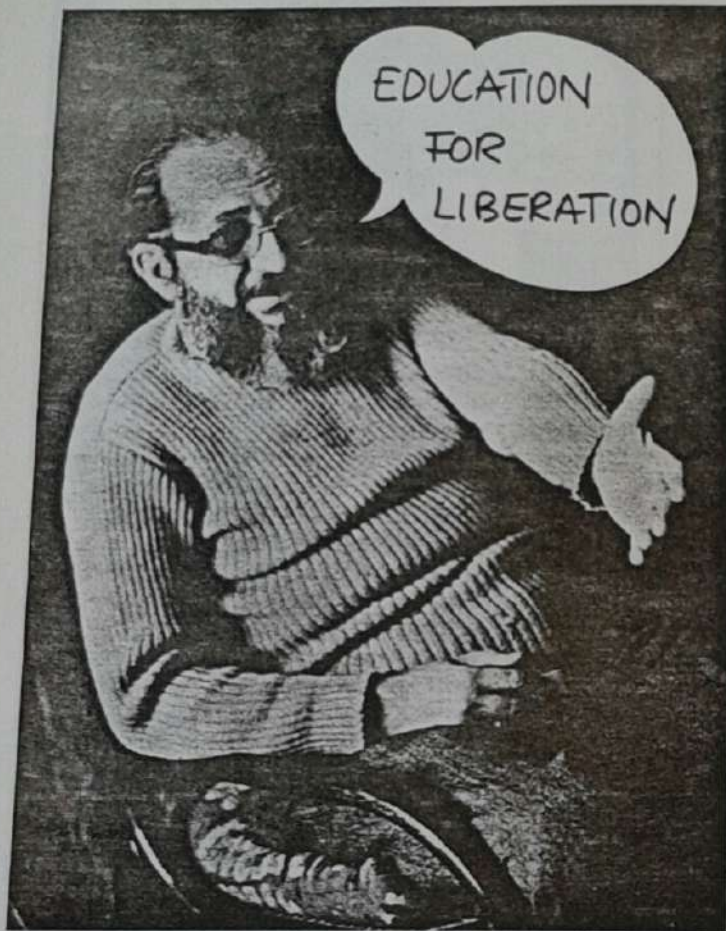


## Viewpoint



Paulo Freire

*Education issues loom large on the agenda of the churches because of their commitment to educational structures. They will be taken up in a section of the Nairobi Assembly dealing with education for liberation and community. Here Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator who has worked courageously in his own country to promote what has been called "the conscientization of the oppressed", makes a statement of faith which reveals the basically political nature of education for liberation.*

There are obvious limitations for a man who is used to talking rather than writing and who is involved in teaching philosophy in a university in trying to restrict himself to a few comments on such a vital theme! So may I ask the reader to regard this article as a conversation and forgive the repetition of remarks I have made in other places. I will try to clarify and extend arguments I have developed previously, not in any systematic way but rather by responding to the challenge of the subject and dealing with issues as they come into my mind.

Let me begin negatively. I do not believe that institutionalized education systems can be used as a lever for liberation. Of course one has to think seriously about the relation between education and politics; to try to separate them is not only unreal but dangerous. But to think of education in isolation from the power which establishes it, to detach it from the reality which feeds it, reduces education on the one hand to the realm of abstract ideas and values and on the other to being the repository of behaviour patterns.

It is not education which forms society in a certain way but society which, having structured itself in certain directions, establishes an educational system to fit the values which guide society. This is not necessarily a mechanical process; different people are affected in different ways and not all societies are the same. But a society which structures its education system to meet the interests of those who hold power then finds a means to preserve power in the process of education. The power which creates an education system in its image will never allow education to be used against it and therefore a radical transformation of the education system can never take place unless society itself is transformed.

Therefore to talk about education for liberation implies talking about change of a political kind. For me education for liberation implies the political organization of the oppressed to achieve power. Only then will there be the possibility of having a new kind of education which takes reality and the potential of each member of society seriously. This means thinking about the implications for the educator and about the changes — the revolutions — we need.

First let me say that educators don't need to feel pessimistic in the face of this reality. The more they come to understand the processes at work in society the more they gain clearer perception of the dynamic relationship between society and education. There is much that the educator can do, even if there are no precise guidelines which refer to each and every situation. Each has to work out what is appropriate in the particular setting and seek to put it into effect. Therefore it is important to recognize limitations and accept them humbly without being paralyzed by pessimism or seeking to manipulate people through cynical opportunism. In history one does what is historically possible and not always what one would like to do.

The obstacles are enormous. For example, I often work with students who have been trained to consume knowledge. The teacher for them has a profile of respectability and authority. So when we try to approach the learning process in a different way so that everyone, including the "teacher", is involved in seeking to understand the alienation of our daily lives, which we usually perceive without perceiving, an immediate resistance is created. They have little experience of the challenge yet if the theoretical discussion is to have integrity we must be involved in what is actually happening in society.

But if I do succeed in getting the students to understand what is going on and really see the alienation they experience and why it is so, then I feel I am doing something positive.

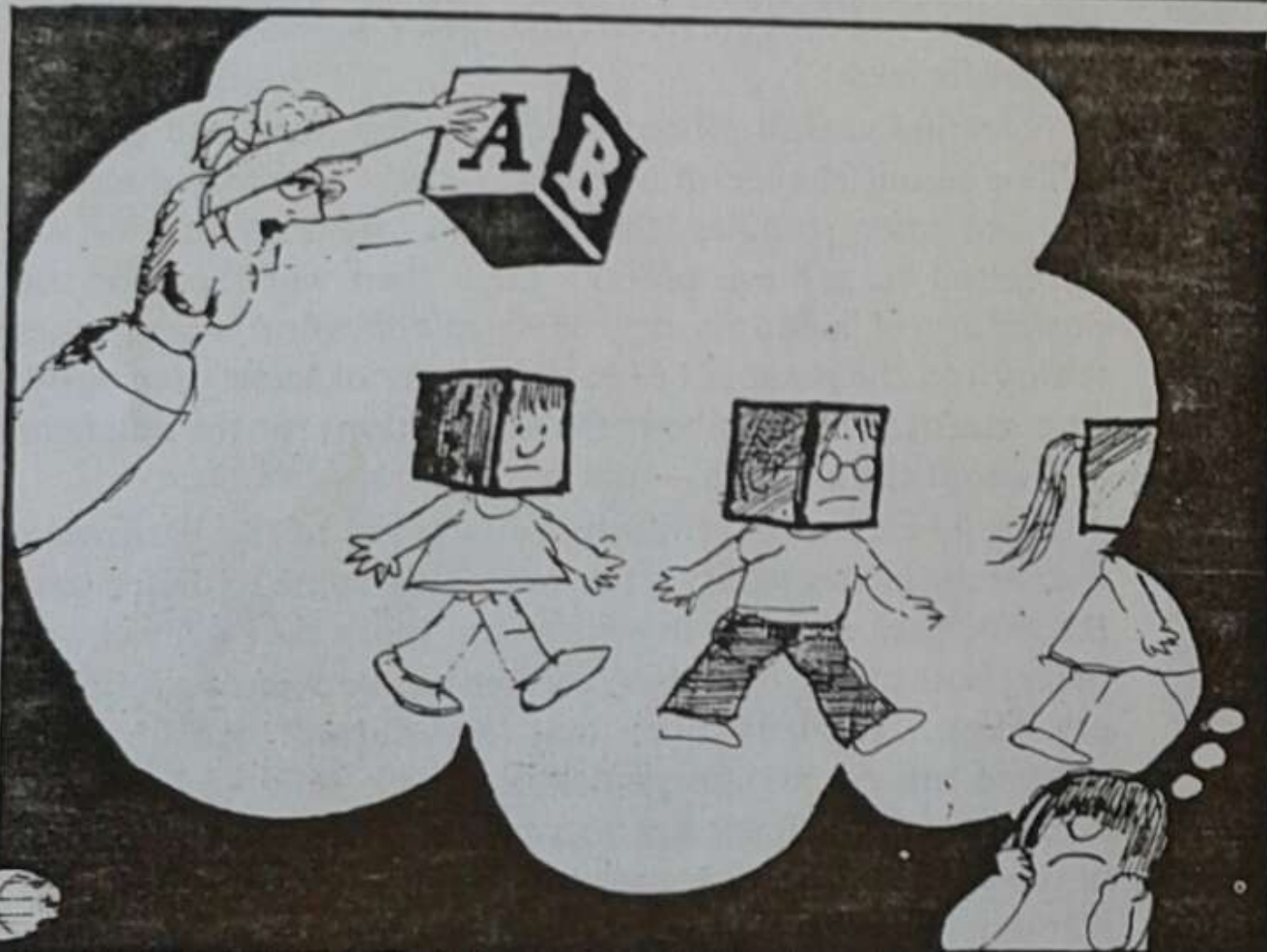
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July 1975

CAUDIUS

Lili

I WANT YOU TO  
WRITE HOW YOU  
SEE YOUR SCHOOL



I don't imagine I am creating the revolution because that is a long process which cannot be accomplished overnight. But the more we are able to challenge one another about why things happen, to look behind the reality of the 8.14 train to town and why we behave in certain ways, we are making a serious contribution.

**What kind of revolution?**

So whether education is designed to bolster the power of the ruling groups or designed to help a new society to shape itself, education is a political act. It is perhaps easier for Latin Americans or Chinese or Africans to see this. Many Europeans and Americans believe that education is neutral and that science and education are neutral disciplines at the service of humanity. Our experience, born in the cradle of capitalist domination, does not support that thesis. Education never was and never will be neutral.

Of course that does not mean the methods and tactics of liberation are the same in all societies. Everything depends on the historical moment the society lives and how the relationship of forces is aligned. This will dictate the kind of confrontation that liberation implies. It is one thing to talk of a liberating educational effort in a society where socio-economic inequalities are visible to the naked eye.

The contradictions of a society which talks of democracy and equality while the majority live in a poverty maintained by the violence of a minority which oppresses them in most basic ways is quite different from some industrialized countries.

This imposes limitations. You could not, for example, create millions of schools to prepare the Brazilian people for a new society at the present moment only manipulate and propagandize them in the ideology of the ruling group. Their situation would not be much improved by knowing how to rearrange their houses better or having better hygiene. But in other situations it is possible to work with the peasant. In Costa Rica, for example, the educator must first learn as much as possible about the reality of Costa Rica and the relationships of power. How does the country understand itself; how does it work; what are its relationships to the power points of the world? By knowing about these things it becomes possible to see what might be done and how people can be encouraged to understand their situation as a means of controlling their own reality.

In the industrialized countries other strategies are required. Violence and physical repression are not the means of oppression; on the contrary there is "social wellbeing", efficiency and order in which the mass media play an important role in masking reality. The education system and the mass media become sophisticated means of social control. Most frightening of all is the level of alienation in which we become robots without even realizing it, marching to unspoken orders and failing to challenge the reason why. We are dehumanized, unable to express our feelings or even our fears. We are afraid to be human. We become trapped in a vicious circle in which we hide our feelings and then suffer because we are afraid to let them out.

I find the love for animals in some industrialized countries a real parable for this. I am not against loving animals, but what I see is more than that. The relationship between some people and their pets strikes me as a compensation for reality. Dogs don't speak, don't ask questions, don't ask what happened to you today. They follow, act as silent comrades. They are precisely what we need, but I ask myself whether it is truly human. Our first need is to try to unmask reality.

**New society**

Transformation, revolution, is hard to achieve but only radical social change provides the possibility for things to happen in a different way. The more the new society is able to resist the temptations of "consumerism", which characterizes the capitalist way, and manipulation, the more it will be able to build up new human relationships based on a different material reality. It gives a chance of overcoming the old dichotomies between manual and intellectual work between practice and theory, between teaching and learning. This is how a new educational system is built. Liberating education, which in preparing for change identifies itself with the organization of the oppressed to defeat oppressive structures, now becomes a systematic process serving the ideals of the new society.





If previously education was committed to serving the status quo, in the new society it becomes fundamental to the ongoing process of liberation. This of course is not without its difficulties and problems. Some revolutionary societies spend years repeating the mistakes of former educational systems which are in fact in contradiction with the new society. The genius of China has been to take the issue of culture and education seriously.

But the revolution can never eliminate the dramatic tensions which characterize the human condition. While recognizing all the temptations to which we are exposed, as a Christian I nevertheless believe profoundly that our vocation is to create and recreate, to do and redo. I cannot be passive or indifferent in the face of the human predicament because I believe we have a responsibility, a task for the future. I believe in human beings and their calling to become truly human, freed from injustice, oppression and alienation.

I will never forget a conversation I had last year with a worker in Detroit — the city of the automobile, one of the most mechanized cities in the world. He told me I was talking with a 50% machine. We began to talk about the stress of living in Detroit and the number of crimes in the city, which has more murders each year than the whole of Western Europe. "I am 50% machine", he said, "and I talk with a friend who is also 50% machine. My 50% machine says something which offends his 50% man and his 50% machine kills my 50% man." If a socialist society is unable to reject this kind of society we will continue to be dehumanized.

That is one reason why I admire China which set this model aside and why I tell African leaders who contact me not to follow western patterns. If they follow this path there can be no solution. Our hope lies in questions, whether we are in the school system or outside it. What must we do to promote liberation? How? When? With whom? For what? Against what? And in whose favour?