

Paulo Freire as Brazilian Activist (Lecture to student taught seminar on popular education in Latin America, 4/10/90)

I've been asked to contribute some "historical background" to this class, perhaps to correct the impression that everything in popular education started with the experiments of Paulo Freire in Brazil during the late 1950's.

Freire was a professor of history and philosophy of education at the University of Recife in the impoverished Northeast of Brazil, during the heyday of a populist political regime which was fostering optimistic nationalist thinking about Brazil's destiny. Brazilian intellectuals of his generation expected their country to develop rapidly into a great power. They were greatly concerned, however, by the extreme social inequality that afflicted their country and the chronic and increasing problem of rural and urban poverty. They were divided over the question of whether Brazil might be developed with an increasingly participatory political and economic regime for which social justice was a primary concern, or whether the country required an authoritarian government which would squeeze the poor and restrict any movement for social justice in the short run, while providing maximum opportunities for both domestic and foreign capital in order to achieve development. The Northeast, then as now, was one of the more impoverished areas of the Western Hemisphere; and nationalist intellectuals there tended to think of social justice as a necessary condition for development.

The Archbishop of Recife, Dom Helder Camara, was an early leader in focussing people's attention on the desperate poverty of the nordestinos, and advancing the idea that the Church had a special responsibility to them -- because it was a Gospel imperative to reach out to them, and because otherwise in desperation they might turn for a solution to communism, perceived by the propagandists of both Church and State at that time as the number one threat to Christian civilization (that is, to privilege and to what it viewed as the proper constitution of society). Along with many others, Freire joined the Catholic Action movement inspired by Helder Camara, to help search for a way to develop literacy and awaken human potential among poor adults in the Northeast -- and thereby to strengthen church and society for the struggle against communism.

It became clear to Freire in the course of his experiments with popular education in the Northeast that conventional approaches to education for the poor, conceived as a pouring of new ideas into empty heads by people already educated, were offensive on the one hand to the human dignity of their students, and on the other could serve only to strengthen the prevailing unjust socioeconomic system by socializing those students into the values and worldview of their oppressors. Reflection on that experience led him to the idea of education as empowerment or *conscientização*, to be achieved through a process in which people learned to read, and also to participate more effectively in the social processes of production and political struggle, by reflecting together upon their own social, economic and cultural situation, and beginning to take charge of their own lives. The human person must understand herself as a "subject" who is able to work changes upon the world, however small -- not simply as an "object" upon whom changes

are worked by others. Freire and his friends found that people could begin to understand this once they overcame through collective effort the attitudes of hopelessness and resignation which had characterized most poor Latin American people during four centuries of colonial and oligarchical rule and deprivation. This awakening began in repeated group discussions of situations meaningful to ordinary people, to which all participants were able contribute understandings born of reflection on their own experiences. The role of the "teacher" was to facilitate such discussions rather than to impart knowledge.

Freire and those working with him developed a core vocabulary for literacy work out of the de facto life situations of the rural poor of the Northeast. They developed the method of work which is familiar to readers of his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and had trained adult literacy workers and built up considerable momentum for their before the U.S.-sponsored military coup of 1964 in Brazil -- enough to be seen by the new government as a threat and dismantled. Freire then left for Chile to continue his experiments under UN auspices, working there through the land reform agency INRA under the Frei government. Later he went to Geneva to work for the World Council of Churches during the 1970's and 80's, and from that position (thanks to the translation of his books into many languages) was able to have a wide influence on popular education efforts in many countries.

That is, presumably, where this course takes off. But the idea of popular education did not begin with Freire. Freire's work can be seen, rather, as a culmination of a long tradition. As you think about it, about what people have done elsewhere in the Third World with his ideas and about the implications of those ideas for work in this country, it may be useful to you to have in mind some key moments and lessons of that history -- the history of efforts to educate adults for more effective citizenship -- in which Paulo Freire himself was brought up and trained.

Education in colonial Latin America was initially aimed at adults, and geared to their participation in a process of social transformation. The missionary educators aimed at transforming conquered Indians into vassals of a European king, and willing collaborators in their own economic exploitation. But they were also concerned to inculcate their catechumens with an understanding of themselves as human beings made in the image of God, and as brothers and sisters equal to every other Christian in the sight of God, whose Christian conduct on earth would be as well rewarded as that of any other Christian in the hereafter. They also worked with these converts to construct communities which could operate with a certain measure of social and political autonomy, on communal landholdings and in possession of such new technologies as weaving on the broad-bed loom, ploughing fields with draft animals and milling grain with water-wheels, during the little-known period of some three centuries during which what we know today as "popular Christianity" was forged by those converts and their descendents within the protected realms of the "closed corporate Indian community" and even of the slave plantation community under colonial rule.

Very little is known about the history of education, of the production and

reproduction of new cultural forms within those communities. But the folk religions of both Afro- and Indo-America have certainly served to empower their participants for action within the restricted realms of expression left accessible by colonialism to the economically and politically powerless. Folk religiosity had its start in the encounter between Native Americans or newly landed African slaves and the missionaries sent to "straighten them out;" but it developed in time into an alternative consciousness operating on a path parallel to official Church life, never fully controlled by it and often enough in direct contradiction to it.

This story can be told with reference to Antonio Conselheiro and the Canudos rebellion in the backlands of Freire's own Northeastern Brazil in the 1890s....

In Antonio Conselheiro's story we can see the folk church responding to dimly perceived, frightening changes in the world and reaching out to try and empower poor people to do something about it. But the official church of the 19th and early 20th centuries had its own sense of danger in a changing world, and came up with its own more systematic and enduring procedures for dealing with it.

Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*. Worry about the explosion of socialism on Europe with its unChristian idea of class struggle, and about the declining influence of the Church among working people (and capitalists!) in the advanced industrial countries. Critique of capitalism as well, developed in later encyclicals, as incompatible with Xnty for its materialism and its lack of respect for the dignity of work and of the human person.

Catholic Action. Italian version, organization of lay people for traditional piety (rather like *beatos* in Northeast, but with more clerical control). Belgian/French version: emphasis on spiritual formation & lay leadership to evangelize specific social milieux seen as problematic (that is, likely to be lost to socialism). People seen as natural leaders in their environments invited to be members of small cells, elite groups of Catholic militants who came together for prayer, reflection & action. Action oriented toward social reform with the idea of "see, judge & act." Culminated in the worker-priests and nuns who would go live and work alongside the poor, share their lot and witness to their beliefs among them.

Mexico as a proving-ground for both. Catholic labor movement, mobilization around the repression of the Church. Padre Pro & Madre Conchita. Sinarquismo. Catholic Social Action. Antigonish coops from Jesuit experiments in Depression era. Opus Dei. All involved basic Catholic Action principal of mobilization of lay leadership in context of anti-Communist ideology.

Catholic Action to Brazil in 1935 to go along with Cardinal Leme's agreement with the Vargas regime. Italian style spread widely but didn't accomplish much social change, associated with Integralismo movement (Fascist-style politics). Dom Helder Camara, young priest involved in Integralismo, saw limits and right after WWII became national coordinator of French-style specialized Catholic Action. Groups for workers,

high school students, peasants, women, university students, etc. Thrust of whole movement was to validate lay people as Church members with a unique mission that complemented that of priests. And to orient that mission toward social reform in conformity with Christian teaching. Christian teaching still very much controlled from the center, in line with evolving thought on the "social question" expressed in the papal encyclicals. Lay people responsible for the life of the Church, which is to say empowered by participation in it.

Natal movement of assistentialist Church response to sufferings & social disorganization caused by rural misery, migration to Natal, U.S. air base with prostitution etc. during War, post-war depression. Italian Catholic Action well-developed there, evolved into French-style very quickly after war as city lay people tried to organize the poor in their communities. Rural Assistance Service which moved beyond assistance to train leaders, organize communities to solve their own problems. Rural missions with a doctor, dentist, agronomist & a couple of lay organizers donating time. Two days in each place to get communities organized. Radio schools experiment with basic education, literacy, entertainment, Mass. This became a basic modality of popular education, empowering in the sense that it obliged people to do what they could with the messages. MEB within which Freire worked came out of this experiment, mobilized a lot of Catholic Action people for work with the poor in early 1960's.

Movement spread to Pernambuco, came to focus on organizing peasants into cooperatives & unions & urge their political participation. Hierarchies & bourgeoisie supported these moves for fear of communism at first. But then, the interaction between priests & poor served to educate priests and alienate them from hierarchies & bourgeoisie, which put these on notice that the movement was a threat & priests could become "communists."

A parallel movement was that of the Peasant Leagues of Pernambuco, which arose when a group of peasants who had organized a burial society in early 1950's faced repression and sought support from leftist lawyer & politician Francisco Juliao. His response to them strengthened their resolve and provided them with a more radical rhetoric & program than the Catholic Action groups -- more explicitly cognizant of themselves as an agency for class struggle. Class struggle always a critical issue, seen as an invitation to violence and social disruption. Church per se, hierarchies of Church & society, always suspicious of any such thinking. That debate was underway (under the umbrella of first a nationalist developmentalist government in late 1950's with its program for structural change in Northeast encouraging demand for land reform, and then of the populist Goulart government with its open call for support from the Marxist left & Cuba) when Paulo Freire conducted his experiments.

For those who participated in the struggle on either side, repression was a real danger and the increasing suffering of the poor within the capitalist world system was an ever-present reality. People of whatever preparation, searching for elements of analysis to explain the situation in which poor people found themselves, could not help but be influenced by Marxist analysis with its emphasis on intrinsically life-destroying character of capital and the need for class struggle to overcome it -- at the same time that they

retained the Church's horror at the anticlerical character of European Marxism.

Now there is another, secular tradition of popular education that needs to be brought into our historical background. That is the post-French revolution tradition of adult education aimed at subverting the monarchical structures of dependency in the Church-supported Old Regime of the European and colonial world, in order to create the independent citizenry of free and economically active persons required by a democracy. In its Liberal version, this tradition quickly transformed itself in Latin America into a tradition of formal public education which was slow to develop because it was expensive and which came during the last half of the 19th c. in most countries under the influence of the ideology of Positivism.

Positivism was a French anti-clerical school of thought which elevated science and mathematics to the highest level on the hierarchy of knowledge and advanced the notion that government should be in the hands of scientists and engineers. It was especially appealing to military and business elites, and with its ideology of "order and progress" came to be the dominant ideology in several Latin American countries, notably Mexico and Brazil. The positivist tradition was mostly concerned with formal education to reproduce the labor force for hierarchical and undemocratic societies. But it also encouraged the notion that the reason for the backwardness of Latin American societies was on the one hand that its populations had been kept in ignorance and superstition by the ideological control of the Church over society, and on the other hand that they were racially and culturally inferior.

One solution to that problem was immigration to "improve the race;" but another was popular education aimed at raising the moral level of the working-class population (particularly in the cities) by developing vocational skills along with literacy and preaching against drunkenness and superstition. Positivist idealists from Chile to Mexico to Brazil wrote proposals and conducted experiments for an adult education aimed at uplifting populations; but little support for these was forthcoming from governments. At the same time Protestant missionary activity began, with its effort to rescue ignorant Papists from the shadowy realms and invite them to a new life through clean living and literacy which would enable them to read the Bible. The impact of Protestant ideology and Protestant schooling is evident in many advocates of social change in 20th-c. L.A. Protestantism was itself empowering in its own limited ways, spread for the most part by lay preachers rather than by missionaries.

Story of Mezquital pentecostals.

Another feature of the secular tradition of educational thought in Latin America was the introduction of anarchist and eventual Marxist ideas by European immigrants, especially in the Southern Cone, beginning in the second half of the 19th century. This

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