

Making history and unveiling oppression

an interview with

Paulo Freire¹

As progressive educators, I believe we have an ethical responsibility to struggle to unveil situations of oppression. I believe we have a responsibility to create ways of understanding political and historical realities that will create possibilities for change. I think that this is our role, to develop ways of working through which, little by little, the oppressed can unveil their reality.

At this time in history, it seems we have particular responsibilities. Reactionary forces have recently had success in proclaiming the disappearance of ideologies and the emergence of a new history without social classes and therefore without antagonistic interests, without class struggle. At the same time, they preach that there is no need to continue to speak about dreams, utopia, or social justice. And yet it is, to me, impossible to exist without dreams. How can we stand up to these neo-liberal discourses that are currently being paraded as truth and keep alive our dreams? One way, I believe, is to raise the political consciousness of educators.

Neo-liberal doctrines seek to limit

education to technological practice. Education is being seen as no longer formation but only training. I believe we must continue to create alternative ways of working. Critically implemented educational practice can make an indispensable contribution to political struggle. Educational practice is not the only key to the social transformation required to gain human rights, but I believe no transformation will take place without it. Education can give people a greater clarity to 'read the world', and this clarity creates the possibility for political intervention. It is this clarity that will challenge neo-liberal fatalism.

The language of the neo-liberals speaks of the necessity of unemployment, of poverty, of inequity. I believe it is our responsibility to struggle against these fatalistic and mechanical ways of understanding history. While people attribute the hunger or poverty that destroys them to destiny, fate or God, there is little chance for collective action. Similarly, if we are fooled into believing the neo-liberal economic discourses that explain away as inevitable the realities of homelessness

or poverty, then opportunities for change become invisible and our role in bringing about change becomes hidden. In my view, being in the world means to change and re-change the world - not to adapt to the world. As human beings, surely our main responsibilities are to intervene in reality and to maintain our sense of hope. As progressive educators, we must hold on to these responsibilities. We must endeavour to create the context for people to challenge fatalistic perceptions of their circumstances so that we can all play our part in making history.

Towards a 'pedagogy of desire'

Take, for example, working with street people. I am wary of speaking about particulars, as every context is different and I do not believe in prescriptive approaches. In each situation, in order to develop ways of working, we would have to go to the people and discuss with them what needs to be done in their context. In all contexts, however, in actions and in ways of speaking, I am interested in

finding ways to create a context in which street people can rebuild their wishes and their desires - the desire of being again, or starting to be in different ways. I am interested in creating a pedagogy of desire.

As progressive educators, one of our greatest tasks seems to be how to generate in the people political dreams, political wishes, political desires. It is impossible for me as an educator to build another person's wish. That is their task, not mine. How can we find ways of working that create a favourable context for this to happen?

In trying to create a pedagogy of desire, I am interested in exploring how to make it clear that being in the streets is not a 'natural' event but a social, historical, political, economic event. I am interested in exploring the reasons for being on the streets. This sort of exploration will lead to certain discoveries. It may lead to the discovery that the person is not on the streets because they want to be. Alternatively, they may realise that they do want to be on the streets, but will then engage in a further questioning of why this is the case - the origins of this desire.

In this sort of looking, searching for the reasons, we prepare ourselves and others to overcome a fatalistic comprehension of our situations, our contexts. To go beyond a fatalistic understanding of the facts of history means necessarily to discover the role of consciousness, of subjectivity in history. Overcoming the fatalistic understandings of being in the street means exploring the social, political, historical reasons for being in the street - against which we can then, collectively and consciously, struggle.

Beyond charity

An important distinction needs to be made between this process and charity. In the campaign against hunger initiated by Brazilian sociologist Herbert de Souza Betinho, assistance in the form of food is being given to some of those who are hungry. Yet, in Brasil alone there are 33 million people who are hungry. There is no possible way that a charitable approach will solve the problem of hunger. In order to solve the problem of hunger, we will need to understand the connections between hunger and food production, food production and agrarian reform, agrarian reform and the reactions against it, hunger and economic policy, hunger and violence and hunger as violence, hunger and democracy. We will have to realise that victory over misery and hunger is a political struggle for the deep transformation of society's structures.

For this reason, we must address problems in ways that invite people to understand the relationship of the problem to other factors, to the politics of oppression. I believe that this is what the hunger campaign has been doing. It is making hunger a shocking, uncomfortable, and undignified presence among us. I have no doubt that Betinho never intended to organise a solely charitable campaign. The campaign is giving assistance in ways that are fuelling the curiosity of the 'assisted'. This seems crucial. It is gradually making it possible for them to accept themselves as subjects of history, through their involvement in the political struggle. It is up to us to make history and to be made and remade by it. It is only by making history in a different way that we will put an end to hunger.

Acknowledging the groundwork and imagining the future

As subjects of change, sometimes we don't notice changes that are occurring. Sometimes we don't notice the groundwork that we are doing to promote revolutionary consciousness. Sometimes we fail to recognise the significance of this groundwork and the potential for change to grow from it. For example, just look at the advancement of popular movements throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, a decade seen as lost by many. Look at the advances in this country made by the landless (Sem-Terra). They have had many victories in claiming land rights, co-operatively developing the land, and creating settlements (see box). This movement, which now has enormous popular support, has long histories. It has grown in popularity enormously in the last ten years but its source extends further back in Brazilian history. One of its many sources was the quilombos formed hundreds of years ago by Afro-Brazilians resisting slavery. Quilombos were places where the black slaves of Brasil took refuge in solidarity and community. The resisting slaves created almost self-sustaining cities and, in so doing, created a symbolic alternative country. They fought against the white state hundreds of years ago. They were expressing the Brazilian desire for life, for freedom, which today Sem-Terra, the landless movement, encapsulates in fantastic ways.

It is hard to imagine where the landless movement will go from here. Sem-Terra has a very political consciousness. They know their project. They are beginning to invite the

unemployed to join their struggle. They know that it has to be done - today or tomorrow. I am sure that they also know that it will be necessary to involve the people of the streets. They know that land reform will, if not immediately, then within ten years, involve the people of the streets of the cities.

About three or four years ago, I had the opportunity to teach a final class to a group of young popular educators on a farm that had been successfully claimed by the landless movement. The following day, the educators were to split up and leave for the different settlements into which the farm had been divided. At one point, a young man, who was a literacy educator active in the movement, spoke to us all. In his speech he said: 'During

one of the early moments of our struggle, we had to cut, with the strength we gained from our union, the barbed wire surrounding this farm. We cut it and entered. But when we had got in, we realised that in the process of cutting the physical shackles we were also cutting other shackles, other fences. The fences of illiteracy, ignorance, and fatalism. Our ignorance makes for the happiness of the landowners, just as our learning, reading, improving memory, and advancing culture makes them tremble in fear. We know now that not only does the land need to be transformed into centres of economic production for all, but also into centres of culture, of learning'.

Today it seems possible that Sem-Terra may be able to bring about real

change and transform this country without violence. This seems a time of enormous possibility. Progressive educators of the past have played their part in bringing us to this point, in unveiling practices of oppression and injustice. We still have crucial roles to play. We need to view our work with a sense of perspective and history. Our struggle today does not mean that we will necessarily achieve change, but without our struggle today, perhaps future generations would have to struggle much more. History does not finish with us, it goes beyond.

Note

1. This interview took place in Paulo Freire's home in Sao Paulo, Brasil, on 24th April 1997. Present were Walter Veranda, David Denborough and Cheryl White.

Movimento Dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra The Movement of Landless Rural Workers

The MST, or Landless Movement, as mentioned by both Paulo Freire and Walter Veranda, is a movement of those who have lost their land in rural Brasil. In response they occupy land, lead campaigns, set up their own schools to educate their young people, and in April 1997 they held a march in which tens of thousands of people marched thousands of kilometres to converge on Brasilia. With their scythes in their hands and with only thongs for shoes, the MST inspired much of the nation. Buses, trucks and cars would wave their support as they passed the long lines of workers who were marching quietly but quickly in two lines - so quickly that every so often a group would have to run to catch up to keep the line intact. It was a march that built upon its own momentum. Each night those marching would set up camp and hold meetings with the local people about the politics of their journey and the plight of the landless in Brasil. When they arrived in Brasilia there were 40,000 people to greet them and join their protest at the Parliament House. For many people working on homelessness in Brasil, the issue can only be understood in the context of the broader struggle for land redistribution. The MST continues to organise, politicise, protest and reclaim land which they then work productively and collectively. Their example offers to many in Brasil a powerful sense of hope in relation to the possibilities of addressing the broader social and historical issues that generate homelessness in the cities and landlessness in rural Brasil.