

Locating Freire in Africa Today: Problems and Possibilities

By Pradip N. Thomas

Abstract

Paulo Freire has established a position for himself among those who seek to explore the meaning and praxis inherent in liberation movements, Freire was concerned about some of the constraints of committed and practically-oriented education: centralised bureaucracies, alienation, foreign language and illiteracy. These notwithstanding, his pedagogy always rings afresh, especially as his main themes of liberation, freedom, conscientization and practical action which are still contemporary concerns in African development. Thus Freire seems to be engaging African development enthusiasts in a perpetual dialogue.

Dr. Pradip N. Thomas is the Head of Publications at the World Association for Christian Communication, London.

Comment Situer Freire dans l'Afrique Contemporaine: Problèmes et Possibilités

Par Pradip N. Thomas

Résumé

Paulo Freire s'est fait une place d'honneur parmi ceux qui se donnent à la recherche de la signification et le praxis de la libération en Afrique. En effet il a lui même dû faire face à beaucoup de contraintes, créées par une éducation qui est bureaucratique, et caractérisée d'une aliénation linguistique et d'analphabétisme. Malgré ces obstacles, sa façon d'aborder les thèmes principaux de la libération, de la liberté et de la sensibilisation demeure réaliste, en ce qui concerne le développement en Afrique. De ce fait, Freire semble demander aux enthousiastes du développement de l'Afrique de s'engager dans un dialogue perpétuel.

Dr. Pradip N. Thomas est le Chef de Publications à L'Association Mondiale de la Communication Chrétienne.

Introduction

That communication has become globalised, privatised, and become the monopoly of a few is no longer considered newsworthy. We are asked to live in a world shorn of options. The possibility of 'access' and 'control' for the many seems more distant than ever. A decade ago, media alternatives could be discussed in a wide range of fora. But with the demise of the 'Big Bear' and its cubs, the globalisation of the market economy, the retreat of the state from its 'public' commitments, stagnation in the alternative development sector and a general dilution of support for a new communications and information order, alternatives are most definitely out of fashion. The only alternative discussed today is the need for privatised competition to public, state-controlled media enterprises. Utopian thinking, not surprisingly, has taken a backseat. More resources seem to be directed towards colonising space than for solving the myriad problems associated with life on earth. Many intellectuals have shifted loyalties, others have become apathetic or have succumbed to an inertia that is, in a real sense, the hallmark of the left today.

Fortunately, there have been exceptions, and Paulo Freire ranks among a select few who have continued to explore the meaning and praxis of liberation. In recent years, he has been involved in a multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary literacy movement in Sao Paulo. He has also embarked on a dialogue with emerging theoretical paradigms, post-modernism and post-structuralism in particular. This willingness to go beyond the bounds of received tradition, to explore new avenues for praxis and to cross borders is the hallmark of an open intellectual, for whom the exploration of utopia is an unceasing task.

While there is no doubt plenty of evidence to suggest a 'gloom and doom' scenario, there has also been a witness to signs of hope, to initiatives that have brought about peace and justice, development and an environment that is conducive to the exercising of rights, in Africa and elsewhere. These include an enhanced awareness of human rights, sustainable development,

the empowerment of women in society, the conservation of biodiversity and the expression and consolidation of various movements for justice and rights.

Yet, in spite of these developments, we cannot but question the motives that shape needs into universal demands. For instance, on sustainable development, we need to ask the simple question - sustainable for whom and in whose interests? How does one reconcile the tendency to advocate sustainability from a position of strength i.e., by those in the North, who have achieved certain standards of living, to the millions in the South who live on the margins and for whom survival, not sustainability is the key issue? At the risk of belabouring the point, we need to ask, will it ever be possible for sustainability to become more than a topical concern, when any number of transnational corporations in the business of exploiting the earth's resources increasingly operate above the law and are more powerful than their own governments, let alone states in the South? There seems to be a number of issues at stake including what Miller(1990:31) refers to as aspects related to 'inter-generational equity' as well as 'intra-generational equity'. The latter is absolutely essential to the former; if basic needs are not met for millions in their own life-time, chances are that the welfare of future generations will not figure high on the list of priorities except at the level of political rhetoric. It would seem that Freire's espousal of another development based on participation, dialogue and local control seems to be as relevant today as it was two decades ago.

Freire in Africa

Freire's work in Africa dates from the early seventies, initially in Tanzania with the teaching of pedagogical methods for a literacy campaign and more substantially with adult literacy programmes in the context of national reconstruction efforts within the newly liberated, post-colonial Lusophone states of Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde and Sao Tome in Principe. These experiments were

by no means successful; as Freire has himself admitted, centralised bureaucracies, programmes de-linked from the production process and communicated in the language of the coloniser, Portuguese, in this case, blunted the radical potential of the method and the objective of literacy as a means to coming by a new consciousness, and stymied the capacity of people to "...read not only the word but also read the world".

But what are perhaps of enduring influence in Africa, particularly in Sub-Saharan and South Africa are the objectives and methods associated with 'conscientization', a process that is engendered through action-reflection and dialogue towards what Freire terms 'authentic' communication. "Conscientization" according to Freire(1985:160) "is identified with cultural action for freedom, (and) is the process by which in the subject-object relationship.....the subject finds the ability to grasp, in critical terms, the dialectical unity between self and object. That is why we affirm there is no conscientization outside of praxis..". The language of conscientization as well as its praxis has influenced a host of popular communications strategies in Africa, in apartheid-ridden South Africa as well as in a number of other countries in Africa. Botswana and its tradition of community radio, popular theatre in Kenya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Zambia, Lesotho, Botswana and Zimbabwe (See Mda:1993) and other popular communications initiatives directed towards organising for awareness and change are examples that come to mind.

In hindsight, it would seem that Freire's ideas and methods work best in overt situations of crisis or in situations of heightened oppositional consciousness. The sustainability of this endeavour in 'normal', everyday contexts where people live with crisis seems to be much more problematic. One-party politics, restrictions on individual and media freedoms, dependent development, state corruption, militarism and the politics of ethnicity are among the conditions that militate against radical cultural politics be it the Freirean or any other variety. There is also a massive difference between centralised, socialist

environments, a fertile ground for Freire's experiments in radical adult education, and the average state in Africa whose legitimacy is minority-based rather than majority-based. While there are significant exceptions to this, - it is nevertheless obvious that consensual, democratic politics are at a premium in most countries in Africa and, for that matter, in many countries in the South. In both Africa and elsewhere, public space for the expression of dissent is in short supply.

Not surprisingly, given the radical potential posed by Freirean pedagogy, countries throughout the South either proscribed his teachings or actively discouraged the use of his methodology.

Terms for Liberation - Old and New

But how relevant are Freirean insights and understandings of development in the light of contemporary politics in Africa to the practice of communications scholars? One way to deal with this question would be to examine 1) the durability and continuing relevance of his pedagogical objectives and method, 2) its more or less ambivalent aspects, and 3) the irreconcilable elements in his particular way of naming the world.

A common theme running through Freire's work is his belief in the necessity of human freedom and critical consciousness as the means to another development. In Freire's words (1985:68-69) "Only beings who can reflect upon the fact that they are determined are capable of freeing themselves." Critical consciousness is crucial for a new awakening to the awareness of dependence and towards an awakening of possibility. The need to counter dependence both between the North and the South and within the South, to redeem situations that enable one-dimensional, abstracted, fragmented and standardised visions of development and progress are concerns that lie at the crux of the Freirean problematic. These issues are of abiding relevance to communication scholars. In the wired world of today, technological and cultural dependencies arising out of the skewed distribution, availability, manufacture and uses of information

technologies have resulted in widening gaps between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. The analysis of such realities needs to be complemented by an understanding of the various resources and languages of resistance, the inventions of tradition, the subversions of order and all the means by which ordinary people learn to, as it were, 'denounce' the dominant order and 'announce' a culture of hope.

Freire's insistence on the need for utopian thinking is particularly relevant in our present context in which the market has been invested with 'gospel' status, and hailed as the means for the final liberation of humankind from the clutches of poverty, ignorance and underdevelopment. Structural Adjustment Policies, the fall-out of GATT-led initiatives and the further 'underdevelopment of development' seems to have taken many countries in the South back to square one. We are back to the days of 'trickle-down', to the unbridled economic optimism of modernisation theorists who still do not recognise the particular and the local in their understandings of politics, society, culture and change in the South. While development theories have, as a result of their tryst with the post-structuralist turn, exemplified in their present pre-occupation with notions such as 'interfaces', 'discontinuities', 'power flows', 'knowledge processes' and 'struggles over meaning', become fashionably inflected, we are exhorted to refrain from taking sides on development issues, to remain neutral and to capitulate to a value-free version of the social sciences. Long and Villarreal(1993:158) exemplify this position as they implore their readers to stand back "....from the tendency to empathise ideologically with the hapless victims... one should instead, explore the extent to which specific actors perceive themselves capable of manoeuvring within given contexts or networks and develop strategies for doing so." Freire had attacked the poverty of this model of development in the late sixties and pointed us towards another way of doing development.

There is also a problematic side to Freirean thought. While the cause of another development has been irrevocably strength-

ened by inclusive processes that are rooted in traditions of participation, dialogue and local control, the contexts of development have changed, and quite dramatically so in very many parts of the world. Today, we are a lot more cautious with respect to the objectives of liberation and freedom. We recognise that there are finite limits to participation, that a pragmatic, reconciliatory, multi-cultural approach based on the ethic of mutual solidarity is a more viable option than that offered by one-dimensional, exclusive approaches to liberation. There are complications of a structural nature as well, including the reality of intensive demographic changes within and between borders - migrants, the internally displaced, refugees, etc. Such mass movements and resettlements have affected development initiatives based on notions of participation and equity. There are more questions than answers. What should an enabling pedagogy respond to in the present situations in Africa? How can solidarities be maintained in a context characterised by shifting populations, weak support structures and the closure of public space? What is the basis for alternatives in a situation where ethnic, religious and nationalist conflicts threaten to divide already fragile environments?

Freire has always maintained that his method is not a recipe, valid for all times and places but that it needs to be adapted, honed and moulded to the culture, modes of experience and expectations in any society. Thus, in India for example, grassroots thinking in the context of rural organisation and mobilisation has benefitted immensely from the interweaving of Freirean and Gandhian thought. There have also been attempts to blend Freirean thought, particularly his language of liberation, with the social ideology of Ambedkar, the champion of Dalit (Untouchable) liberation. In other words, Freire's praxis of liberation needs to be realised in context, in the confluence of indigenous cultures, local languages and visions of liberation. The Guinea-Bissau of 1995 is immensely different from what it was in the days of Amílcar Cabral. There is no vanguard party, no cadres and no party intellectuals. And if Freire were to propose a

literacy campaign in Guinea-Bissau today, two decades after he first went there, he would most definitely have to rethink his method, including the role of animateurs and of a liberation that was based, rather paradoxically, on the leaders and the led.

To be fair to Freire, one must admit that he has constantly endeavoured to take seriously criticisms that have been levelled against his method, his belief in the primacy of the party, his inability to theorise difference, particularly the question of gender. In his foreword to the book edited by Peter McLaren and Peter Leonard entitled *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter* (1993:x), he affirms his commitment to the struggles of people while recognising the complex and differentiated nature of agency and the conditions for struggle: "I have always challenged the essentialism reflected in claims of a unitary experience of class and gender, in as much as it is assumed that suffering is a seamless web always cut from the same cloth. Oppression must always be understood in its multiple and contradictory instances, just as liberation must be grounded in the particularity of suffering and struggle in concrete, historical experiences, without resorting to transcendental guarantees."

Nevertheless, it seems that a new 'birthing' is required if Freirean notions of liberation are to remain valid in the contexts of Africa - a birthing in the 'publics' in Africa, old and new, recognised and unrecognised, the organised and the unorganised sectors, the spaces provided by the informal economy, all the places where people think and dream and where there is the potential for creative cultural politics. The historian Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba (1994:258-59), currently teaching in Tanzania, has attempted to bring the marginalised into his vision for a new emancipatory politics in Africa. "Our starting point must be in Africa too, *people think* and this is the sole material basis for politics. We must investigate the internal content of what they actually think. It is through an analysis of these forms of consciousness that we will grasp the forms of political consciousness characterising the antagonism with the existing overall social order.....progressive politics has *several sites* and a *multiplicity of processes*."

Times have changed. We now realise that there are limits to both the economism of modernisation theories as well as the idealism of the many variants of neo-Marxian theories of development and underdevelopment. The material, the cultural, the social, the natural and the spiritual - all these have a role to play in our vision of sustainable futures. These then are the conditions for the self-organisation of the publics in Africa - the basis for a dialogue with Freire.

- * An earlier version of this paper was presented at the ACCE pre-biennial conference *Rethinking Development: The Legacy of Paulo Freire*, October 16-17, 1994, Accra, Ghana.

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