the examinees.

Finally, it has been argued that exams provide protection against nepotism, or corruption in general. Professor Cox again:

... dons write references for candidates for jobs, and ... at the moment the student is protected by his exam result. In future, apparently, these confidential reports can be entirely subjective, and the don can indulge his own whims and prejudices. How are we to stop the professor from exaggerating the virtues of his friends and relatives, or, more subtly, those likes and dislikes which can easily warp judgment? The authority of exam results protects the student from the need to curry favour.¹⁹

Just how authoritative exams are we have seen already. The argument seems, in addition, to have no application to those numerous cases where examiners and referees are identical. Nor does it cover cases of people with similar results, where references alone are used to favour one over another. More important, however, the problem to which exams are supposed to provide the solution can be removed much more simply by a change which is desirable on other grounds anyway: removing the confidentiality of references. This will do as much as one could ask for to protect students against the caprice of referees. (A system of open references could be strengthened by a custom of supporting job applications with samples of one's work - in applying for employment one submits a port-

folio of work, much as commercial artists do now).

I conclude that these justifications for exams do not stand up to scrutiny. They give no good reason for thinking that examinations are needed, or that a system of education without assessment is either impossible or undesirable.

4. What do examinations achieve?

So far I have argued that exams do not measure what they are supposed to, that they do not measure anything reliably and fairly, and that the reasons conventionally advanced in their justification do not hold water. These conclusions are consistent with certification by examination being a harmless, if idle, social practice that does not call for reform or corrective action. I now want to look at some of the major consequences of exams.

The first achievement of exams is that they spread sickness and death. There is no doubt that exams annually precipitate a wave of tension, unrest, and misery among students. 'Third term blues' is a well-known phenomenon. Statistical evidence shows that the known incidence of mental illness among students is significantly higher around exam time, than at other times.²⁰ At the British Student Health Association's 1968 conference it was generally agreed that between 8 and 11 per cent of all students seek medical treatment for various exam-related conditions.²¹ One can only guess at the number of those who don't seek treatment for similar conditions (or seek treatment away from student health services) and therefore don't enter the statistics.

Here are some descriptions by medical authors of the reactions to exams commonly encountered:

*During the course of an exam students are sometimes brought out in a state of almost total physical collapse, shivering, unable to write, think or even to walk.*²²

*Examination panic. These are the cases of students who start their papers, but get increasingly anxious or exhausted and finally leave the examination room. Sometimes they actually faint or have nosebleeds, sometimes they are overcome by headache or migraine, but for the most it is just an increasing and overwhelming feeling of nervousness, tension and despair, with an incapacity to remember things they previously knew. The great majority of these students have already suffered from a long period of mounting pre-exam strain.*²³

*Such (i.e. pre-exam) behaviours include all the well known symptoms, ranging from restlessness and bladder irritability to full blown panic attacks and mania.*²⁴

*There is reason to believe that examination stresses in some circumstances can give rise to thought disorder not immediately distinguishable from that of schizophrenia.*²⁵

Dr Malleon, already quoted above, has compared exam reactions of students to pre-battle reactions of soldiers, and has suggested that exam panic may be treated with techniques applicable to shell shock.²⁶

These observations could be multiplied many times. The picture of misery they suggest ought to be familiar to anybody involved in the schooling process. The impact of exams on the health of students is not uniform: women (as usual in sexist society) suffer from exam anxiety more than men, and overseas students more than locals. A study conducted in Manchester shows that the proportion of women made sick by exams is nearly twice that of men!²⁷ This is additional to the demonstrated fact that exam performance is adversely affected just before and during the menstrual period.²⁸ Since, as was argued above, exam results are essentially comparative, the outcome is not only that those who are sick underperform, but that those who are not automatically benefit from the ill-fortune of their fellow candidates. This makes exams one of

the most unsavoury forms of competition I know.²⁹

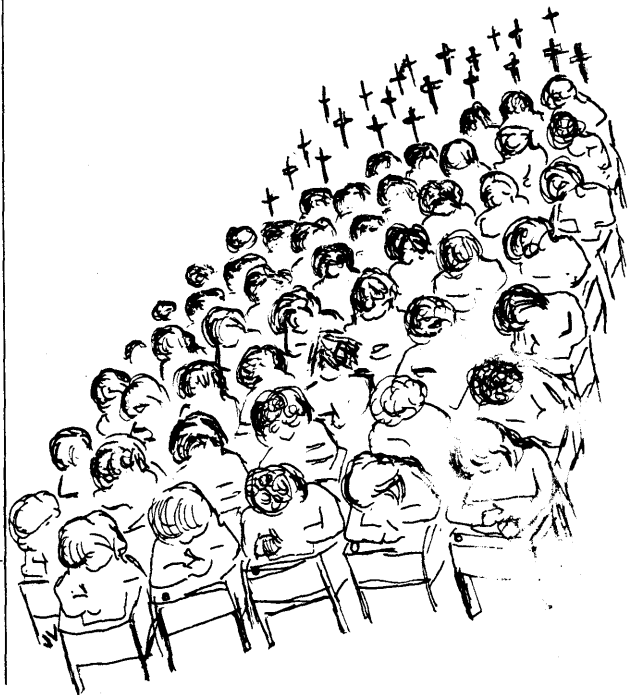
Exams do not merely cause widespread suffering and distress among those who have to face them. They are a causal factor, directly, in many cases of dropping out; and at least indirectly, in many cases of suicide. Clear evidence shows that suicide rates among male students in England and Wales are higher than among the comparable non-student population.³⁰ The evidence connecting student suicide with exams is there, but because of paucity of studies is perhaps not conclusive. Rook³¹ analysed the suicide figures in Cambridge in the decade 1948-58, and concluded that

It is difficult to believe that exams do not have some influence on the Cambridge suicides, for over half of them occurred around the exam period, and four out of five of those who were believed to be worrying over their work died in May.

Carpenter³² showed that over a longer period (1923-1958) the proportion of third-term suicides at Cambridge (=43.3%) was higher, but not 'significantly' so than the proportion of third-term suicides among non-students (=34.5%). The difference is however considerable. I know of no more recent studies of the nexus between exams and suicide: a neglect in medical research which is itself symptomatic of our general indifference towards the life-destroying aspects of exams. I have however known of cases of people who have suicided for reasons which at least included exam-anxiety.

The second achievement of exams is that they maintain and reproduce hierarchic stratification, and thus are the means whereby educational processes are deployed in the perpetuation of social inequality. On the one hand exams are used to exclude people from further study (by the setting of entrance requirements, quotas, the distribution of scholarships, stipends etc on the basis of exam results). On the other hand exams are the method of distribution of a whole range of socially important rewards: on results depend entry to professions and types of work, with attendant financial and status rewards.³³ Thus examinations are the means for slotting people into their 'stations in life'.

The usual defence of this aspect of exams is meritocratic: the process is seen by those who are not egalitarians as selecting the able, the bright, clever, and meritorious people for positions of rank and reward. In this way exams are seen as 'maintaining high standards'.



This meritocratic defence fails not only because exams do not measure cognitive capacity or excellence of mind, but for two other reasons as well. The first is that exams cannot measure, even in principle, more than what the candidate currently knows. No exam can tell you anything about what the candidate could come to know in the future, as a result of further study, experience, changed interests and motivation, etc. The use of exams to exclude people from further study has therefore no meritocratic justification whatsoever. The second, and more significant, failure of meritocratic defence derives from the abundantly demonstrated fact³⁴ that certified scholastic achievement depends more on family background, the cultural milieu of the home, and such like factors which ultimately trace to social class position, than on all other types of factor. The hierarchy which certification perpetuates is not a hierarchy of merit, talent, excellence, or any of the other qualities of which educational conservatives are so fond. It is the class structure of capitalist society.

A third achievement of exams is that they produce, and reproduce, alienated, dehumanised social relations. Exams have this effect on the relation between teachers and students, as well as on relations among students. The teacher's role as assessor cannot but place a strain on the relationship between him/her and the student. This tension has often been remarked upon.³⁴ The result is particularly deleterious in a learning situation. Continuous assessment (or course assessment) magnifies this effect, and it has been said that its introduction is capable of 'poisoning the whole teaching atmosphere'.³⁵ The basic point, I suppose, is that in the relation between assessor and assessed the latter is dominated by an interest in being favourably assessed, and the former by a totally false sense of authoritativeness which his teachings (and other actions) gain as a result of his power as an examiner. Critical interaction between minds is made impossible: what people say in a testing situation bears no intrinsic relationship to what they believe. Candidates only say or write what they believe will get them good marks. Exams which are so carefully guarded against so called cheating, infuse into the relationship between teacher and taught a much more profound bad faith and inauthenticity.³⁷

Around exam time relations among students become marked by jealousy and explicit competitiveness.³⁸ Evidence shows that students often feel that their own chances are improved by not sharing their ideas and work with their peers. This feeling is of course justified, but even if it weren't, its mere existence would tend to cut off people from one of the most important sources of learning: the insights of one's fellow learners. Exams are also the most drastic means of reinforcing the bourgeois ideology of individualism in intellectual matters. By being individually assessed, the student is irresistibly driven to the privatisation of knowledge, i.e. to the false and socially pernicious belief that the creation and transmission of knowledge are the private achievements of isolated individuals. Powell and Butterworth sum up the matter aptly:

By discouraging students from co-operating with each other the assessment system inhibits the prime virtue of civilised society - that of mutual aid. By isolating people from each other in a highly formative stage in their lives, and encouraging them to regard their work as a private and measurable achievement, it enforces or reinforces the view that different people deserve different rewards in life.³⁹

I should also add that in a fuller discussion of this whole area one would have to explore also the role which exams play in relationships between students and their parents.⁴⁰

A fourth achievement of exams is that they constrain and narrow curricula and militate against diversification of study programs. This they do in

the following ways: first, they determine exclusions from the curriculum along the 'principle' expressed by one Sydney headmaster's saying 'If it's not examinable, don't teach it.'⁴¹ In an exam-dominated education system the inclusion of a subject in the curriculum tends to become conditional on the availability of administrable forms of testing associated with the subject. Second, exams set up administrative (bureaucratic) barriers against diversification of study programs. It is easier (cheaper, more convenient) to design and administer a single test for assessing a given (large) group of students than to design and administer a multiplicity of tests for the same group. This clearly generates a tendency favouring narrowness and imposed uniformity of curricula as against wide diversity and flexibility in the choice of study programs.

A fifth achievement of exams is that they waste money. How much exactly assessing costs has never been calculated. In a recent conversation the Vice Chancellor suggested, as a very casual guess, that the recurrent costs of examining at Sydney University may be around \$100,000 p.a. I regard this figure as the lowest possible estimate. Even so, if we take this amount as our basis, the annual cost of examining in Australian tertiary institutions alone would come to something between 2.5 and 3 million dollars. The overall costs of examining throughout the whole school system is many times this sum. The money is from an educational point of view totally misspent.

5. Conclusion

There is no conclusion beyond the obvious one. Exams are a means of social control in an authoritarian sense. They are a pivotal part of an education system geared to forcing people into pre-existing and uncriticised economic and social roles. Certification, which issues from this education system - the system of schooling - labels the skilled labour power which its individual owners then sell in the labour market. Certificates do not measure cognitive skills. It has been shown³³ that the matters most crucial to employers for the hiring of certified labour have little to do with grades or indices of scholarly achievement, but rather with the evidence which certificates provide of the possession of attitudes and acquired behavioural habits that make the student suitable for work. The certificate matters insofar as it shows that its possessor has absorbed the lessons of the hidden curriculum. Submitting to exams is more crucial than results gained, the grade matters insofar as it shows the extent to which one has submitted to the assessment system. One's certificate shows one's exploitability - it's as simple as that.

The radical transformation of this situation involves a comprehensive liberating social revolution. This is no easy task, but an integral element of the long struggle for a fully self-managed world. Since however even the longest journey begins with a short step, we can define our immediate aim as the *discrediting and delegitimising of exams* in the eyes of students, teachers, parents, and people at large. The talk you have just heard, although it contains nothing new or original, is a modest contribution to this first task. We must get ourselves as speedily as possible to the position where the whole question of the value of exams will be generally considered as settled. Then we will be able to use the worthlessness of exams not as a conclusion to be argued, to, but as a premiss to be developed, both in theory and in practice!

Notes

- 1 From a talk at the Teachers College, Sydney University, September 1973.
- 2 *Universities Quarterly*, 1967, p343.
- 3 Daniels, M. J. M. and Schouten, J., *The Screening of Students*, Council of Europe publication, 1970, p12.

- 4 D. A. Allen, *Universities Quarterly*, 1970. (quoted in A. Powell and B. Butterworth: *Marked For Life*, London, 1972, p10).
- 5 HMSO, 1963, App.Two(A), Annek K.
- 6 Cited in Daniels and Schouten, *op. cit.*, pp16ff. The same conclusion has been drawn from the observation of constant pass rates in the British GCE (O-level) over the years despite a tremendous increase in numbers of candidates. Cp. John Pearce, *School Examinations* (Macmillan, London, 1972, p103): 'The occurrence of constant pass rates with large increases in entry, however, suggests that the pass-rates are determined as much statistically as by performance.'
- 7 Robbins Report, Appendix 2A, Part 4. Cp. Dale, *Universities Quarterly*, 1959.
- 8 *Examination Strain at Manchester University*, mimeo, Manchester, 1966. Cp. Powell and Butterworth, *op. cit.*, 2-6, and E. Gaudry and C. D. Spielberger, *Anxiety and Educational Achievement*, Sydney, 1971, pp118ff.
- 9 I. Kandel, 'Examinations and their Substitutes in the United States', cited in Cox, *Universities Quarterly*, 1967, p304.
- 10 Edgworth, cited in Cox, *op. cit.*, p295.
- 11 Hartog and Rhodes (with Cyril Burt), *The Marks of Examiners*, 1936.
- 12 Powell and Butterworth, *op. cit.*, p15.
- 13 *op. cit.*, pp.17-18. Cp. Donald McIntyre, 'Assessment and Teaching', in D. Rubinstein and C. Stoneman (eds.), *Education for Democracy*, 2nd ed., 1972, p168.
- 14 C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson (eds.), *The Black Papers on Education*, London, 1971, p72.
- 15 Cox and Dyson, *op. cit.* p76.
- 16 Powell and Butterworth, *op. cit.*, p24.
- 17 Cox and Dyson, *op. cit.*, p76.
- 18 *Didaskolos*, 1970, p275.
- 19 Cox and Dyson, *op. cit.*, p72.
- 20 R. J. Still, *Psychological Illness Among Students in the Examination Period*, Leeds University, mimeo, 1963.
- 21 *Proceedings of the British Student Health Association Conference of July 1968*, p161; Cp Still, *op. cit.*, and *The Mental Health of Students*, Leeds University, mimeo, 1966.
- 22 Conway, *The Practitioner*, June 1971, 0795.
- 23 N. Malleon, *A Handbook on British Student Health Services*, 1965, p62.
- 24 Conway, *loc. cit.*
- 25 Still, *The Mental Health of Students*, p10.
- 26 *op. cit.*, pp68ff and *The Lancet*, 1959, i.p225.
- 27 *Examination Strain at Manchester University*; Cp. A. Ryle, *Student Casualties*, 1969.
- 28 Dalton, *The Lancet*, 1968, ii, pp1368ff.
- 29 Cp. Powell and Butterworth, *op. cit.*, p3.
- 30 R. G. Carpenter, *British Journal of Preventive and Social Medicine*, 1959, i, pp165-72. Cp. Ryle, *op. cit.*, p105.
- 31 A. Rook, *British Medical Journal*, 1959, i, pp599ff.
- 32 Carpenter, *loc. cit.*
- 33 Cf. the research finding 'that the type of personal development produced through schooling and relevant to the individual's productivity as a worker in a capitalist enterprise is primarily non-cognitive.' H. Gintis, *Harvard Educational Review*, 42(1), 1972), p86cp. Gintis, *Americal Economic Review*, May 1971; and C. Jencks et al, *Education and Inequality*, NY, 1972.
- 34 Coleman, *Report on Equality of Opportunity in Education*, Dept. of H.E.W., Washington, 1966. Cp. Jencks et al, *op. cit.*; A. Morrison and D. McIntyre, *Schools and Socialisation*, Penguin, 1971, pp13.
- 35 Cox, *Universities Quarterly*, 1967, p334.
- 36 Edwards, *The Observer*, 6 June 1971.
- 37 'Students cannot help but see behind the friendly interest of an unassuming tutor the remorseless judgement of their Finals.' P. Marris, *The Experience of Higher Education*, quoted in Powell and Butterworth, *op. cit.*, p23.
- 38 Cox, *Universities Quarterly*, 1967, p355.
- 39 *op. cit.*, p24.
- 40 Pearce, *op. cit.*, p51.
- 41 Quoted to me by Mike Matthews.

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

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*¹ and *Cultural Action for Freedom*² 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 Recife, North Eastern Brazil, an area populated by peasants and redundant