

'CONSCIENTISATION'

A discussion of conscientisation calls for a number of preliminary remarks, and I would like to begin today by explaining where that great mouthful of a word came from.

Many people, especially in Latin America and the United States, insist that I invented that strange word, because it is a central idea in my thoughts on education. But I didn't. The word was born during a series of round table meetings of professors at the Brazilian Institute of Higher Studies, ISEB, which was created after the 'liberating' revolution of 1964, under the wing of the Ministry of Education. The word was thought up by some of the professors there, but I really can't remember who. Anyway, it all came out of our group reflections. I recall, among others who met there with us, Prof. Alvaro Pinto, a philosopher who wrote *Science and National Reality*, and more recently, *Science, Awareness and Existence*. There was also a sociologist, Professor Guerreiro, who is at present at the University of California.

I used to compare notes regularly with all of them, and it was at the ISEB that for the first time I heard the word 'conscientisation'. As soon as I heard it, I realised the profundity of its meaning since I was fully convinced that education, as an exercise in freedom, is an act of knowing, a critical approach to reality. It was inevitable, then, that the word became part of the terminology I used thereafter to express my pedagogical views, and it easily came to be thought of as something I had created. Helder Camara was the one who popularised the term and gave it currency in English. Thus, thanks to him rather than to me, the word caught on in Europe and in the United States.

In 1965 I wrote an article for the review *Civilisation et Development*

Paolo Freire's experiences with the impoverished peasants of North-East Brazil are reflected in PEDAGOGY of the OPPRESSED (Seabury Press) and CULTURAL ACTION FOR FREEDOM (Penguin). Imprisoned after the military coup in 1964, he left Brazil and continued his work in Chile; in recent years he has been working with The World Council of Churches Education Department in Geneva. This article is the text of a lecture in which he presents a useful condensation of his ideas; it is reprinted with permission from THE MONTH (114 Mount St, London, May 1974). With acknowledgments to GISRA.

called 'Education and Conscientisation'. But it was Helder Camara who, as I have said, in his wanderings about the world, popularised the word so that it is as commonplace today in the United States, where a great number of articles are being written about conscientisation. None the less, I am more and more convinced that the word should really be used in its Brazilian form, *conscientização*, and spelled that way. That is why I entitled an article I recently wrote in English 'The Conscientização Process', not 'The Conscientisation Process'.

What is conscientisation? I have noticed that conscientisation is frequently taken to be synonymous with the French expression *prise de conscience*, yet the two must be carefully distinguished. To show why, let me define the scope of each of them. As a matter of fact, conscientisation is possible only because *prise de conscience* is possible. If men were not able to become aware, there wouldn't be any conscientisation. What then is conscientisation?

One of the distinguishing traits of man is that only he can stand off from the world and the reality of things around him. Only man can stand at a distance from a thing and admire it. As they objectivise or admire a thing (admire is taken here in the philosophical sense of admiring, looking at), men are able to act consciously on the objectivised reality. That, precisely, is the human praxis, man's action-reflection on the world, on reality. And yet, in their approach to the world, men have a preliminary moment in which the world, the objective reality, doesn't yet come to them as a knowable object of their critical consciousness. In other words, in their spontaneous approach to the world, men's moral, basic attitude is not a critical, but an ingenuous one.

Not that there is no knowledge of reality at this spontaneous stage, but what we don't have yet is a critical attitude. There is one kind of perception of reality that gives us a real, if limited, knowledge of it: the Greeks called it *doxa* (mere opinion, or belief). Knowledge that stays at the level of mere *doxa* and goes no further to the level of a task (the reality's reason for being, as Mao Tse-tung would say) never becomes full knowledge; it is not a *logos* of reality.

To become aware, then, all it takes is to be a man. All it takes to be a man is to seize reality in the dialectical relations that flow between man and the world, the world and man; those relations are so intimate that we shouldn't really talk about man *and* the world, but just about man, or perhaps world-man. The first level of apprehension of reality is what the French mean by *prise de conscience*. The taking awareness of reality exists precisely because, as situated beings—closed beings in Gabriel Marcel's words—men are with and in the world, gazing at it.

This *prise de conscience* is not yet conscientisation, however. Conscientisation is a *prise de conscience* that goes deeper; it is the critical development of a *prise de conscience*. Hence, conscientisation implies going beyond the spontaneous phase of apprehension of reality to a critical phase, where

reality becomes a knowable object, where man takes an epistemological stance and tries to know. Thus conscientisation is a probing of the ambience of reality. The more a person conscientises himself, the more he unveils reality and gets at the phenomenic essence of the object he stands in front of, to analyze it. For that same reason, conscientisation without a praxis, i.e. without action-reflection as two paired, dialecticised elements permanently constituting that special way of being the world (or transforming it) is peculiar to man.

Historical Commitment

Conscientisation, therefore, is commitment in time; in fact, there is no conscientisation without historical commitment. So that conscientisation is also a historical awareness. It is a critical insertion into history. It means that men take on a role as subjects making the world, remaking the world; it asks men to fashion their existence out of the material that life offers them. The more they are conscientised, the more they exist.

The mere fact of finding oneself oppressed will move a step ahead and become a process of liberation only if this discovery leads to a historical commitment that means an involvement. For involvement is more than commitment: it is a critical insertion into history in order to create, to mould it. And so when an oppressed individual sees he is oppressed, if he does not set out to do something to transform the concrete oppressing reality, he is not historically committed, and thus he is not really conscientised.

Conscientisation implies then that when I realise that I am oppressed, I also know I can liberate myself if I transform the concrete situation where I find myself oppressed. Obviously, I can't transform it in my head: that would be to fall into the philosophical error of thinking that awareness 'creates' reality. I would be decreeing that I am free, by my mind. And yet the structures would continue to be the same as ever—so that I wouldn't be free. No, conscientisation implies a critical insertion into a process, it implies a historical commitment to make changes. That is why conscientisation bids us to adopt a utopian attitude towards the world, an attitude that turns the one conscientised into a utopian agent. Before going any further, let me explain what I mean by that word utopian.

Denouncing, Announcing

For me utopian does not mean something unrealisable, nor is it idealism. Utopia is the dialectisation in the acts of denouncing and announcing—denouncing the dehumanising structure and announcing

the structure that will humanise. Hence it is also a historical commitment. A utopia supposes that we know critically. It is an act of knowledge. For I cannot denounce the dehumanising structure unless I get at it and know it. Nor can I announce, either, unless I know. But—this is important—between the moment of an announcement and the accomplishment of it there is a great difference: the announcement is not the announcement of a project, but of an ante-project. Because the ante-project becomes a project only through a historical praxis. Besides, between the ante-project and the moment of accomplishing or concretising the project, a period intervenes that we call historical commitment. For this reason, only utopians—and revolutionaries too, to the extent that they are utopians (what was Marx but a utopian?)—can be prophetic and hopeful.

Only those who announce and denounce, who are permanently committed to a radical process of transforming the world so that men can be more, only they can be prophetic. Reactionary people, oppressors cannot be utopian, they cannot be prophetic, and because they cannot be prophetic they cannot have hope.

What future has the oppressor but to preserve his present status as oppressor? What scope for denouncing can oppressors have, other than the denunciation of those who denounce them? What do oppressors have to announce but the announcement of their myths? And what can be the hope of those who have no future?

I see a great possibility here for a theology, the utopian theology of hope. The utopian posture of the denouncing, announcing historically committed Christians who are convinced that the historical vocation of men is not to adapt, not to bend pressures, not to spend 90 per cent of their time making concessions in order to salvage what we call the historical vocation of the Church. We humans have an unbelievable vocation, and we cannot jeopardise it for any one fact, nor can we compromise it for any single, isolated problem, because the Church has the whole world. Why then risk one's entire historical task over any single fact? That would be, not to be utopian, but to be Machiavellian. It would be to concede, and to forfeit one's soul in the concession.

Conscientisation clearly has to do with utopia. The more we are conscientised, the more we become, by the commitment that we assume to change things, announcers and denouncers. This commitment ought to be permanent, though, because if after denouncing a dehumanising structure and announcing a more human one, after committing ourselves to the reality (after all, the project is going to be accomplished only if we work at it), after understanding the project and being convinced of its importance (being conscientised about it), if we were then to stop being utopian, we would simply bureaucratise ourselves. This is the danger inherent in any revolution, once it ceases to be permanent. One masterly way to avoid that danger is by a cultural revolution, that

dialecticalisation which has no yesterday, today or tomorrow and which avoids becoming static because it is an ongoing effort for change.

That's what conscientisation is: a seizing of reality; and for that very reason, for the very utopian strain that permeates it, we can call it a reshaping of reality. Conscientisation demythologises. Obvious and impressive as the fact may be, an oppressor can never conscientise for liberation. (How would I possibly demythologise if I am an oppressor?) A humanising endeavour can only be an endeavour to demythify. Conscientisation then is the most critical approach to reality, stripping it down so as to get to know the myths that deceive and perpetuate the dominating structure.

One might protest: 'But how can we ever find the process, the how of conscientisation?' The how of it brings up an important point, one that seems to me to be the essential difference between education as a means of domination and education as a means of liberation. An education that is used to domesticate merely transfers knowledge, as the educator passes on his thirst for knowing to his pupils, who passively, receive that knowledge. In that sort of relationship, conscientisation is impossible. We can see a certain incipient conscientisation in it, though, despite that education, in the way the students react, because the natural intentionality of human awareness cannot be thwarted by any educator's domesticating process.

A conscientising—and therefore liberating—education is not that transfer of neatly wrapped knowledge; it is the true act of knowing. Through it, both teacher and pupils simultaneously become knowing subjects, brought together by the object they are knowing. There is no longer one who thinks, who knows, standing in front of others who admit they don't know, that they have to be taught. Rather, all of them are inquisitive learners, avid to learn.

Education and Freedom

Those who propagate the superstructure's myths are, equivalently, supporting the superstructure itself. Even if there is a serious change-over, such as a revolution, the myths from the previous structure will carry over and continue to influence the new governmental structure. Unless we critically grasp this fact, we will never understand how, even after an infrastructure has been changed, people will continue to think as they did before.

An understanding of this dialectic and this sort of subdetermination (which Marx certainly had) will persuade us that a mechanistic view of social changes is no good. Someone with a mechanistic approach would expect that if the infrastructure were changed, the superstructure would automatically be changed too—but that is not what happens. That was

the problem that baffled Lenin after the Soviet Revolution: Stalin wrestled with it—and solved it finally by shooting down the peasants. It is the dilemma facing Fidel Castro today with his peasants, though it is not so crucial for him. It is also the problem that Mao Tse-tung had and has, but he came up with the most genial solution of the century: China's cultural revolution.

What is cultural action? What is a cultural revolution? In generic terms, but in the good sense of the phrase, it is the way we culturally attack culture. It means that we see culture always as a problem and do not let it become static, becoming a myth and mystifying us.

Whereas education, in practice, too often merely inverts the praxis and domesticates students by pumping myths into them, education for freedom, on the other hand, strives to expose that inversion of praxis at the moment it occurs, so that it will not take place. A noble objective, indeed. But how do we do it? As we turn our attention to see our misdirected praxis, we fix our eyes on, as the object of our knowledge, that domesticating capability of an inversion of praxis, the very prostituting of our transforming action. At that moment our act of knowing illuminates the action that is the source of our knowing. And right there we have the permanent, constant, dynamic of our attitude toward culture itself.

Otherwise we risk falling into an elitist position, hence one that is neither liberating nor human, nor humanising. But even supposing that we avoid that pitfall, how are we to undertake a programme of cultural action, or of education for freedom, when we know that people are all the while being dominated through the so-called mass media—which are really means for sending messages rather than communicating, for propagandising and domesticating rather than for liberating? We must save that word from the distortion being made to cover a wholesale invasion by slogans. But communications is not sloganising. It is something completely different. As all of us recognise, cultural action for freedom is ultimately a kind of action.

Let's turn for a moment to the desperate situation of the peasants in north-east Brazil. Their awareness of what is going on is so primitive that they are wholly unable to get a structural view of the reality. They are incapable of envisaging their plight as a result of the world they live in. Yet even a peasant is a man, and any man wants to explain the reality around him. How can he? one might ask. What reasons can he find? How does his dulled brain conceive his wretched lot? Normally, he will try to size up the situation. He will look for the causes, the reasons for his condition, in things higher and more powerful than man. One such thing is God, whom he sees as the maker, the cause of his condition. Ah, but if God is responsible, man can do nothing. Many Christians today, thanks be to God, are vigorously reacting against that attitude, especially in Brazil. But as a child, 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 have to build our heaven, to fashion it during our lifetime, right now. Salvation is something to achieve, not just to hope for. This latter sort of theology is a very passive one that I cannot stomach.

How could we make God responsible for this calamity? As if Absolute Love could abandon man to constant victimisation and total destitution. That would be a God as described by Marx.

Whenever men make God responsible for intolerable situations, or for oppression, then the dominating structures help to popularise that myth. If God is not the cause, they whisper, then destiny must be. Human reason at this level easily becomes fatalistic; it sits back and sighs: 'Nothing can be done about it'. Sometimes another scapegoat is found, and it too is a myth spread by the dominating structure: the helplessness of the oppressed. The dominated mind looks inward and decides that it is totally unable to cope with its misery: it concludes that it is impotent. A Presbyterian clergyman from the United States once told me that the whites in his country say God made the blacks inferior. It was a fine example of what the author of the book *Picture of the Colonised Contrasted with the Picture of the Coloniser* meant when he wrote: 'The oppressor always draws a picture of the oppressed'. For the oppressed mind in its desperate plight, I repeat, there seems to be nothing that can be done.

For the critical mind that conscientises itself, beyond this situation there is the future, what we must do, the thing we must create, the historical futurity we have to bring into being; and to do that, we must change whatever it is that prevents the humanisation of our fellow men.

As we examine the structures and the reasons why they are so intolerable, as we expose the oppressive situation, we are forced to a decision: we either commit ourselves or we don't—but we will have to answer to our consciences for our choice. The process of conscientisation leaves no one with his arms folded. It makes some unfold their arms. It leaves others with a guilt feeling, because conscientisation shows us that God wants us to act.

As I conscientise myself, I realise that my brothers who don't eat, who don't laugh, who don't sing, who don't love, who live oppressed, crushed and despised lives, are suffering because of some reality that is causing all this. And at that point I join in the action historically by loving genuinely, by having the courage to commit myself (which is no easy thing!) or I end up with a sense of guilt because I am not doing what I know I should. That guilt feeling rankles in me, it demands rationalisations to 'gratify' myself (the term is used here in the psychological sense). A North American theologian has called those rationalisations 'fake generosity' because to escape my guilt feelings I go in for philan-

throphy. I seek compensation by almsgiving, I send a cheque to build a church, I make contributions: land for a chapel or a priory for nuns, hoping in that way to buy peace. But peace cannot be purchased, it is not for sale; peace has to be lived. And I can't live my peace without commitment to men, and my commitment to men can't exist without their liberation, and their liberation can't exist without the final transformation of the structures that are dehumanising them.

Fear of Freedom

In the seminars that I have given in various countries it is very interesting to observe how two attitudes are produced. Often I am violently assailed because many people, when they hear me, start to despise themselves—and their almost immediate second reaction is to strike back at whoever made them do that. Observing this process can be extremely interesting.

A similar process takes place with very simple people, too. Many of them run away from freedom. Oppression is so potent a thing that it produces fear of freedom. That fear crops up whenever any discussion or even mention of freedom makes them already feel it as a threat. But freedom isn't something that is given. It is something that is very arduous, because nobody gives freedom to anyone else, no one frees another, nobody can even free himself; men free themselves only by mutual planning, by collaborating on something wrong that they want to correct. There is an interesting theological parallel to this: no one saves another, no one saves himself all alone, because only in communion can we save ourselves—or not save ourselves. You don't save me, because my soul, my being, my conscious body is not something that A or B can save. We work out our salvation in communion. Each one of us must set out in quest of his salvation, we must do it ourselves. I don't mean that God hasn't saved us by His presence in history: I'm talking now on the human level.

Conscientisation demands an Easter. That is, it demands that we die to be born again. Every Christian must live his Easter, and that too is utopia. The man who doesn't make his Easter, in the sense of dying in order to be reborn, is no real Christian. That is why Christianity is, for me, such a marvellous doctrine. People have accused me of being a communist, but no communist could say what I have just said. I never had any temptation to cease being, to cease existing. The reason is that I am not yet completely a Catholic, I just keep on trying to be one more completely, day after day. The condition of being is to go on being.

Each of us has to give his witness, and conscientisation is a summons

to do that: to be new each day. Hence it is peace, and it enables us to understand others.

Conscientisation could never be an imposition on others or a manipulation of them. I cannot impose my opinions on someone else. I can only invite them to share, to discuss. To impose on others my way of not being would be a real contradiction. For loving is not only a free act, it is an act for freedom. And love that cannot produce more freedom is not love.

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