

# LIBERATION PEDAGOGY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

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## **Introduction**

WE HAVE ARRIVED AT a time to reflect on what has been done in the field of education for liberation, alternative education or People's Education during the last few years. We have to analyse and theorise our experience in this country because it is imperative that beacons be set for future action, that direction and goals be determined so that energies now being expended are not wasted or misdirected. That there has been an explosion of liberation pedagogy, in the form of a multiplicity of educational projects and experiments inside and outside of the formal system of schooling since the early 'seventies more or less, is a well known fact. In recent years, many learned articles have appeared that attempt to contextualise this renaissance of learning in South Africa. Most of these have been programmatic and rhetorical or prescriptive insofar as they have dealt with the macro-educational issues involved, or descriptive and tentative insofar as they have confined themselves to micro-educational issues. Certainly, anyone who is at all conversant with education in South Africa does or can have exhaustive information on what is wrong with the system and on the reasons for the 'educational crisis'. So diverse, contradictory and even esoteric have been (and are)

most of the counter-hegemonic alternatives being probed in different parts of the country under the aegis of different cultural, educational, political, labour and community labels, that no serious attempt has yet been made to generalise and theorise our experience in this vague and undefined field of 'alternative education'. A recent booklet co-authored (in German) by Ludwig Helbig and myself represents a first, undoubtedly inadequate and essentially descriptive intervention. Fortunately, more and more compilations of primary materials and of some analytical essays are being published so that we can soon expect a generation of titles that will undertake the difficult task of showing on which road we are walking, how far we have gone and how far we can hope to go along that road.

For the present, I want to do no more than place the question in a relevant historical context and to indicate why all these developments are taking place at this particular historical moment. Is there anything special about the conjuncture in South Africa during the last ten years that explains why various experiential learning projects have made their appearance in that period? The importance of this question has to do with our understanding of how long the particular conjuncture will last and thus with the shifts that we can anticipate realistically on the terrain of struggle.

## **The international context**

In post-war Europe and North America, the revolt of the youth against the authoritarianism of their parents and against the acquisitive society to which an unfettered capitalist system had given rise, saw the rapid development on all levels of the superstructure of challenges to the conservative elitist, patriarchal-capitalist practices that went almost unquestioned in the inter-war period except to some extent in the explicitly socialist movements. The holocaust, the countless millions of soldiers and civilians who died in

the two world wars, culminating in the unthinkable at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, all these wondrous achievements of Western Christian Civilisation spelled the same things to the post-war European and American youth, viz., disillusionment, scepticism, alienation, a general sense of betrayal. Their rejection of that which their fathers had 'built up' and bequeathed to them took many different forms. In one direction, it led to the suicidal radicalism of 'Hitler's children', i.e., the Baader-Meinhof – Red Army Faction phenomenon; in another direction, it led to the hippy, flower-children counter-cultural phenomenon and in yet another direction it ended up in strengthening the non-Stalinist left-wing, radical socialist movement throughout the world. Existentialism, the Frankfurt School and various permutations of a new Marxism became the philosophical sources that nurtured these generations.

At the same time as the youth of all classes were rejecting the inheritance of their parents in Europe and North America, all other oppressed nations and groups began to rise up and to demand their rights to equality, dignity and the means of life. The movement for women's liberation reached a peak in the 1960s and 1970s at the same time as blacks in North America and in Europe began to fight relentlessly against racism in the so-called democratic and civilised West. In the colonies, one anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movement after another gained victory, beginning with the Asian giants of India (1947) and China (1949), regardless of the fundamental differences between these movements. Capitalism on a world scale was under siege but it was able eventually to ride out the storm for reasons which we cannot stop to examine here.

More important for our purposes is the fact that in educational theory and practice, the pre-war norms and certainties which were based to a very large extent on positivism and crude behaviourism were confronted with a formidable challenge from more liberal and radical

conceptions of education and learning. Starting with John Dewey in the United States, educationalists and social theorists began questioning the outmoded methods and psychological theories of a simple, essentially 19th century capitalist education system. The development of the productive forces, especially the technological and communications revolutions, simply swept away the crude ideas about learning and education that had been hegemonic in the stable bourgeois world before 1945. The new pedagogies tended to be linked more or less to a critique of the orthodoxies of the received capitalist system and were, therefore, intended and perceived to be politically committed in one direction or another. This particular debate continues today. Particularly important is the debate between liberal reformists who realise the need to overhaul the outmoded pedagogies generated by less complex earlier forms of capitalist exploitation and radicals who are no longer satisfied with cosmetic changes to the system of class domination. A useful example of this debate is that which continues in the question of 'compensatory education' for lower-class, i.e., working-class people. Ironically, the examples and models on offer in what Bahro called 'the actually existing socialist states' of Eastern Europe, with notable exceptions in the sphere of cognitive psychology, were of little if any value to the critical theorists and activists of the 'sixties and 'seventies.

As is well known, European and North American youth experimented with all kinds of 'alternative life styles' and forms of communal living. Extremes of individualism and collectivism were attempted and these have changed the face of the world quite literally. What is common to all of them is the attempt to realise democracy and self-determination in practice. Inevitably, of course, these grassroots developments – even though they were largely confined to the intelligentsia – found a deposit in the academic and intellectual practices of Western European,

North American and ex-colonial universities and other educational institutions. In particular, theories of education were also revolutionised by new, radical pedagogies.

### **Paolo Freire (a digression)**

There would be little point in elaborating on the development of the new pedagogies, whether they were conceived of in terms of a more sophisticated behaviourist, a humanist or a cognitive approach. Today, most educational theorists operate within one of these paradigms or in eclectic combinations of the three. (An excellent summary of the development of post-war pedagogical and psychological theory can be read up in Youngman 1985: 111–149.) I have based much of what I have to say in this chapter on Youngman's insights. Suffice it to say that the bridge between these, essentially European and North American, developments and the more turbulent if less articulate developments in the 'Two-Thirds World' (usually called the Third World!) is the enigmatic figure of Paolo Freire. His ideas, in the words of Youngman:

... coincided with (and indeed reflected) a number of international developments, such as the growth of Catholic radicalism in the period around the Second Vatican Council of 1965 and the rise of the New Left in Europe and North America during the 1960s. Freire's Third World origins and political-religious radicalism synchronised perfectly with the Zeitgeist of the late 1960s in the West, which was characterised by support for anti-imperialism, the growth of the movement of blacks, women and students, and the revitalisation of the Marxist intellectual tradition. The English language publication of his work in 1970 took place at a moment of crisis in bourgeois hegemony in which many aspects of capitalist society were being brought into question, including education. (Youngman 1986: 151)

It was at precisely this moment that Freire was discovered in South Africa by the fledgling Black Consciousness Movement or, more correctly, by the University Christian Movement and the South African Students' Organisation. But more of that presently.

The fundamental difference between Freire's pedagogy and most other radical pedagogies of this period was his insistence on the link between personal and social liberation, that which he called *conscientização*. The basic education methods he espoused were not very different from what more and more theorists had been and were propounding in order to renew education and to get out of the rut of alienation in which all schooling in the capitalist world had got stuck to the point that some, like Illich, were advocating in deadly earnest the abolition of the school as an institution. Experiential learning, learning by doing, 'discovery' methods, all these and many other empiricist approaches to learning used the same basic educational technology as did Freire and his teams. Yet there were fundamental differences. The central difference was that which revolves around the concept of *praxis*. For Freire, the decisive difference between animals and human beings consisted in the ability of the latter to reflect directly on their activity. This ability is, for him, the unique attribute of human consciousness and 'self-conscious existence is what makes it possible for people to change their situation. It is the philosophical basis of the very notion of conscientisation' (Youngman 1986: 164). Through his emphasis on the essentially Marxian concept of *praxis*, Freire ensures that in his method, there is a unity of theory and practice without which we end up with either 'empty theorising' or 'mindless activism' (Youngman 1986: 171). Education, therefore, must help the learner(s) to objectify the world, to understand it critically and to act to change it. In brackets I might say that Youngman's critique of Freire's idealism (his ambivalence concerning an independently existing reality)

and his vacillation concerning the role of theory (and, thus, of the teacher) in the dialogical situation (see Chapter 5 of Youngman 1986), appears to have been addressed in part by Freire in one of his latest works. According to Youngman:

... Freire shows a profound ambivalence. His dilemma lies in how to relate the authority the teacher derives from a correct theory to his humanist antagonism to imposition. (Youngman 1986: 177)

This eventually leads him to embrace what Lukàcs called 'messianic utopianism', i.e., the glorification of the middle-class leader who commits class suicide and joins the ranks of 'the people'. The classical example of this kind of leader-teacher was, for Freire as for so many others, the shining figure of Che Guevara (see Youngman 1986: 184).

Be that as it may, Freire seems to be groping towards a more decisive position on this very important question. In one of the 'dialogues on transforming education' between himself and Ira Shor, he arrives at the conclusion that teachers and students are 'together, but not equal':

... I don't know whether you are also asked by students and teachers about this question of authority in a dialogical classroom, whether the teacher is or is not equal to the students ... The experience of *being under* leads the students to think that if you are a dialogical teacher you definitely deny the difference between you and them. All at once, all of us are equal! But, it is not possible. We have to be clear with them. No. The dialogical relationship does not have the power to create such an impossible equality. The educator continues to be different from the students, but, and now for me this is the central question, the difference between them, if the teacher is democratic, if his or her political dream is a *liberating* one, is that he or she cannot permit the necessary difference between the teacher

and the students to become 'antagonistic'. The difference cannot allow this to be antagonistic if I am democratic. If they become antagonistic, it is because I became authoritarian. (Shor and Freire 1987: 92–93)

Perhaps I should just say by way of rounding off this digression that Freire's method has been co-opted in thousands of different ways in the pursuit of ruling-class, *status quo*-preserving projects all over the world. This, indeed, is one of the criticisms made against the uncritical acceptance of the Freirian method by various authors (see, e.g., Youngman 1986 *passim* and Prinsloo 1987). Indeed, in a brief discussion of the Brazilian state-promoted literacy project, Celia Da Rocha Reufels has shown that '... the military government and the state literacy agency (MOBRAL) used ... [Freire's] techniques to do just the opposite of what Freire intended' (Da Rocha Reufels 1983: 77).

## **Crucial role of Black Consciousness**

In South Africa, the discovery of Freire's method and his concept of conscientisation came at just the right moment, so to speak. Helbig, basing himself on various South African sources, has shown how Freire's ideas were introduced to the University Christian Movement and through it to SASO in about 1970 by Rev. Collins. Although the government banned Freire's works, about 500 or more copies of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* made the rounds at the 'bush colleges' and were eagerly studied by the young activists of the Black Consciousness Movement. In Freire's works, they saw the mirror image of that which they rejected in the Bantu Education system as well as the possible way out of the *cul-de-sac*. Informal courses in Freire's methods were conducted at these unintended 'breeding grounds of communism' (an accusation levelled



by Verwoerd and his minions against the liberal English universities in the 'fifties!) and soon some of the SASO students and others had begun conducting literacy and other conscientisation projects in urban and some rural townships. The banning of the BC organisations in 1977 temporarily brought many of these projects to an end but they were carried on by others in more or less adapted forms (see Alexander and Helbig 1988: 67). I can do no better than to quote at length Helbig's summary of the reasons why educational activists and theorists in South Africa accepted Freire's pedagogy so readily. According to Helbig:

1. Freire's anti-capitalist social theory accorded with the experience of and the insights at which the liberation movement in South Africa in general and the educationists active in it in particular had arrived increasingly;
2. the pedagogical situation out of which Freire's pedagogy had been formed resembled that which existed in South Africa's ghettos and homelands;
3. Freire's pedagogical method of combining education/culture with conscientisation and politicisation accorded with the views of the BCM and was subsequently adopted by the broader liberation movement;
4. the specific organisation of the liberation movement in the late 'seventies and especially in the 'eighties as a grassroots movement anchored in small groups and projects in the 'community', brought with it an exceptional sensitivity regarding democratic principles. This sensitivity, reinforced by Freire's pedagogy, consequently also became integral to the practice of 'alternative education'. (Alexander and Helbig 1988: 68–69, my translation)

The whole concept of an alternative education in South Africa was deeply influenced by Freire's visions and methods. I shall refer later to this integral relationship between national and international developments and to the consequent importance which we ought to begin placing on studies in comparative education. For the present, however, I want to stress that transplanting Freire to South Africa in the decade of the 'seventies meant inevitably the radicalisation and overt politicisation of the educational arena. This was particularly the case after the Soweto uprising in 1976 and we are all fully aware of the dramatic developments that have followed in rapid succession during the last twelve years, developments which are equally significant when viewed from a narrow pedagogical perspective or from a broader political point of view.

It is enough, therefore, if I try to put in a nutshell what has happened in these twelve turbulent years. To all intents and purposes, post-war South Africa under the Voortrekker-like guidance of the National Party was moving in a diametrically opposite direction from the rest of the world. Rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, the consequence of the world-wide process of the explosive development of productive forces, far from resulting in the liberalisation of the South African economy, policy and society were made to intensify as far as possible the pre-war labour-repressive system of racial capitalism. The people of South Africa, especially the black people of South Africa, had to walk on the *via dolorosa* from segregation to apartheid.

But, as everyone knows today, apartheid was one of the most dangerous social engineering experiments in the history of the world. The black working class and their children began clamouring for the rights which were so perversely, as they and many liberals believed, withheld from them. From the Defiance Campaign to Sharpeville, to

Soweto a red line of blood and suffering gave continuity to our struggle through its many valleys and over its few but memorable peaks. That line represents the deepening disillusionment of the nascent black middle class, the irrevocable alienation from the system of the vast majority of the black people regardless of class, colour or language, the total loss of legitimacy of the National Party government and all white-supremacist options. The liberation struggle, in the nice phrase of the Carter and Karis volumes, graduated from protest to challenge until we reached the pre-revolutionary position in which we find ourselves today, where only the timing, not the principle, of radical social change is still at issue.

Black students, like their counterparts in Europe, North America and in the ex-colonial world, resented and eventually rose up against the stifling embrace of outmoded capitalist and racist norms and taboos. In our context, it is of the utmost relevance to stress that the system with which they were confronted was that of racial capitalism in which they were confined *a priori* to an inferior status no matter what genius they manifested as individuals or as a collectivity. Unlike their counterparts in other parts of the world, they could not isolate even nationally the struggles in the educational arena from those in the broader social and political sphere. Black power movements and revolutionary movements in the ex-colonial world consequently played a major role in shaping their consciousness. Inevitably, their questioning of the pedagogy of capitalist domination and racial privilege went deep even though they did not have the technical expertise to articulate this critique in a generalised form. That process of theory building has continued since the late 'seventies and is now acquiring a self-consciousness which augurs well for the future.

What was happening on the political and economic fronts of the struggle had its inevitable but uneven accompaniment on the broad cultural front. In education,

both in the formal and in the non-formal arenas, more and more alternatives were being probed and established. Organisations such as SACHED and many others played the decisive role in this area throughout the late 'seventies and early 'eighties. The rapidly developing civil society adumbrated the revolutionary alternative to the apartheid state, an alternative the development of which that state could obstruct but not prevent. The war of position shifted the balance of forces strongly in favour of the black working class especially when the state was compelled to recognise the right of independent trade unions to exist. In the specifically education arena, ideas such as the formation of SRCs at high schools, PTSAs, awareness programmes and all the other innovations which are all but taken for granted amongst us today, could be and were often suppressed by state action only to resurface in more radical form with every new wave of mobilisation.

### **The present situation**

Even from this brief reference to the preceding period, it ought to be clear that People's Education did not fall from a cloudless sky as so many simplistic and unhistorical accounts maintain. The prehistory of people's education for people's power is in fact a long and important one since it demonstrates Santayana's precept that those who are not willing to learn from history are condemned to repeat it! The particular political and educational conditions that led to the propagation of people's education for people's power by the NECC starting in December 1985 are too well known for us to have to dwell on them. Suffice it to say that one of the important links in the chain of causation that is usually left out of the 'historical' account is the crucial national consultative workshop called by SACHED, the SACC, the Institute of Black Research and the Council for Black Education and Research in Johannesburg on 28 November

1985 under the chairpersonship of Bishop Tutu. At that workshop, the Soweto Parents Crisis Committee (SPCC) represented by, amongst others, Rev. Tsele, was present and agreed to a larger, more representative national consultative conference being reconvened on 28 December 1985. For reasons that are unnecessary to canvass here, the convenors subsequently agreed to forego that date in favour of the now historic conference called by the SPCC at Wits University on that day.

There is no doubt, of course, that in those first months, the National Educational Crisis Committee (NECC) and many other organisations spread the idea of people's education for people's power throughout the length and breadth of South Africa. Important educational and pedagogical initiatives were taken and continue to be taken. It is exceptionally important, however, to stress that the campaign around people's education which is often promoted in a sectarian, party-political manner, did not in any way diminish either the fact or the importance of the hundreds and even thousands of small and large projects that continued to be promoted outside of the particular political framework within which the organisers and leadership of the NECC chose to work. I should like to stress that I am not saying this in order to belittle or devalue the many important actions and projects initiated, promoted and encouraged by the NECC. On the contrary, I have great respect for these but I believe that the new radical pedagogy that all of us are trying to understand and to concretise has no place for undemocratic and even totalitarian suppressions and falsifications of the historical record and of important social practices with which we happen not to be directly concerned. To tolerate this kind of philistinism and intellectual timidity is to undermine everything that we say we believe in. To believe that only those groups who pay allegiance or genuflect to the NECC are 'kosher' is to negate *a priori* everything we say about so-

called democracy.

Education in South Africa, we are never tired of saying, is in a state of crisis. But so is that which we call alternative education, education for liberation, or people's education. Whatever the major and peripheral differences of approach, the fact is that we are in serious danger of stagnating at the level of slogans. Already when one reads some of the descriptions and analyses that attempt to define people's education or alternative education practices, one is often deeply disturbed by the hopelessly myopic, uninformed naïveté that underlies some of these pretentious essays. Unless we face these things head on, we are going to connive at the nurturing of the weeds that will fatally strangle the fragile plant that has sprouted from the seeds I have described previously. Liberation is not some apocalyptic event that will suddenly happen one day!

The real situation in which we find ourselves today is one which has been called a situation of 'violent equilibrium'. In a nutshell, this means that the ruling group cannot in the short to medium term be displaced by the organised force of the popular masses. At the same time, however, the repressive organs of the state cannot eliminate spontaneous uprisings and various forms of organised mass resistance as well as vanguardist actions of guerrilla activists. In effect, therefore, we are confronted with a future of zigzag development in which the rulers will continue to try to effect so-called reforms within an ethnic, multinational framework based on elite-level cooperation, while the leadership of the liberation movement and the working people generally continue to hold out for a unitary non-racial democratic solution based on universal suffrage. This insoluble contradiction means quite simply that for the next decade or so the emphasis in proactive liberatory activity will shift to the social and cultural terrains of struggle while the day-to-day resistance will continue to manifest itself on the political and economic terrains. On all

levels, also on the level of education, we have to plant the seeds of the socialist future in the capitalist soil of today. Struggles in the educational apparatuses have to be integrally part of the broader liberation struggle if they are not to become dead-end initiatives that result in learners and educators turning in on themselves. To avoid such a situation from arising, we have to undertake a number of urgent tasks. Concretely:

We *have* to encourage and make possible the proliferation of alternative educational (and other cultural revolutionary) projects on a very large scale. Hundreds and thousands of such projects involving millions of people in formal and non-formal situations have got to grow. Democratic procedures have to be observed so that none of these practices boomerangs on our movement. Only if we augment our direct experience of radical pedagogy can we get beyond the rhetorical, often mere party-political propaganda that now is sometimes marketed as 'people's education'.

We have got to recapture *for ourselves* professional standards based on competence, skills and scholarship. The inane nonsense that is sometimes passed off as learner-centred education even at universities has got to be exposed and disregarded for the (usually) bourgeois mystification that it actually is. We *must* learn the rudimentary lesson that in a class-divided society the dominant ideas are the ideas of the dominating classes and that 'education' that doesn't challenge these ideas is simply reinforcing the reproduction of the *status quo*, no matter what fancy names we give it. Most learners come to their place of learning with all the excess baggage of ruling-class ideology. Left to themselves, they will seldom arrive at a pedagogy in practice that takes them beyond the *status quo*. Hence the importance of radical social theory and of a teaching corps (whatever it is called) that is suffused with that theory. From what I have said about the co-option of Freire's method for ruling-class

purposes, I think it ought to be obvious that this is a matter of the highest priority. It is *not* a question simply of the politicisation of teachers; it is a question of liberation pedagogy in the most fundamental possible sense. Teachers have to acquire a viable theory of society and the individual that will equip them to act as guides to learners without imposing their particular views. They have to become catalysts that unleash the latent creative powers of their students.

We have, thus, to refine our theory of education. This will be an agonising process for many, especially the majority who have to operate in state-funded educational institutions. The kind of contribution made by works such as that of Frank Youngman (*Adult Education and Socialist Pedagogy*) and some of the more recent works written in the Freirian tradition constitute a valuable point of departure. Education faculties and teacher-training colleges especially have to begin to re-examine their curricula and their practices urgently. They need to look closely at what has been happening in the so-called non-formal arena where major pedagogical advances have been chalked up more easily, if more shakily.

Comparative education studies should receive high priority. Developments in Africa, Asia and Latin America particularly are of profound relevance to what we hope to do in this country. In line with Professor Dias of the Institute for Pedagogy in the Third World at the University of Frankfurt, I believe that alternative education for us means the rediscovery of the real meaning of education, the re-establishment of the continuity between our African past and our Azanian future that was ruptured by colonial-imperialist conquest. In the unique conditions of South Africa, this means no less than the building of a nation and the initiation of the process of creating a national culture out of the diverse strands (the African, the European, the Asian and, to a lesser extent, the modern American) out of



which our emerging nation is being woven together. The fabric of this culture has to be patterned by socialist values imprinted on it by the day-to-day activities of the working class. In doing this, we can learn much from the experience of other nations similarly situated. Indeed, we can learn from the experience of every nation on earth.

We need to take every possible opportunity to test theory against practice and to theorise experience. Like Youngman, I believe that we have to

... challenge the ideology and culture of capitalism and create a counter-hegemony; [and] ... to develop the general knowledge and technical expertise necessary to re-organise production and society in a fully democratic way. (Youngman 1986: 197)

Moreover, we need to get to the point where we accept in practice and not merely in words that 'the linking of learning to production and political action is the key to the unity of theory and practice that socialist pedagogy seeks to achieve' (Youngman 186: 211).

At the same time it is necessary and appropriate to warn against the danger of method for method's sake. While there can be no question about the primacy of the learners' experience and of the issues that face them in ordinary life, the crucial dimension that we as teachers have to guide them towards is the critical analysis of that experience. The learners' interests must influence the direction of the learning process but the educator cannot and should not '... accept the students' view of their interests and experience uncritically' (Youngman 1986: 203). We have to get away from false Aristotelian alternatives; our pedagogy should be neither learner- nor teacher-centred. Instead, as Youngman has pointed out, we have to transcend this dichotomy 'by a democratic collaboration between the educator and the students' (Youngman 1986: 208). Above all, we have to avoid the demagogic pitfalls of manipulation masquerading as 'participatory democracy'. Such a deviation will saddle

us with the terrible burden of generations of ill-trained, ill-disciplined and pretentious charlatans. As Francisco Vio Grossi has said in another context:

‘It is widely known that participation is sometimes allowed only to give the impression that things are managed collectively, rather than in an authoritarian way, but in fact that participation has so many limits that it helps to consolidate domination ... (Grossi 1983: 109)

Clearly, there is room here for educational practice to lead the way out of the unresolved tension between our recognition of the reality that teachers/educators are different from their students by virtue of their theoretical knowledge on the one hand, and our warning on the other hand against the ‘demagogy’ of pseudo-participatory methods. We have to find ways of avoiding the catch-22 situations in which educators might begin to feel that anything they did might be either too ‘egalitarian’ or too ‘authoritarian’. Perhaps the answer to this conundrum lies in what is only an apparent contradiction in terms when I suggest that educators have to earn from learners the status of first among equals!

Most of us have gained crystal clarity about the distance we still have to travel towards our goal of a South Africa/Azania free of all oppression and exploitation. We have a very demanding itinerary ahead of us and we have to set out today armed with the compass of a feasible social theory. ‘History never stops. It is true that the pace of that process has been slower than most of the earlier literature predicted, but the tendency is clear’ (Grossi 1983: 110).

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