

This article discusses Freire's concept of conscientization or social learning. This view of learning is situated in the Marxist tradition. The various levels of consciousness described by Freire are analyzed. Certain criticisms are made of Freire's theory of learning. This theory of learning is compared to the theory of John Dewey and found to be decidedly more radical. Freire's view of learning as necessarily social and political is found to be most relevant for educators in North America.

## SOCIAL LEARNING AND PAULO FREIRE

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Philosophers who analyze the concept of human learning tend to focus in upon the concept of learning as abstracted from the concrete cultural situation in which a person learns. Learning is analyzed more in its individual, logical, and psychological aspects, than in its collective and cultural aspects. Various senses of individual learning are distinguished depending upon the object of learning: a fact, a skill, an attitude, a value, the explanation. Attempts are made to ascertain the necessary and sufficient conditions for using the word "learn" in ordinary human language. Attempts are also made to define a concept of learning that would reduce the various uses of "learning" to a single concept.

In recent years, philosophical analyses of learning have been concerned almost exclusively with psychological learning theories. Behaviorist learning theories have been the chief objects of analyses. The sophisticated and detailed arguments of Charles Taylor in *The Explanation of Behavior* are a tribute to the myriad stances and resourcefulness of neobehaviorists.<sup>1</sup> The analyses of the behaviorist concepts of learning have greatly determined the shape and focus of discussions on human learning. Attention has been focused at times more on animal learning than on human learning. Efforts have been made to refine a language of learning that will be applicable to both animal and human learning.

The psychological theories of cognitive learning theorists have also been the object of philosophical analysis, but not to the same extent as the behavioristic theories. Some attempts have been made at analyzing insight, discovery learning, perception, motivation and other concepts prevalent in cognitive theories. Yet when one ponders the work of Jean Piaget, one is staggered by the task of careful analysis that needs to be done in this area. Some analysis

<sup>1</sup>Charles Taylor, *The Explanation of Behaviour*, (New York: Humanities Press, 1964), Part 2, pp. 111-215.

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attribute of this level of consciousness, for the people have internalized the negative values that the dominant culture ascribes to them. This level of consciousness is also marked by excessive emotional dependence. To be is to be under someone, to depend on him. This form of consciousness often expresses itself in defensive or therapeutic magic.

*Naive or semi-transitive* consciousness is the third level of consciousness. Freire also terms this level *popular consciousness*. Silence is not the characteristic of this level. A serious questioning of the situation begins, but at a naive and primitive level. This consciousness is more likely to see the cultural situation as determined by men. Populism is characteristic at this level of consciousness. People begin to sense that they have some control over their lives; but the danger of manipulative populist leadership is great at this level.

Before passing to Freire's highest level of consciousness, the obvious Marxist character of this analysis should be pointed out. Like Marx, Freire explains cultural-historical reality as a superstructure in relationship to an infrastructure. Oppressed class is opposed to oppressing class. The three levels of consciousness of Freire correspond to the false or reifying consciousness of Marx. "Reification" for Marx is the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were products of nature, cosmic laws, divine will. The reified world is a dehumanized world. The real relationship between man and his world is reversed in this consciousness. Man is viewed as being the product of a world which he, in fact, has made. Man is capable paradoxically of producing a reality that denies him. In Marxist thought, reification is closely related to alienation.

The highest level of consciousness for Freire is *critical consciousness*. This is achieved through the process of conscientization. This level is marked by depth in the interpretation of problems, self confidence in discussions, receptiveness, refusal to shirk responsibility. The quality of discourse here is dialogical. At this level the person scrutinizes his own thoughts; he sees the proper causal and circumstantial correlations. Conscientization for Freire, in the context of Latin America, means a radical denunciation of dehumanizing structures, accompanied by a new reality to be created by men. It entails a rigorous and rational critique of the ideology that supports these structures. Critical consciousness is brought about not through intellectual effort alone, but through praxis — through the authentic union of action and reflection.

Learning for Freire, then, is the process by which one moves from one level of consciousness to another. The content of this consciousness is the view that one has of one's existence in the social world and the power that one has to determine one's destiny. Learning begins with the present level of consciousness as this is manifest in language, self concept, world view, present living conditions. Learning is becoming aware of the contingency of the social world. This contingent world lies within the power of man to change. Learning is thus the process of challenging and of being challenged

by the givenness of one's life situation, of the socio-cultural reality in which one lives.

For Freire, learning is predominantly an active process. He is strongly opposed to what he terms the "banking" concept of learning in which deposits of information are made into the mind of the learner. The process, rather, begins with the learner's words, ideas, and life-situation. The educator uses these to form codifications of the concrete world in which the learners live. The task of the educator is to get the learners to examine, challenge, criticize these situations as presented to him verbally and pictorially.

In emphasizing the activity of the learner in the process, Freire, is, of course, not pointing to anything that has not been often repeated by educationalists. But his strong emphasis on learning as dialogical action between learners and educators highlights a crucial aspect of social learning. The adult literacy process as an act of learning implies for him the existence of two interrelated contexts.

"One is the context of authentic dialogue between learners and educators as equally knowing subjects. This is what schools should be — theoretical context of dialogue. The second is the real, concrete context of the facts, the social reality in which men exist.<sup>4</sup>

There is a close connection between these two contexts. The Marxist concept of praxis as the continuing dialectical relationship between action and reflection bridges the gap between the two contexts. The group reflects on its actions in order to gain a deeper understanding of them and of their causes in order that they will be able to act differently according to their new understanding. Learning for Freire is the total process of becoming aware of the concrete situation in which one lives, understanding how that situation may be changed, and then acting to change the situation. In Marxist terminology, it is the continuing process of knowing and denouncing one reality and announcing a new reality towards which men can strive.

Freire speaks of conscientization as a group process designed for adult learners. This was the concrete situation in which he educated. It is the situation out of which he theorized. Can an individual learn, or be conscientized outside this group process? He does not explicitly direct himself to this question. He appears to have little interest in speaking of education as a one-to-one relationship or as self-education. Freire's view of man, however, would appear to leave room for this possibility. He describes man as a being of relationships in dialectical relationship with the world and in dialogical relationship with his fellow man. Man is also a free, conscious, transcendent, temporal being. He is a being who is capable of reflecting on his reflections.

It is at this point that contradictions are found in the thought of Freire. His views of man and nature appear to contradict his views of history and culture. He speaks of man as possessing an unchanging human nature which

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<sup>4</sup>Paulo Freire, "Cultural Action for Freedom," *Harvard Educational Review* and Center for the Study of Development and Social Change: Cambridge, Mass., 1970, p. 14.

makes him essentially distinct from animals. He attempts to combine a natural law view of man with a Hegelian and dialectic view of man. His view of culture and history are evolutionary in the Marxist sense. His view of man and nature appear rather static and absolute. In later writings, these contradictions become less evident as Freire becomes more thoroughly Marxist in his philosophy of man.

When one examines the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire, it is difficult not to make some comparisons with the educational philosophy of John Dewey. Both emphasize the activity of the learners in the process of learning. Freire's concept of conscientization bears some resemblance to Dewey's concept of experience. Dewey saw the beginning of learning in the interests, concerns, and experiences of the students. For him, learning was being engaged in activities in which a person was directly interested. Education was the constant reflection upon experiences with the aim of acting according to these reconstructed experiences. We find in both philosophers the same recurring critique of dualism. Both are insistent on uniting theory and practice, action and thinking or reflection, knower and object known.

Though there are similarities between the philosophies of the two men, there are some rather important differences. The two philosophies arose in two different historical contexts. Dewey was fundamentally in favor of the direction in which American society was taking the process of increased industrialization. Education for him should, for the most part, attempt to imitate the type of learning which took place outside the school. If it did this, it would promote greater interest and involvement. Though his basic thrust is in viewing education as needing reconstruction to adapt to societal changes, he does warn against a slavish imitation of the status quo. He sees the schools as being instruments of a degree of social and cultural change.

Freire, on the other hand, sees the existing cultural situation in the Third World (and also in modern industrialized countries) as something to be directly challenged. He wants to challenge the false consciousness prevalent in these societies. This consciousness keeps the masses of the people at the level of magical or naive consciousness. It prevents them from realizing the extent of the oppression under which they live. The general culture has educated people to accept lives of oppression and submission.

At the heart of Dewey's thought there is a certain unresolved ambivalence. Education is to prepare people to live in the society which now exists, education is to prepare people to form a better society. He appears to have stayed his distance from the radicalism of those who wanted to use education and the schools to establish a new society along utopian socialist lines, though at times he appears to have been fascinated by this ideal.

This ambivalence is not found in Freire, at least in his later writings. I make this qualification for it appears that at first he was solely interested in the democratization of culture in Brazil. But the revolutionary force of using his method in those concrete circumstances became quickly apparent.

In later writings, especially in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, conscientization is presented as education and learning directed to radical social change. True learning will bring one to challenge the oppressive social reality under which one lives.

Freire's concept of learning as conscientization is interesting for a number of reasons. It is refreshing to look at a theory of human learning that has been elaborated following a unique educational practice. No one can deny the success of the practice. People learned to read and write in a short time. They also became critically aware of the social reality in which they were immersed and took steps to change and control this reality. Yet success in practice obviously does not mean truth and consistency in theory. One can inadequately explain what one has successfully accomplished. A person can also succeed because he does not practice what he theorizes. In theorizing, Freire again and again goes back to the reality of what he did in order to explain it as completely and as consistently as possible. He also modified his practice as a result of theoretical and practical considerations. There is thus in his work the close dialectical relationship between theory and practice that lies at the very heart of his educational philosophy.

Freire's concept of human learning is interesting on another ground. We can carefully study the historical context in which the theory was developed. Learning is thus seen as related to the entire cultural situation in which persons live. He reminds us that theories are the constructs of living men who reflect on what they or others do. A study of the theory is not possible without an understanding of the context in which it was developed. Educational theory is often presented as uprooted from the original soil in which it developed. Theories to be sure gain an existence of their own. They go through their own history. To assess them adequately however, this history must be known.

Freire's theory of education and learning is subordinated to political and social purposes. Such a theory opens itself to the charge of indoctrination and manipulation. The situation in which Freire worked in Brazil made him sensitive to these charges at least to the degree of avoiding conflict with Rightist elements in Brazilian society. He is even more sensitive to these charges now that his writings are being examined and considered for application to other countries and cultures. Is the Freire method indoctrinative and manipulative? A close look at his writings reveals a certain ambivalence in this regard.

He is strongly opposed to the "banking" concept of education. He criticizes the primers because they merely impose ideas on the learners. His method entails that the words and themes are those common among the people who are to be educated. The content of education is to be arrived at in conjunction with the people to be educated. Freire specifies that the codifications should be neither too explicit nor too enigmatic. If it is too explicit, it will take on the character of propagandizing and prevent the development of any critical awareness on the part of the learners. If it is too subtle

or enigmatic, it will lose its capacity to provoke thoughtful discussion. Freire answers charges of indoctrination by contending that his goal is to get people to learn by having them challenge the concrete reality of their lives as presented in the codifications. Another view of social reality is not imposed on them but through the true conditions under which they live. Through discussion, they also begin to see that the present social reality is not determined but can be changed.

Though Freire is sensitive to the charge of subtle manipulation, it cannot be clearly stated that he totally escapes this charge. For him, there is no neutral education.

All educational practice implies a theoretical stance on the educator's part. This stance in turn implies — sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly — an interpretation of man and the world.<sup>5</sup>

This non-neutrality of education is shown in the fact that out of all the words and themes that could be chosen for discussion, those which are chosen have the greatest capacity for challenging the existing social reality. The process of conscientization entails for Freire a radical denunciation of dehumanizing structures, accompanied by the proclamation of a new reality to be created by men. Freire is confident that this will come about through free dialogue in which learners and educators participate as equals. Yet one cannot help but wonder if there isn't a more subtle manipulation built into this method of procedure.

Whether or not Freire's pedagogy escapes the charge of subtle indoctrination and manipulation may ultimately depend upon analysis of these concepts. There is a way of describing concepts that would preclude calling any form of human learning through instruction and dialogue anything but indoctrination and manipulation. Perhaps this is the case. Then we are involved in determining more or less blatant and objectionable forms of manipulation. Freire's pedagogy would appear less objectionable than the forms of pedagogy which he criticizes. But one can say this of anyone who opposes his views to others. And then there is the question of the subtlety and sophistication of his methods as compared to the methods which he criticizes. One wonders which pedagogy respects the true rational nature of those who are taught.

The educational philosophy of Paulo Freire is obviously a normative or prescriptive philosophy, though some analysis of concepts is found in his writings. He is concerned with proposing dispositions which education should foster. He attempts to give a rationale for his values, principles and goals. He draws heavily on existentialist and Marxist philosophy for this rationale. He makes recommendations about ways of achieving these ends. He also gives rationales for his recommendation. The purpose of education is to bring about cultural action for freedom. Educational theory then is subordinated to political and social values which are viewed as necessary for man and for society.

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<sup>5</sup>*ibid.*, p. 6.

Freire raises again the question of whether it is indeed possible or even desirable to educate in a value-free manner. Many speak as if incidental learning is the ideal since there is no danger of manipulation and indoctrination.<sup>6</sup> Yet often in this type of learning what is learned is held uncritically and without rational examination. Slavish imitation may often be what incidental learning comes down to under closer scrutiny. The illiterates among whom Freire worked existed at the lower levels of consciousness. They learned not in schools but by being immersed in a given culture. They learned through family customs and attitudes, the common knowledge of their sub-cultures, religious beliefs and superstitions, and the laws of the community in which they resided. He charged this form of education with manipulation and oppression. He opposed to it a form of conscientization in which the critical powers of individuals were brought to bear on concrete living conditions. The content for the discussion groups was chosen in cooperation with the people to be educated. The themes chosen were selected to codify real life problems. The values of the educators were no doubt present in the codifications and became clear in the discussions. Yet it appears that the freedom and rational ability of the learners was sufficiently respected. At least this appears to be the case in the description and theoretical elaboration of the Freire method.

The relevance of Freire's *Pedagogy* is its capacity to draw from exclusive concentration upon the logical and psychological aspects of human learning as it occurs in schools. He is concerned with the education of adults outside a school situation. His work might better be termed an "Andragogy". He is concerned with enculturation, socialization, and political socialization. Learning, to be sure, can be analyzed in its psychological and logical aspects. Yet there are other aspects of human learning that must be considered: the circumstances in which it takes place, the freedom one feels to reject what is presented to be learned, the force with which it influences decisions, the relationship of learning to action, how one internalizes the values of society, how one accepts the legitimations offered for these values.

The failure to confront deeply enough the social, political, and cultural consciousnesses that exist in American society has led to the failure of educational reform movements in this country. Michael Katz in *Class, Bureaucracy, and the Schools*, has pointed out that the failure of the reform movement of the '60's was predominantly a political failure. This movement failed to revamp the political structure of schooling. The reformers attempted this first through integration, then through decentralization and community control. These efforts have failed because of the deeply ingrained racism and inequality in American society. Recently, both Everet Reimer and Ivan Illich have analyzed the plight of the schools in North America in terms of their total connection with the dominant technological culture.

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<sup>6</sup>Paul Goodman, "No Processing Whatever," in Beatrice and Ronald Gross (eds.), *Radical School Reform* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), p. 100; and Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 12.

The educational philosophy of Paulo Freire might be relevant in thinking about future reform of American education. His direct concern with education as a means for political and cultural change challenges the concept that political change must precede educational change — that it is necessary to alter political control before anything meaningful can happen educationally. His focusing on organizing learning to serve social purposes highlights to what extent ideologies govern the lives of people and their actions. He forces us to think upon the historic role and vocation of the schools in this country as the democratic socialization of those who are schooled. He challenges our individualist conception of learning and knowledge, where we are led to believe that learning is the acquisition of the individual man rather than fundamentally a social reality. It is not an individual affair at all. He challenges us to look seriously at the classes that have developed in American society to see to what extent there is a supra-structure (overclass) and an infra-structure (underclass). The overclass in American society may be not merely the power elite who control production. It may be those who manage the lives of our greatest institutions and control the uses of technical knowledge.