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Paulo Freire and Educating the Oppressed

By Colman McCarthy

IN LATIN America, few areas are deeper sink holes of poverty than northeast Brazil. Hunger, illiteracy and disease have beaten down the defeated poor with daily cruelties, and all the while the military regime talks up the need for industrial development and tighter police security. Few have gone into the backlands of northeast Brazil to work, and fewer still have stayed to succeed. Among the latter, Paulo Freire stands out. Working in the rural villages, Freire mostly taught reading and writing among illiterate adult peasants. He discovered that the conditions of poverty passed from parents to children less because of inherited ignorance or lethargy than because the poor often fear freedom. They "prefer this security of conformity with their state of unfreedom to the creative communion produced by the pursuit of freedom . . . Self-depreciation is a characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy and unproductive—that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness."

Freire's work is gaining recognition in the United States, though he runs the risk of being glamorized by the counter-culture hip as another Third World messiah come to save the masses. Freire has pulled in fat lecture fees in New York but he has backed away from having his thought packaged into cocksure slogans like Illich's "deschooling society." Instead, and perhaps purposely to ward off panhandle followers, Freire's major work, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (Herder and Herder), is a difficult, dry and slow book. One reading is not enough. Increasingly, articles on Freire are appearing in North America, but mostly in small circulation journals devoted to what is timeless, not only timely. A few universities are offering courses on Freire's thought, including Michigan State. Professor Brady Tyson of American University believes that Freire's education philosophy may produce an alliance for progress where there really is progress.

AT ONE time in Brazil—the early 1960s—Freire's methods of education were evolving into a successful national movement. It didn't last, though. As if to prove that Freire was on to something, the new bully government of 1964 imprisoned him without charges, labeling his work as—what else?—communistic. Freire was released after 70 days and took exile in Chile. From 1964 to 1969, he worked in the villages and is credited with awakening much of the country's sleeping political potential. Currently, Freire, 52, works in Geneva as head of the educational division of the World Council of Churches.

A basic theory of Freire is that education is more a matter of knowing than learning. When a person is taught to read and write, "the illiterate is no longer a person living on the fringe of society, a marginal man, but rather a representative of the dominated strata of society, in conscious or unconscious

opposition to those who, in the same structure, treat him as a thing. Thus, teaching men to read and write is no longer an inconsequential matter of *ba, be, bi, bo, bu*, of memorizing an alien word, but a difficult apprenticeship in naming the world." As an example of an act of knowing, Freire talks about a group of peasants in the agrarian reform of Chile who took part in a literacy program. They wrote words with their tools on the dirt roads where they worked. When asked why he hadn't learned to read and write, a peasant answered; "Before the agrarian reform, I didn't even think. Neither did my friends. It wasn't possible. We lived under orders. We had only to carry out orders. We had nothing to say." This is the culture of silence, a recurring phrase in "Pedagogy of the Oppressed."

AS Montessori and Jacques Ellul before him, Freire does not believe that education can be neutral. Either it leads to social change or social control. Too often—in some areas of Latin America it is always—control



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is the result. Traditional education presumes that the student sits before the teacher like an empty bowl, ready to have facts poured in; when full, the student is graduated and sets out to occupy the shelf-space of society's orderliness. Not only has the student filed away bits of information but he himself is soon part of society's filing cabinet. Freire scorns such stifling styles of education as mere transferrals of information. "The students are not called upon to know, but to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher. Nor do the students practice any act of cognition, since the object towards which that act should be directed is the property of the teacher rather than a medium evoking the critical reflection of both teacher and students. Hence in the name of 'preservation of culture and knowledge' we

have a system which achieves neither true knowledge nor true culture." What is needed is critical consciousness, what Freire calls *conscientization*: an awareness of one's dignity and choosing forms of political participation to protect and bolster that dignity.

Freire's thought has much of Whitehead and Teilhard in it, especially in his idea that the creation of the world is not finished but still goes on. "As a child in northeast Brazil, I knew many priests who went out to the peasants saying, 'be patient. This is God's will. And anyway, it will earn heaven for you.' Yet the truth of the matter is that we have to earn our heaven here and now, we ourselves. We have to build our heaven, to fashion it during our lifetime, right now. Salvation is something to achieve, not just hope for."

Liberation is seldom authentic, because often the once-oppressed merely end up in puppet mimicry of the oppressor. The latter may have been joined or replaced but he is still the only model; Lenin replaces the czar, Castro ousts Batista, but what is really the difference between them? The tables may be turned but the poor are still kept from eating at them. "If the goal of the oppressed is to become fully human," writes Freire, "they will not achieve their goal by merely reversing the terms of the contradiction, by changing roles . . . The moment the new regime hardens into a dominating bureaucracy, the humanist dimension is lost and it is no longer possible to speak of liberation." With notable sameness to Martin Luther King's philosophy, Freire insists that "it is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves can free their oppressors." In a meeting with some Chilean peasants, Freire summarized the complexity of the oppressor-oppressed relationship: *Yo no soy si tu no eres: yo no voy si tu no vas* — I am not unless you are, I can not go forward unless you go forth.

MUCH OF the news from Latin America tells about citizen uprisings—in Colombia, Guatemala, Brazil—and always the oppressed are driven back. Freire's method of education—based on the raw experience of the student and his willingness of heart to free both himself and his enslaver—has produced no striking results. He was asked recently if he could point to any instance where peasants have overthrown local oppression, and he could show none. Yet many are convinced that Freire is neither another con man nor even limited to Latin America. For the past year, the office of HEW Secretary Elliot Richardson has had an education specialist who has been using the Freire method to sensitize HEW to minority problems.

It is fitting that Freire is becoming known in the United States. Little oppression is found here in comparison with the severity of northeast Brazil, but we share a common culture of silence. Wealth, not poverty, is making objects out of most of us: who can keep count of, let alone actively resist, all the outrages? Freire speaks of an "invisible war" against the common citizens. He referred to Brazil but the front lines are here too.