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THE DIALOGICS OF NEGATION: GENDER AND SUBJECTIVITY

by

Sumita Chakravarty, Ken Dinitz, Tracy Essoglou,

Hazen Reed and Angel Shaw

Virtually all the ideas that Paulo Freire has devoted his life's work to explicating -- the notion of the active subject, of praxis, of human agency and creativity on the one hand, and of the culture of silence, objectification and internalized oppression on the other -- can serve to define the key themes in feminist scholarship, and in what might be called a gendered understanding of subjectivity. In the Freirean perspective, as we see it, it is ultimately in the realm of subjectivity that the educational process must meet its greatest challenge and wrest its triumph. So also in feminist struggle and critical practice. Whether one takes the idea of consciousness-raising as means of empowerment early on in the women's movement, or more recent challenges to a patriarchal poststructuralist paradigm by women of color for whom the articulation of colonizing structures remains a priority, the question of subjectivity is a preeminent one. Moreover, for both Freire and feminists, subjectivity is socially and culturally constituted; it is the map of experience and existential reality.

It is the adequacy of this mapping that our paper seeks to address. Our point of reference and interrogation is the Freirean model of dialogue as elaborated in the essay, "Extension or Communication" in Education for Critical Consciousness (Freire, 1973). Without doing injustice to the concrete situation --agrarian and Third World--in relation to which Freire's

educational project is elaborated here, we wish to address the larger philosophical issue of knowledge and shared meaning that he advances to frame the viability of the project itself. For Freire, education is but another name for the dynamic process of consciousness, the consciousness of self and other made possible through dialogue. We believe, however, that the categories of "consciousness" and "dialogue" have been collapsed in the Freirean model, whereas the two should remain analytically distinct. In other words, while consciousness is the awareness one garners out of one's total life situation, dialogue (to be distinguished from language) enhances this awareness but does not exhaust its representation. Put in Freirean terms, dialogue as epistemology is not the same as dialogue perceived as mode of action. Freire sees dialogue as the process whereby individuals come together to understand the world and to transform it. But if dialogue is to be foregrounded as a form of praxis, language itself (and access to it) cannot be taken as a neutral means of expression, but one which is inflected by the dialogic situation. Freire uses "dialogue" both as metaphor (of ontological being) and as concrete practice (intersubjective linguistic exchange), with a consequent slippage from one to the other. But recognizing that dialogue is possible and desirable does not ensure its viability as method.

Our contention, therefore, is that there is a gap between the realm of consciousness and the spokenness of dialogue, a gap that we explore through the notion of gendered subjectivity. The question we ask is not, (or not only), how women as social beings inhabit the dialogic mode, nor is our purpose here simply to reaffirm the specificity of women's silencing, of which enough documentation exists. Rather, we use the subjectivity of women as the space in which the relationship of subaltern consciousness to dialogue may be

explored. Our concern in this paper is with the status of what might be called vestigial consciousness, that which is epistemologically and philosophically inadmissible and yet informs subjectivity as the residue of experience. We argue that the dualities of subject/object, speech/silence, humanity/dehumanization, even extension/communication cannot take full account of the social life-process, including the educational process, and that what needs to be articulated is the recognition of negation in speech, dehumanization in humanity, extension in communication. In other words, within the parameters of the dialogic mode, we need ways to draw attention to what is dialogue's shadow self: ambiguity, self-doubt, negation and bitterness. Where, we ask, do models of social change put the "mess," the debris of failed understanding, of communication gone awry? Can the notion of anti-dialogue sufficiently account for the complexity of the unspoken? In what follows, we try to provide an alternative mapping of the process of dialogue, using the subjectivity of women to foreground notions of uncertainty, silencing and negation inherent in dialogue. For, in Paulo Freire's own words, "The world is not made up of certainties. Even if it were, we would never know if something was really certain. The world is made up of the tension between the certain and the uncertain" (Literacy: Reading the Word and the World, 1987: 58).

Defining Our Terms

We are aware that terms like "negation" and "subjectivity" are philosophically loaded, but we do not wish (and do not have the space) to invoke those associations here. Our use of the terms is more modest and our context limited to that of communication. Negation implies that which is

perforce left unsaid or unspoken in the process of dialogue. If we resort to the structuralist linguistic paradigm for a moment, every act of linguistic choice is posited upon a denial. What we say simultaneously silences what we do not say. Negation in this sense identifies a cluster of phenomena such as self-censorship and self-doubt, inexpressivity and the inappropriate articulation. Stated within a Freirean framework, in which the purpose of dialogue is to render into speech that which has been internalized to the detriment of one's social and psychic well-being, we argue that dialogue, particularly in the case of women, often resonates with silence and negation. In fact, negation is the unacknowledged condition of possibility of dialogue. We use the term "subjectivity" to suggest a form of consciousness that informs the individual criss-crossed by social definitions. In recent years, the notion of the subject has, as Paul Smith notes in his book, Discerning the Subject (1988), been "either explicitly or implicitly installed within a number of different areas or discourses of the human sciences." Explicitly, Smith identifies three versions of theorizing the subject: one, the subject as synonymous with the "individual," the "person"; two, the subject in psychoanalytic discourse as "the unconsciously structured illusion of plenitude" which we call "the self"; and three, the subject as object of social and historical forces and determinations. Informing these usages, he claims, is the dualism of subject/object inherited from the western philosophical tradition. Smith argues that the productive contradiction in the notion of the "subject" as determined and determining enables us to see that subjectivity is partial, that an "individual" inhabits multiple subject-positions (pp. xxvii-xxx). Extended to the dialogue situation, subjectivity has meant the ideal of a fully enabled and self-conscious power

(the Subject in Freirean terms, moving from a subject-ed position to its obverse through critical consciousness). But it can also mean the historically specific individual inhabiting diverse subject-positions, a subjectivity constituted by non-coherence and fragmented by multiple oppressions. Thus we hold that the subject is neither the autonomous fount of meaning nor a mere constellation of discourses as the post-structuralists would have it. Rather, it is the tension between the identification that the subject makes of him or herself as the "I" and the awareness of the tenuousness of this identity in the innumerable crises of daily life and discourse that informs our notion of subjectivity.

By "dialogics" we mean the constitutive conditions of dialogue. Freire has noted: "Communication implies a reciprocity which cannot be broken. Hence it is not possible to comprehend thought without its double function, as something which learns and something which communicates" ("Extension or Communication," p. 138). Here Freire sees communication in relation to "community," reinforcing, like John Dewey and Raymond Williams, the ideas of consensus and shared meaning. Such emphasis, though, cannot account for what Barbara Johnson has called "the warring forces of signification within the text [dialogue] itself" (Johnson, 1980: 5). Moreover, our experience of community is in general mediated and provisional, dependent upon a whole range of social practices, including signification. Our use of the term "dialogics" is inflected by such phenomena. Following Bakhtin, another great exponent of dialogism, we locate utterance "on the border between what is said and what is not said" (Holquist, 1990: 61).

In seeking to elaborate on "the dialogics of negation," then, this paper points not to a derailment of the dialogic process but to its

problematization. Our task is a theorization of the inadmissible as inherent in the dialogue process. In other words, dialogue itself is insufficient guarantee that all will be said, revealed or known, that the process will ensure full and equal participation of all concerned. The gendered subject provides the site for the examination of this gap.

The Freirean Model of Dialogue

Before we proceed further, it is necessary to turn to Freire's essay in order to note the intertwining of the philosophical and the political that informs his notion of dialogic communication. Arising out of the specific context of his literacy campaigns in Brazil and its applicability in the rural Third World, Freire is at once addressing the particular forms of "aid"--financial, technocratic-scientific, educational--that the privileged (both internal and external) proffer to the oppressed and deprived and using this specific model of aid-giving to critique the motivations that underpin them. To develop this critique, Freire is concerned with elaborating on dialogue and communication as the essential human activity which differs from what he calls "extension," the imposition of instrumental knowledge on the poor and illiterate without taking their own understanding of their world into account. For Freire, dialogue can only take place between equal Subjects, in a process in which both the educator and the educatee learn from one another. Freire does not investigate that middle ground between the political context of his ideas and the philosophical rationale for the model he proposes. In other words, how is the agronomist-educator to become the dialogic communicator? How is a de-contextualization and re-contextualization to take place? Freire pins his faith on a notion of oral, face-to-face