

History, *Praxis*, and Change: Paulo Freire and the Politics of Literacy

GARY A. OLSON

In true Marxist form, Paulo Freire appeals unabashedly to an “objective” reality that we all can come to know through careful, critical analysis. He has little patience for poststructuralist proclamations that reality is neither objective nor knowable. In Freire’s world, everything, including the objective reality to which he so regularly appeals, is social. Of course, “there is an individual dimension of this social perception,” but “the very construction of reality is collective.” The social collective, the people—this is where Freire’s heart lies.

Also in typical Marxist form, Freire tends to subsume the struggles of women within the class struggle. That he is becoming sensitive to charges that his writings and pedagogy are male oriented and his language sexist is abundantly clear from this interview: he takes pains always to say “he or she,” for example, and he insists that he does “emphasize the fight against machismo.” He even goes so far as to say that he can “feel like a woman” in women’s struggles for equality, and he appears somewhat defensive, insisting that it would be “absolutely naive” for women to “reject my sympathy and my camaraderie because I am a man.” Yet, Freire seems to downplay the women’s movement, saying, “I always work together, men and women—the people” because “in the last analysis, men and women, we are, together, human beings.”

These views, though, are consistent with Freire’s larger world view, for he sees himself as a man *of the people*. And, of course, he has devoted his life to liberation of the masses through critical literacy. In fact, freedom is “one of the main issues of this century,” and we all must continue to strive for more and higher levels of freedom because “without freedom, it’s impossible to go on.” But bringing freedom through critical literacy necessitates carefully conceived ethnographic research of a given community, and this means, again, becoming one with the people. That is, the ethnographer must learn to “respect the reality” of the people in order to minimize the distance between the people and him or herself so as to be positioned to intervene effectively in their reality.

Freire’s constant striving to be thought of as a man of the people is evident in some comments made during a coffee break midway through the

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interview. Like many of his compatriots, Freire indulges liberally in numerous cups of powerful Brazilian coffee. He explains proudly that his own staff is quite communal when it comes to this indulgence:

This is not public coffee. We do not put the expense of the coffee in the budget of the Secretary. *We* pay. We make a collection. Of course, I pay more than the others. First of all, I drink much more than anyone else, and I receive more people, and also I'm paid more than some. But *I will* tell you that there *are* people here who get paid more money than the Secretary—the lawyers, for example.

Freire prides himself on the democratic workings of his own office, even in such trivial matters; and he also reveals that though he is the chief executive, the Secretary of Education of São Paulo (one of the largest school districts in the world), others in the system are better paid, that somehow his high rank still does not cause him to transcend “the people”: he is, forever, one of us.

Freire is preoccupied with “history,” as is to be expected of someone steeped in Marxist philosophy. It is the task of the progressive educator, the progressive intellectual, to intervene in history, to move history forward. For example, Freire feels that the U.S. is beginning a new decade of activism in reaction to the social apathy of the past, and “one of the tasks of progressive educators, teachers, writers, and so on is to challenge, to push, to improve, to increase this trend.” Change, like history itself, is a process; and we must understand that “the process of change starts exactly in the place that we would like to change.” To intervene in history, says Freire, “we just have to start.” And he even senses his own small part in history, expressing with joy and genuine humility his pleasure that “history is not waiting for my death in order to say, ‘That man existed.’”

Perhaps it is exactly this kind of activism that makes his pedagogy so compelling. His notion of *praxis* as reflection plus *action* foregrounds the importance of students' adopting a “subject position,” a position of agency, of action. This theme permeates the discussion here, as it does all of Freire's publications and interviews. He insists that students take an active part in their own education, that they be considered “subjects of the very process of education.” Repeatedly, he contends that teachers must “respect the subjectivity of the students,” that they must strive to increase curiosity at every turn. What truly makes someone critical, able to “read reality,” is “insertion in the struggles in order to intervene in reality. It is *praxis*.”

Nevertheless, this emphasis on students' participation, on students' action, on “respect for students and their contexts,” does not mean that teachers should surrender authority to some abstract ideal of classroom democracy. In fact, Freire is quite adamant that his liberatory pedagogy does not translate to the teacher's relinquishing of authority. Quite the contrary: “The teacher has the duty to teach,” to use his or her authority to good advantage. Despite attempts to read Freire as advocating the dissolution of

the teacher's authority as a means of achieving a truly participatory, dialogic teaching environment, Freire argues that the teacher's authority "has to exist." The important point is that it should never "have such power that it crushes freedom."

Paulo Freire may seem at times a bit patriarchal, even as he pledges solidarity with women in their struggles, and he may appear somewhat out of step with contemporary epistemology in his tenacious appeal to objective reality and his unshakable faith that we all can come to comprehend and transform it; yet, he will always be especially important to compositionists because permeating his life and work is a sincere and abiding love for literacy, for freedom, and, most importantly, for students.

Q. Since the publication of *Education as the Practice of Freedom* in the early 1960s, you have written a considerable number of books and articles. Do you consider yourself a writer?

A. The other day a friend of mine asked me, "Paulo, do you think that sometime you could become a member of some academy of letters?" I said, "No." And he asked me, "But why? Do you have some prejudice?" I said, "No, I don't; it's just that I don't feel that I'm a writer." I would like very much to be a writer. Of course, when I publish books this is because I write good books. I write essays; I write about my *praxis*; I write about philosophy and the politics of education, but I don't make "literature." Whether I write well or not, whether I have good taste—I would like very much to have good taste in writing—is another question. Yet for me, this would not be enough to make me a member of an academy of letters. The novelists, the poets—they are writers for me. Maybe I'm wrong; maybe I have a narrow understanding of being a writer. I also have to tell you that in thinking like this I feel sad because I would like very much to be a writer. Maybe in some moments of my books—a certain moment of the analysis I am doing, and so on—readers could think they are reading a "writer." This is when I become most happy in writing. For example, in one of my short books that's already in English, *The Importance of the Act of Reading*, I think that perhaps there are moments that give the impression that somewhere inside of the educator is a sleeping writer.

Q. When you do write, do you revise often? Do you use a computer? Tell us about your writing habits.

A. I can tell you with humility, with humor, but not with irony, that I am underdeveloped. I am a man of northeast Brazil, one of the very precarious regions in the world, and I am almost seventy years old, so it's difficult to start learning some things, especially things concerning machines and technology. I believe in my hand, in the pencil, and in the white piece of

paper before me. I believe in that. Then I start filling up the paper with my thought and transforming it into words. I don't even know how to type; I never use a typewriter. I am thinking about buying a computer for my wife to use to write her essays, her books—and also for me to use. But I don't believe that I will learn how to use it. It's very sad that the educator Paulo Freire would say such a thing. Yet I am convinced that all of us need to use computers. I see how my friends in the States—professors such as Ira Shor, Henry Giroux, Donald Macedo—produce their work with such discipline. They know how to use the machine, how to put it at their service. It's fantastic. They do much more than I because they use a very good instrument. My friends all tell me, "Paulo, you have to learn to use the computer." And maybe I will start, because I believe that in the last analysis there's always time for us to learn.

Q. In some of your publications, you have attempted to transcend the constraints of conventional text formats by experimenting with various dialogic forms. *Pedagogy in Process* is a collection of letters that together constitute a dialogue between you and revolutionary leader Mario Cabral; even the introduction is, in your words, a "letter-report" to the reader. *Learning to Question* is what you've called "a spoken book," a lengthy conversation between you and Antonio Faundez. And *A Pedagogy for Liberation* is a collection of "dialogues" between you and Ira Shor. Why have you found these experimental formats necessary?

A. Maybe before I perceived them as *necessary*, I saw them as *possible*. I remember that one day some years ago—in the 1980s, maybe '81 or '82—I asked myself, "Why not start *speaking* books instead of exclusively *writing* them?" Of course, I never thought that we should stop writing in favor of speaking books, but why not do the two things from time to time, and even simultaneously? Then I invited a young Brazilian educator from São Paulo to make the first experience with me. He accepted, and we started a dialogue, following a certain thematic issue, and we spoke a book entitled *On Education*. Immediately we did a second volume, and afterwards we started another. Today, I think I have five or six such books, some of them very good ones. The book with Ira Shor is for me excellent, not because of *me* but because of *us*. Ira is very critical, very lucid, and the book is very good. In every language, the book has had a good reception. And *Learning to Question*, with the Chilean philosopher Antonio Faundez, is also for me a very good book. I did that, as I said, not because I thought it should be done, but because I thought that it *could* be done, it was possible to do.

Q. Do you see these forms as a counterpart to your antihierarchical, dialogic pedagogy?

A. Yes, I think so. It has to do with the spirit of dialogue.

Q. When you were a young student, what were the most influential factors in the development of your own critical literacy?

- A. Perhaps the moments which challenged me and invited me to think of a much more participatory education in relationships between educators and educatees were the moments in which I did not understand the teacher but nevertheless lacked the courage to ask questions because I felt myself inhibited vis-à-vis the arrogance of the teacher, the authority of the teacher. Maybe those negative moments challenged me and invited me to think of that *more* than the positive ones. At least, this is what I could tell you now.
- Q. Drawing on the work of Karl Mannheim and others, you have espoused a social epistemology. You say in *Education: The Practice of Freedom*, for example, that “the *we* think determines the *I* think.” Do you agree, then, with those who posit that knowledge, reality itself, is a social construct—a product of social consensus?
- A. Yes, because the very perception of reality, the perception we have of reality, is a social one. Of course, there is an individual dimension of this social perception. It is obvious because I can perceive in some way and you in another way because of different reasons (which are all social ones). But the very construction of reality is collective.
- Q. Fundamental to your liberatory pedagogy is “resolution of the teacher-student contradiction”—a dissolving of the authority hierarchy between students and teachers. Some compositionists attempt to do this in their writing classes through collaborative learning, asking students to meet in groups of three or four and jointly work on specific writing tasks. Does this method reflect your own pedagogical values?
- A. Every kind of activity of educational *praxis* in which two, three, four, fifty, or one-hundred students are challenged to increase curiosity and to improve their understanding of how reality is becoming, every kind of action in which the subjectivity of the students is respected in its relationships with the objectivity of the object, every kind of educational *praxis* in which the students are considered also as being subjects of the very process of education has to do with me—or maybe I should say *I* have to do with *it*. I think that telling it to you in this way is better than trying to put these ideas into some scheme.
- Q. Some compositionists argue that while collaborative methods *seem* democratic, they can easily cloak and even reinforce the instructor’s authority and control over students. Thus, ironically, collaborative methods can reproduce ruling ideology even more effectively than traditional hierarchical methods. What are your thoughts on this matter?
- A. Yes, this is very interesting because, in fact, you can get lots of different results starting from a very apparently good thing. And I think there is another aspect of this question which we should underline: dialogue and respect for students and their contexts do not mean that the teacher has to disappear or, in other words, that the teacher does not have to teach. It’s impossible for me to imagine the existence of a teacher without teaching.

That is, the teacher has the duty to teach. The question for me is how the teacher uses his or her authority. I'm not against the authority of teachers. I am against the hypertrophy of authority against the fragility of students' freedom, and I am against the hypertrophy of students' freedom against the fragility of authority. For me, when some people say, "No it does not work well because inside all of this you can have again the authority of the teacher being stressed," I say, "No, the authority of the teacher *has* to exist." The question is that it never should have such power that it crushes freedom. Dialogue is not a tactic for denying authority, in my view.

- Q. You say in *Pedagogy in Process* that "the impatient educator often transfers knowledge like a package while discoursing volubly on the dynamic nature of knowledge," while the overly patient teacher can lapse into passivity. How can we maintain a productive tension between patience and impatience?
- A. Of course, I don't have a prescription for this. Nevertheless, I can state that we should live and act impatiently patient. If you are exclusively patient, you don't accomplish your tasks; you don't get the results of your dreams. But if you are exclusively impatient in order to make viable your dreams, maybe you will lose them. Being patiently impatient means having a very critical understanding of the limits of the practice. That is, we have to know that there is no practice which can be free from limits. The question for us is to know what the limits are. What are the ideological, economical, political, scientific limits? Then we have to deal with all of these in order to learn how to be impatiently patient.
- Q. The concept of critical consciousness is, of course, central to your theory. There is a "critical thinking" movement in the U.S. in which students learn a kind of informal logic and acquire the ability to analyze and synthesize. Unlike your own context-specific critical pedagogies, however, such training is often directed toward atomistic dissecting of texts or arguments and is not linked dialectically to "action." How can we influence this movement to include your concept of *praxis* as reflection *plus* action?
- A. I think the best way for us to have dialogue with these people is not just to try to teach them about that but to discuss with them how it is not even possible to get their own results without *praxis*—that is, without action *plus* reflection. Theoretically, it is not difficult to understand, for example, that becoming critical in the process of reading reality does not come about through a mere intellectual exercise. Through an intellectual exercise, I can increase and improve my power of speaking, for example, so that I speak fluently, beautifully even; but what makes me critical, what gives me knowledge, what teaches me how to read reality, how to reread reality is my insertion in the struggles in order to intervene in reality. It is *praxis*; it is practice. On the other hand, there is also another danger, which is to think that just practice or just action is enough to teach someone how to become critical. For me, the only way (which is already the critical way

of doing things) is to experience the tension between theory and *praxis* without denying one or the other. Thus, I am never interested just in theory, just in *praxis*, but in the relationships between them. This is what makes me more critical.

- Q. One important concern of compositionists is the use of standardized tests to evaluate writing ability and reading comprehension. Do you believe such tests are appropriate for evaluating reading and writing? Or do you think there are other, more productive ways to measure such things?
- A. First of all, no matter whether the examinees are candidates for becoming medical doctors or sociologists, we have to keep in mind regional differences. That is, I can ask a question of a young man from northeast Brazil who hopes to become a medical doctor which I would not ask of a young man here. Nevertheless, there are questions which should be asked there and here. Secondly, since I was very young I have never accepted those tests that are a kind of guessing game. We introduced that here in the admission-by-competition examinations for teachers. I believe that candidates must have time and space for speaking or writing, for telling us finally how they think vis-à-vis a question. Maybe they won't be able to quote a famous writer or a famous philosopher. This does not matter. I want to see, *at this moment*, how his or her curiosity walks, what a student can do independently. One of the tasks of the university in preparing students to be professors, to be doctors, to be sociologists should be to teach them how to increase their curiosity, their desire to know. So these kinds of standardized tests are not for me. I don't believe too much in them.
- Q. The last three decades have witnessed the development of numerous philosophical and critical systems that posit that there is no "objective" reality. Yet, throughout your own writings you consistently appeal to an objective reality that we all can come to recognize through a truly critical education. How do you respond to criticism that your theory is out of step with current notions of epistemology?
- A. If Peter or John or Mary comes to me and makes a well-structured speech, telling me that there is no reality, and if afterwards Charles comes and says, "Paulo, your pedagogy is totally based on the analysis and transformation of reality, so how do you feel after that speech?" I'd say they are naive.
- Q. In your literacy campaigns you begin with what Manfred Stanley calls "intelligently conceived and executed anthropological research on the objective situation." Some argue, however, that ethnographic research can never be objective because the researcher will always be an outsider, an other. What are your thoughts about the dynamics of ethnographic research?
- A. Of course, one of the conditions for a researcher in the social field who dreams of finding something valid by the end of his or her research is to try to diminish the distance, which varies, between the researcher and the

concreteness of the people he or she is studying. The ethnographer should become one of the others: it's not a question of degree; it's a question of becoming. Thus, I think it depends on the political choice and the political clarity of the researcher, which together condition his or her methods of work. It depends, because of this, on whether the researcher's political choice is a democratic one, whether he or she really believes in the possibility the people have to think, to speak, to know, to create. The ethnographer has to respect the people in their reality in order to be respected. In order to intervene in a reality, first you must respect this reality. That is, you have to try to understand it, to know it with the people. Then you can diminish the distance. Maybe by the end of the research, you are no longer exclusively a foreign person but, on the contrary, a person in the process of becoming. It's not a question that has to do exclusively with ethnography. Before being this or that, it's a political question.

Q. Are you familiar with E.D. Hirsch's concept of "cultural literacy"? He argues that literacy means more than mastering reading and writing skills; it also entails acquiring a level of knowledge about one's culture. While this may appear to be an attempt to situate literacy within specific historical, social contexts, it has become a concerted conservative effort to establish official canons of knowledge that everyone "should" know. How can educators resist such campaigns to establish official, prescribed bodies of knowledge?

A. Since the book came out and people began to talk about it, I have read it; but I am waiting for some time, given my limited time, to reread the book. First of all, I think we should accept the concept of cultural illiteracy and develop it, use it in a much more progressive way. We undoubtedly have cultural illiteracy in the States and here, and we need to fight against it. For example, one day I received a letter from someone in the States in which the writer said to me, "I am very sorry to be obliged to write to you in English because I don't have good command of Spanish." It's incredible that this man thinks I speak Spanish as my mother tongue. This is a kind of cultural illiteracy.

Also, there is a certain ideological aspect of this problem of cultural illiteracy. For example, sometimes you find among famous people and intellectuals a strong cultural ignorance and cultural illiteracy; and what is making them cultural illiterates, in the last analysis, is their prejudice against race, against class, against the nation. For example, when sometimes some Europeans or Americans think and speak wrongly about us, it's not exclusively because they don't know. They don't know precisely because they don't believe in us. Because they have the prejudice of being superior and, therefore, perceive us as inferior, they don't know anything about us and thus remain culturally illiterate.

Q. You have said that "in a class society the power elite necessarily determines what education will be, and therefore its objectives." Richard

Ohmann and others have argued that the formal education system, in its response to illiteracy, teaches only those skills that will help support the military industrial complex. How can the progressive teacher oppose such forces while remaining within the system itself?

- A. Yes, this is exactly my case; for example, now I am the Secretary of Education of the city of São Paulo. It is really necessary to understand that we human beings are ambiguous beings. Reality makes us, from time to time, ambiguous, precisely because reality is also ambiguous. For example, a progressive teacher, a progressive thinker, a progressive politician many times has his or her left foot inside the system, the structures, and the right foot out of it. [Freire solidly plants his left foot to one side and his right to the other.] *Here*, he or she has the present; *here*, he or she has the future. *Here* is actuality, the reality of today; *here* is utopia. This is why it's so difficult, experiencing this ambiguity, for us to walk: we have to walk like this. [With a playful smile, Freire begins to waddle across the room.] Life is like this. This is reality and history.
- Q. Many people in the U.S. believe that the nation is experiencing a "literacy crisis," and they point to what they see as the dismal condition of the educational system and a general decline in the level of literacy. This perception has contributed to a conservative "back to basics" movement. Just how does one implement a progressive pedagogical agenda in the face of such overwhelming public perception that the progressive educational movements of the 1960s were a failure?
- A. In one of his recent books, Ira Shor has said many very interesting things about this regression you are now having in the States, this movement backwards. First of all, I think we have to understand how history is walking with us and because of us, while at the same time conditioning us to walk like this. There are reasons for that. For example, when I arrived in the States in 1969 to teach at Harvard, I found the youth in a state of rebellion. Harvard had been invaded. I met students with head injuries because the police had beaten them. One of them said to me, "Paulo, I thought we could never have things like this here, just in the Third World." I said, "No, you also have the Third World here vis-à-vis your First World. In some moments, you have the same thing we in the Third World have, but not constantly." We have to try to understand that history is like this. And I think that every five or ten years we have changes in the States. From the decade of annunciation of the presence of the students and the people, the popular movements in the streets, we go to a decade of almost total lack of interest, apathy; suddenly the students come back just to study, just to read. They say that the duty of students is just to read and write, to be on the side of the universities. The decade before, they thought that besides reading and studying they also could fight, that they could be "subjects." Maybe I am wrong, but perhaps now in the States we are starting a new decade that will attempt to overcome this apathy—a decade

different from the sixties. If this is true, I think that one of the tasks of progressive educators, teachers, writers, and so on is to challenge, to push, to improve, to increase this trend.

This is the end of this century as well as the end of the millennium, and I think that one of the values which human beings have because they have fought historically for it is also one of the main issues of this century: freedom. There has been a test for freedom in this end of the century. For me, all the changes we are seeing and experiencing in the world today in Eastern Europe and with the Berlin wall are not an attempt to return to capitalism; that is a naive explanation, an ideological explanation. The result is a return to capitalism but that is not the main aspect. I think everything happening in Eastern Europe is a kind of ode to freedom. Maybe we could take advantage of this in the States, here in Brazil, everywhere, to speak about the beauty of freedom and the need for freedom. We are like we are now because of freedom. Without freedom, it's impossible to go on, even though we know we can never get absolute freedom because that does not exist. Freedom is also historical. When we reach a certain state of freedom, we immediately discover we have another one to attain. In the last analysis, reaching freedom means creating avenues to get more freedom. And I think that this is one of the issues of this century.

- Q. You have distanced yourself from Ivan Illich's solution to oppressive education—to completely dismantle the schools—and you've applauded Mario Cabral's decision not to "close all the schools inherited from the colonial era" but instead to introduce "into the old system some fundamental reforms capable of accelerating the future radical transformation" of the educational system. Won't this compromise result in the same corrupt system but with a new face?
- A. We have to understand change as a process. And once we understand change as a process, we also have to understand that the process of change starts exactly in the place that we would like to change. Many people speak about change and think it's possible to start such change in the ideal society. First of all, we can never get the ideal society. The ideal society perhaps is heaven, and we cannot speak about heaven now because we are inside of history; heaven is metahistory for those who believe. We have to change society starting from the society which we now would like to change. This demands tactics; it demands knowledge of the society that now for us is old; it means knowledge of what society should become, the society of our dreamed utopia. Also, there are many virtues we have to create within ourselves. We cannot just receive virtues from leaders or from God; we have to create them in our *praxis*—like humility, for example, like being patiently impatient, and all these things. We must also learn *how* to change, and that takes time, and it demands wisdom, which we get through the experience of becoming engaged in the very process of

change. Once again, there is no prescription; we just have to start.

- Q. In your programs to develop adult literacy, do you take specific measures to respond to the needs of women?
- A. Oh yes. I remember that in the 1960s when I was organizing some issues to create codifications to challenge the illiterate, I wanted to discuss with them the concept of culture in order to fight against the apathy, against the immobilization of mind that makes us not believe in the possibility of change. In organizing some figures, some pictures, I asked the artist to put a book in the hands of a woman who was conversing with a man, not in the hands of the man. My intention was precisely to provoke debate in the very male culture of northeast Brazil, a *machista* culture, to provoke men to understand that women not only have the right to read, to write, to improve their intellectual possibilities, but also that they *can*, that they are *able* to do so. And this is just one instance that I remember right now. Nevertheless, I never worked to prepare programs dedicated to women. I always work together, men and women—the people. But I do emphasize the fight against machismo, which I think is one of the weaknesses of our culture.
- Q. In *The Politics of Education* you say, “I am in total sympathy with women’s fantastic struggle, even though I cannot fight their battle. Although I am a man, I can feel like a woman.” First, why *can’t* you fight the battle for women’s liberation? And, also, in what ways can you feel like a woman and what insight does this give you into women’s struggles?
- A. Even though I cannot take a leadership role in the women’s liberation movement, mostly because I’m not a woman, my sympathy—more than my sympathy, my feeling of camaraderie with them—for me is politically important. I think that only in a naive perspective could women reject my sympathy and my camaraderie because I am a man. It would be absolutely naive from the political point of view, because as a man I add through my solidarity (real and not tactical solidarity) something politically to the women’s movement.

Also, let me address your question about what insight feeling like a woman gives me into women’s struggle. First, I am sure that all men have something of the woman in them, and all women have something of the man in them. The issue for me is that the *machista* culture has repressed men in such a way that we’re unable to feel like a woman and that we’re afraid to say things like this. When I came back to Brazil in the 1980s, I had a ninety-minute interview on national television, and a woman asked me about the struggle of women, and I said I also feel like a woman. Because of that I received letters and telephone calls, above all from northeast Brazil, from friends of mine asking me with some irony or humor, “But Paulo, is it possible that the time of exile changed you in such a way?” They weren’t able to understand what it means philosophically speaking, and also politically speaking, when I say I also am a woman. I am first of all

expressing my solidarity with women in their struggle, and I am also saying that scientifically it is true. The point is that to a large extent I became able to overcome the fears the culture had imposed upon me, and I am not afraid that people say, "Ah, look, Paulo does not know yet whether he is a man or a woman." No, I know that I am a man; I have five children and the possibility to be a father again. But I'm not a *machista*, and I don't feel bad because I recognize in me something which could be characteristic of men but also characteristic of women. In the last analysis, men and women, we are, together, human beings.

Q. You frequently say that *agency*, the "ability to act and intervene," is an essential precondition for acquiring knowledge; only "subjects" can know. Feminists often talk about women's need to attain "subject position." What steps do you believe women must take in order to achieve this agency, this position of liberation?

A. This is also a historical question. I am absolutely convinced that the way women fight in the States is not necessarily the same way that women in Brazil should fight. The methods of action, the understanding, the levels of domination, the power of male ideology—all these things are conditioned culturally, historically, and socially. I can only give a generic answer that does not necessarily apply to the States, or even to Brazil. I think that some of the conditions and preconditions and the values and virtues necessary for the liberation struggle of the oppressed people of a nation are also necessary steps for the struggle of women. First, struggle is an ethical value; we cannot separate ethics from the political activity of women's liberation. For example, I think there's a need for some humility during struggle; maybe when we are fighting and getting some results, we sometimes risk losing humility and becoming arrogant. I am not speaking as a priest, but as an educator and a politician. I think that losing humility in the process of fighting and becoming more or less arrogant is not a good tactic.

Second, I think that even though the liberation of women has to do with men, in my point of view men are not necessarily the enemy of women. It's quite different from the struggle between classes, for example. I understand that during the struggle women sometimes have to adopt an attitude which perhaps gives the appearance that they are excluding men from all aspects of history; but this is not possible. I understand, but this cannot be. For example, I understand scientifically that in some moments of the struggle, women cannot allow the presence of men in their meetings. It is obvious because historically men have controlled things, and sometimes the presence of men can influence things in a bad way. There are many things like this that women have to do. Maybe I am wrong concerning the point of view of women, but the world they dream of cannot be just a world of women; that would be bad. For me, it would be a very ugly world. The world I dream of is the world of *us*, men and women. With this, I am

not saying that I discriminate against relationships between women and women, men and men. No, I'm absolutely open to this. In my point of view, it's a right; it's ethical; but it cannot be thought of as a generalization. For me, then, the world that women want is a free world with the collaboration of all of us.

- Q. Do you believe that the discourse of the women's movement has influenced the discourse of liberation in general? In what ways?
- A. I am not able now to tell you in which ways, but I can say that the discourse of liberation—despite whether it is more or less naive or critical, despite whether it comes from this or that group or this or that class of people or nation—once it is heard, it has the possibility of exercising influence. Sometimes it works against the wishes of those who speak the discourse. The human word, human speech, is not something which crosses history without consequence.
- Q. In *Conscientization and Deschooling*, John Elias says that one weakness of your work is your “failure to consider the role of the church in maintaining the existing level of political and social awareness among the people.” He says that you see the church as part of the solution when it's “really an essential part of the problem itself.” How do you respond to this criticism?
- A. I think the churches have been both problem and solution. The problems in themselves are not the solutions; that is, the solutions for the problems come from outside of the problems. Sometimes the church brings the solution; sometimes it worsens the problems. The question for me is to see when the churches are helping or not. I am not a fanatic in favor of or against the churches. For example, I think that historians of Brazilian politics now, and in the next century, have to recognize that the progressive churches in Brazil were absolutely important in the struggle of the Brazilians in overcoming the military coup d'état. It cannot be denied. Nevertheless, in 1964, immediately after the coup d'état, the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops published a proclamation to the nation applauding the military for having saved Brazil from communism. If it was not unanimous, it was almost. You see how history works? These bishops, during the process of seeing priests, nuns, workers, and peasants being tortured and killed, little by little became conscientized. It was not Paulo Freire who conscientized the bishops; it was history. And then, in some moment, the bishops changed and began to become opposed to the military. You see two moments—the same church, the same bishops. This is what history is: we have the same church with different positions in different moments. Today, perhaps, the much more conservative wing of the church is becoming the majority. It is like this, and I never have a sectarian position. I am always open to reunderstanding the facts according to the context.
- Q. Many people all over the world admire and support your work. Some, however, have criticized various aspects of both your theory and pedagogy.

Are there any criticisms or misunderstandings of your work that you would like to address at this time?

A. Sometimes there are criticisms that are not correct, but I think the critics are exercising their rights in criticizing me. Sometimes, however, the criticisms reveal a bad reading of me and sometimes not even a reading of me but a reading of others who did not read me well. Since the beginning I learned something very important, and my first wife Elza helped me a lot in this: in order not to be criticized, not to be coopted, it is absolutely necessary that you do *nothing*, and this is a very high price. I also learned that we must be humble vis-à-vis criticism, even those that are not correct ones. I thank you for the chance you're giving me now to refer to some of them, but I won't do that. I will make some defense of criticisms when I write a new book or article.

What I would like to say in closing, though, is that I feel happy. I have had the privilege in life, while still alive, to receive recognition from institutions, from the universities, and from many people. That is, history is not waiting for my death in the order to say, "That man existed." So I am happy. These things don't make me arrogant, but undoubtedly they make me happy as a human being. You cannot realize how beautiful it is for me when in different parts of the world I am recognized—when, for example, a young man or a young woman working in a shopping center asks me to write an autograph in one of my own books which they happen to have in their pocket. One day in Athens, Greece, I was walking in the street and a man who was selling something in the streets came to me and said, "Professor Freire, I saw you yesterday on television. I want to tell you that your books are very important also in my country." And he asked me to autograph his book. A merchant in the street! Scenes like this I have had all over the world, and it is for me a reason to be happy, but not to be proud.

A Reminder

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