

# THE THEORY OF PAULO FREIRE

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## WHO IS PAULO FREIRE?

Freire is a Brazilian. He was born in the North East in 1921 of middle-class parents, better off than most. He then went on to work with the poor and this sharing of their life led him to the discovery of what he describes as the culture of silence, of the dispossessed. He came to realise that the ignorance and lethargy of the poor people in his country were the direct product of the whole situation of economic, social and political domination.

At the age of 23, Freire married a teacher and through her became interested in education. In 1959 he became Professor of History and Philosophy of Education and began experimenting with new methods of teaching adults to read and write. He was more concerned to help people to become aware of their under-dog situation than just to teach them reading and writing. He wanted to confront their pessimism and fatalism by enabling them to become aware of their capacity to shape their environment and to obtain the means to do so. Through his experience of teaching illiterate people, Freire soon discovered a method of teaching in which he showed how quickly literacy can be achieved provided it is linked to local social and political issues. Freire has linked teaching and consciousness raising together in his method.

In 1964 there was a military coup in Brazil which overthrew the democratic regime. It was inevitable that Freire would be thrown out of his own country. For the new regime a person like Freire, who was not only helping peasants and slum-dwellers to read and write but also to think and act, was an unwanted person.

After a short spell in jail, he went to Chile, where he worked for 5 years with the Chilean Institute for Agrarian reform and as a Unesco consultant, developing his adult literacy experiment a step further. He then went to Harvard University where he worked with the Centre for the study of Development and Social Change.

He has worked since 1970 in the Department of Education of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, where he has been busy organising education projects for Third World countries. He also speaks with groups all over the world about his ideas.

In order to understand Freire's method of consciousness raising, it is essential to understand his perceptions of humankind and oppression. His approach to education and consciousness raising are intimately related to each other and from these he has developed his concepts and methods.

## THE CONSCIOUSNESS

### FREIRE'S PERCEPTIONS OF HUMANKIND

There are according to Freire two views on humankind.

One view conceives of humans as objects: they are mouldable and adaptable.

The other view sees humans as subjects, independent beings, able to transcend and recreate the world.

In the first conception, humans can be compared with animals. They act and obey without taking time to reflect. An animal cannot see itself as "I" against a "not I", or in other words it cannot see itself separate from this world. If human beings are seen as objects, they are submerged in the world. They have not been given a chance of self-reflection.

In the second view, human beings are seen as subjects. They can think and reflect for themselves and they can dissociate from the world. The essential difference between humans and animals is that humans can operate in the world through action and reflection.

As the starting-point for his theory, Freire chooses the thesis "that humans are subjects in and with the world". According to him consciousness is determined by the socio-economic and political context, and also by cultural conditioning through one's upbringing, education and religion. In other words, it is an inter-change between economic and cultural structures.

Freire distinguishes three different levels of consciousness.

### MAGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Such people adapt themselves defencelessly and passively to the expectations of a superior force: they are not conscious of the socio-economic contradictions within this society: they accept life for what it is and don't question injustices done to their lives. They are silent and docile.

### NAIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

This involves gaining insight into and becoming aware of one's own problems, but without making connections with the world outside- in other words individualising problems. Problems are more or less seen as coincidences, "accidents".

### CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Such people stop looking at problem as mostly individual accidents but see them more as structural problems. Critical consciousness involves making connections with the socio-economic contradictions in society. It means looking at reality and recognising such contradictions as a fact.

### FREIRE'S PERCEPTIONS OF OPPRESSION

Freire explains his views, not by using class-analysis, but more as an analysis of the mechanisms of oppression in general, which can be applied to all sorts of situations. There is no clear party political line in his descriptions. Freire's anti-authoritarian thinking prevents him from making a description of a new society, because his method of consciousness raising enables people to discover and recreate one for themselves ( in personal and social terms ).

### CULTURAL INVASION

Freire made his analysis from his experience of Latin-American society. For centuries Brazil was colonised by the Portuguese. This phase in Brazilian history clearly left its mark in the consciousness of the people. The unequal relationships between those in power ( the landowners ) and those without power ( the labourers and peasants ) have deeply rooted themselves in Brazilian society.

The effect of the colonisation of one nation or group by another is called cultural invasion??. Through cultural invasion the invaded people lose their own culture because they see reality through the eyes of the invaders. They accept the imposed norms and values and perceive the invaders as superior, and in consequence, themselves as inferior. The invaded persons / group lose their identity. They become powerless. The invasion leaves the oppressed absorbing the culture of the oppressors as part of themselves, which leads to alienation from their own culture. The oppressors do the thinking which makes the oppressed into objects.

## THE CULTURE OF SILENCE

One of the most important concepts of Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed is the "culture of silence

The oppressors overwhelm the oppressed with their values and norms, which effectively silences people. In this context Freire uses the concept of "myth". By pressure from those in power, the oppressed have internalised those myths, which we can speak of here as "lies" because they have been purposefully and knowingly imposed upon the people without taking into consideration their reality.

The oppressed people feel ignorant and they become dependent on the culture of the oppressors, the so-called "experts", specialists in society. The needs of the oppressed and the knowledge gained from their own "experience" are not regarded as important; they are ignored, devalued and considered as inferior.

This concept can be applied, for example, to the oppression of women. Women are still dependent in most cases on male doctors and their specialist opinions about, for instance, the need for an abortion. The women's own view of their needs is being ignored: their feelings are not considered a reality.

## THE MECHANISM OF A FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

This is a "myth" created by cultural invasion: "women belong at home and their function is to be responsible for and look after the family". According to the bourgeois norms of society women are seen as the experts only in this area.

In their upbringing girls are being conditioned to fulfil this function within society. As adult women, they have internalised this role.

This consciousness is imposed by means of religion, education and socialisation. It is a false consciousness. Women have not had a free choice in order to take on this role. It is a myth, a false translation of reality. Myths are the base of the false consciousness and benefit the oppressors. They are a way of keeping the oppressed silent.

The effect of making women experts inside the house is to make men the experts outside the house. In other words running society is done by men and the top positions in the professions ( education, medicine, law and politics ) and in industry are still male-dominated. The domination by the so-called experts in society is dangerous, because apart from owning the means of production they also monopolise the system of socialisation.

In the context of the oppression of women there is a recognised set of norms and values based on the way men function within society. For instance, the use of language by men is in general rationally based,

while that by women is more emotionally based.

The areas of work regarded as appropriate for women are only extensions of their function as experts in the home i.e. caring for and looking after other people. Women who reach high functions within politics etc. can only reach that level by internalising the masculine ways of dealing with politics. Hence the lack of women involved in running society.

Oppressed groups must initiate "cultural action for freedom" to get out of the culture of silence.

## CULTURAL ACTION FOR FREEDOM

Freire expresses his ideas on teaching and consciousness raising as "cultural action for freedom". It is important that he very clearly shows that the subject and object in the educational process are not static i.e. the teacher is also a student and the student is a teacher.

In the traditional method of community and social work there are the subjects, the people with knowledge ( social workers, teachers, community workers ) who shape the objects, the people without knowledge ( the clients, students, pupils, people in the community ). This is the patronising side of welfare work and education. It does not encourage people to speak for themselves and people will stay silent.

According to Freire, there are only active people who together are trying to learn more than they already know. People without knowledge don't exist. For instance, a woman bringing up a family on her own on social security will have more knowledge about being a single parent and its problems than a community worker without a family and in a full-time paid job. What the community worker might know is how to encourage the woman to talk about her hardship. Both have something to learn from each other.

In order to understand the main aim of Freire's method, I will clarify further the meaning of "cultural action for freedom".

The concept of "culture" has a very bourgeois meaning. Bourgeois culture ( values, concepts, ideas ) is set up as the criterion for all cultures, in other words it is supposedly the only real culture, and other cultures are regarded as inferior. People from the middle classes view many people in society as unfortunately not yet ready to be part of the "real" bourgeois culture.

They therefore feel responsible for doing something about these "unfortunate" people, helping them, educating them, in order to enable them to join in the culture of the bourgeoisie.

In welfare work, as well as in education, people can be oppressed by the thinking, language and behaviour of others. Community workers, teachers, social workers, etc. can perceive themselves as closer to the truth and reality than the people they are working with ( students, clients ).

In fact, many people learn not to think their own thoughts, to speak their own language, i.e. to "unlearn" their own culture. People are in a sense being forced not to see the truth of their own reality any longer. One woman in a group I worked with said : "Because I speak Cockney, they all think I'm stupid". Who are "they"? - everyone who ascribes to the bourgeois cultural values, including so-called proper spoken English.

This has clearly happened in Third World countries. Yet in our Western society this happens too. Too many people adopt a culture only in order to conform to the cultural life of the more powerful people.

Freire is primarily making it clear that welfare workers should rebel against these subtle ways of alienation through conforming.

Here community workers will ask the obvious question: "What has to be done in order to let all people speak for themselves so that they can liberate themselves and others from domination?"

According to Freire, culture is created by humans themselves through "praxis". By praxis he means the integration of reflection and action, practice and theory, thinking and doing.

Beginning to take freedom for oneself by thinking and doing is "action". Usually action is seen as something which happens before or after reflection. For Freire action consists in thinking and doing. Cultural action for freedom is distinguished by reflection which aims at action and action which keeps aiming at thinking.

By freedom, Freire means "being freed". This means becoming more "subject", more human. It also means working towards a society without one person being the object of another i.e. inferior. Freedom is gained through the struggle with yourself and others.

Freedom is recognising and trying to transcend your own boundaries which put you in certain restricted situations. You will come to see that beyond that boundary is a further possibility you were previously unaware of. Freedom is taking up boundary situations. It is gaining more self-confidence in order to act.

A boundary situation is an important concept related to cultural action for freedom. I will therefore explain it more fully, beginning with an example related to field work with women:

The woman who refuses to do the dishes every night is trying to break through a certain boundary. If her husband shows resistance it will have an effect on her further action, whether to carry on or not to carry on breaking this boundary. With this experience she will pursue reflection, and go into dialogue with other women, for example, at a meeting in the community centre. Soon she will reach another boundary and take action by refusing to make the beds every day for her husband and adolescent children.

This woman has started to look at her life critically. She is looking through the myth that she, as a woman, has a natural duty to take care of her family inside the house. Through her reflection and action she has begun "cultural action for freedom". To realise this is to start to transcend mental boundaries, myths, barriers, inhibitions.

## "BOUNDARY SITUATIONS"

In a general context "boundary situations" means the following: in our society people are being forced inside certain boundaries and they are not permitted to overstep them. It is for the benefit of the people who dominate this society to hold on to those myths which force people to stay within these boundaries in order to safeguard the position of power of the oppressors. A boundary situation is always an objective fact which can subjectively be experienced on different levels. Within the subjective experience are two opposite possibilities or viewpoints:

1) I can experience the state of being tied down "magically". I experience my situation as fate, as being natural and I don't ask myself if it can be different; I conform. My consciousness is occupied with all sorts of myths in relation to my situation. This conformity is being fed by oppressive influences which feed my consciousness continuously - myths like the myth of equal opportunities in education, the myth of private property as a necessary basis for personal success, the myth that white people are superior to

other races, the myth that women are more emotional and therefore less strong than men.

2) I can look really "critically" into the state of being tied to my situation and will come to "cultural action for freedom". I recognise more and more that there is injustice in my situation, an imposition from which I have to free myself instead of seeing it as an unchangeable fate. I am less and less influenced by myths and slogans. I recognise that my situation, which is not only mine, is changeable. It has grown historically, and I look for ways ( often with others ) to liberate myself and thus shift my boundaries.

Between these two extremities the magical and critical way of handling one's situation as described above, lies everyone's awareness process. It is a gradual process which is continuously hampered by "fear of freedom", apathy and scepticism. This process Freire calls "conscientisation".

Finally, it is important not to keep a boundary situation purely as a psychological happening and only in relation to personal growth. This concept attains a wider meaning when it can be placed within the socio-political context. We are not just individuals, we are products of the society we are living in.

#### FREIRE'S PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATION & CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING THE IMPOSING CONCEPT

"We simply cannot go to the workers - urban or peasant - in the banking style, to give them 'knowledge' or to impose upon them the model of the 'good woman or man' contained in a programme whose content we have ourselves organised. Many political and educational plans have failed because their authors designed them according to their own personal views of reality, never once taking into account ( except as mere objects of their action ) the woman/man-in-a-situation towards whom their programme was ostensibly directed'  
(Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire,p.66)

By the concept of "banking style", Freire means that the teacher/group leader deposits ( imposes ) predetermined information which is fed into the object, the members of the group. There is no two-way dialogue, no recognition of the reality of the women in the group. It is related to the myth that one person can make another person conscious.

Consciousness making is in flat contradiction to consciousness raising. For me as a group leader, consciousness making would mean that

- through my own experience/enthusiasm I want to make women conscious of their oppression;
- I impose my consciousness, my norms and values on to those of the women;
- I impose my beliefs on them, and manipulate them into my way of looking at problems and life from my own convictions;
- I would project my reality on to theirs.

This would mean for the women in the group:

- that I don't have confidence in them;
- that I don't accept them as human beings in their own right but more as objects,
- that I don't respect and feel involved with their reality;
- to be good members in the group they have to follow/obey my ideas and concepts.

This way, in fact, little has changed for the women. Women are still subservient therefore dependent

therefore oppressed .... This way, there is no space for the women in the group to discuss their own boundaries, to look at and reflect on them, and maybe take action.

People can't liberate other people - the struggle for freedom has to be done by people themselves. Their own subjective discovery that they are in a particular oppressed position in society will have a liberating effect and can be the beginning of an awareness process which will motivate them to act, to make small and big changes in the circumstances which keep them in certain roles.

According to Freire, consciousness making, i.e. imposing information without consideration of the ideas and reality of the group members is authoritarian. In that case the group leader is the expert, the owner of existing knowledge, and according to her the group members have no knowledge and can be compared with empty containers which are ready to be filled.

Freire says:

"Narration ( with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorise mechanically the narrated content. Worse still, it turns them into "containers", into receptacles to be filled by the teacher. The more completely he fills the receptacles, the better a teacher he is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, p.45).

The information and knowledge which has been transmitted is not coming out of the needs of the members of the group. The group leader decides what the proper information is from her norms and values. She is the subject with the knowledge. The group members are in this situation ignorant objects being filled with knowledge. As a result of imposing information and concepts, the body as well as the emotions and intellect have not been reached by the new information and internalising ideas and knowledge has therefore been made impossible.

With this "imposing" method of teaching and consciousness making the women in the group have no space to look into their own and each others' knowledge and experience in order to gain insight into their own lives. In other words, they are being kept silent. The label which oppressed groups in society have is that of being ignorant.

Women are generally seen as ignorant. With our naive consciousness we see men as the experts in society.

The authoritarian and patronising way of undertaking welfare work has the result that the oppressed are passive and conform to the society the way it is. People are then kept in the place of "naive consciousness

The person who has most readily accepted all sorts of ideas and knowledge from others will be the more alienated and least conscious.

## EDUCATION FOR CRITICAL AWARENESS (THE PROBLEM-POSING METHOD)

In contradiction to the authoritarian method of education, Freire proposes the alternative method of "problem-posing".

This method starts from the life situation and reality of people. Their life situation is made into a problem posing situation. The method concentrates on showing people that they have the right to ask questions on the hows and whys, that they have the right to find out about causes and influences in their lives.

An important aspect of this method is "dialogue". Dialogue means that the relationship between group leader and group members is horizontal. The roles of leader and group member are interchangeable, and the leader learns from group members as well as group members from the leader. They relate to each other as subjects as opposed to the authoritarian method of learning where the relationship of group leader to member is clearly vertical. With the problem posing / solving method leader and group member are in dialogue with each other: it is an encounter on an equal basis. The main goal of the encounter is to discover reality together, to unmesh the false myths with which we have all been brought up. This joint enquiry by means of dialogue into the experience of our lives is also an exchange of information between group leader and group members, teacher and students. As a result of this process in the group a general problem, also called "theme", can come to the surface, i.e. what is the programme for the group?

It is important for the group leader to let members in the group talk freely. Through careful listening the leader will get information in order to pose certain questions. In education by dialogue group leaders are to pose problems rather than provide information, and the problems of group members coming to the surface through dialogue then provide the theme or programme of discussion for the group.

Going back to a previous example.... "Because I speak Cockney they all think I'm stupid". Together with the group I would examine who they are. The information I received I gave back to the group in a problem-posing way, with the question "who are they?". Through dialogue we would together analyse and examine this question. The group leader can then if necessary give certain relevant information in order to get closer to a critical view of their reality. This process encourages the women to look at themselves in relation to the world they live in. They can learn to see the world the way it is, that it is made by people and therefore can be changed by people. In other words, they learn to move away from the feeling "So be it, I can't change it anyway", to come over the threshold of the naive consciousness to the critical consciousness; they learn to break through the idea that oppression does not depend on coincidences but is purely determined by the interests of the more powerful groups of people in society.

Summing up Freire's problem-posing method, the teaching material comes from the group members / students themselves. It has been given back to the group by the leader / teacher in a structured problem-posing way with relevant information in order to get more insight into the total problem.

It is also clear that with this method teaching and consciousness raising are integrated with each other.

<http://www.community-work-training.org.uk/freire/>