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FREIRE, Paulo.

The "real" meaning of Cultural Action; The possibility of a neutral Cultural Action; Cultural Action for freedom and Cultural Action for "domestication"; The theoretical frame of references of their practices. January 1970.

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The following text is one of the lectures which Paulo Freire delivered at CIDOC in January 1970. The other lectures are published in CIDOC CUADERNO 1004

Even though we have spoken many times in this study about cultural action (for freedom or domestication of men) we have not attempted a profound analysis of this concept. In light of the reflexions which we have developed in the first part of this work, however, we may now seek to undertake such an analysis.

In trying to understand what cultural action really is, it is necessary, first of all, to avoid using the expression "cultural action" as though it were a "made phrase" or a "new clich  ". Thus our primary concern must be to understand critically the true meaning that these words convey in their structural context: "cultural action". It means perceiving at the outset their grammatical relationship, thereby enabling us to recognise that the adjective "cultural" - in modifying the "intension"<sup>1</sup> of the noun "action" - indicates that such an action is a human one. This is because, among men, action envelopes the whole being of the actors - their emotions, their feelings, their "language-thought-reflection". Human action which implies the finalities of the actors, is human praxis. Animal action, on the contrary, without "language-thought-reflection", cannot be considered in such a way.

While, action, among animals is merely an instinctive effort of adaptation, action among men is, on the contrary, a creative and transforming one.<sup>2</sup> Through the results of their praxis, men create their own cultural world, which becomes an historical one.



Culture, created by men through their praxis and their work, is the symbolic and "comprehensive" universe in which men act as conscious beings. Nevertheless, to the extent that men, in their dialectical relationship with the world, transform the world through their work, they are conditioned by the products of their own action. Thus in objectifying the world, men objectify themselves and culture appears, then, as the alienation or "estrangement" of the very being who creates it. But, dialectically, the original alienation constitutes a fundamental moment of the very de-alienation process.

It does not mean, obviously, that such a process of de-alienation is a spontaneous one. On the contrary, it means simply that if through estrangement men can become men and thus enter into the humanization process, then, by overcoming estrangement men can become free and thus increasingly humane.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, in order to overcome their original estrangement, men must be engaged in a critical and permanent process of transforming reality. Or, in other words, if men upon objectifying the world while they transform it, objectify themselves and thus become conditioned by their own culture, then their transforming action of a de-alienating character must become a permanent process.

If not a permanent process, the transforming action realized in moment "F" will result in a new alienation even though it is constituted in an attempt to overcome the alienation of moment "E". It is precisely for this reason that the de-alienating praxis must be systematically and coherently exercised upon the infrastructure and the superstructure, which in a dialectical relationship, constitute the total structure.

While culture qua superstructure may influence or change the infrastructure (through the mediation of men, who by introjecting cultural myths, become alienated), the transformation of the infrastructure, nevertheless, remains incapable of bringing about, ipso facto, a

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superstructural modification. Thus, the process of de-alienation must be a total process. The radical transformation of the infrastructure not only involves an attempt at the extrojection of cultural myths whose continued existence prejudices the exercise of that praxis demanded by the new reality in transformation,<sup>4</sup> but it also includes the imperative to avoid the formation of new introjectable cultural myths. This means in effect "surprizing" culture in the dialectical moment of the "inversion of praxis",<sup>5</sup> through the problematization of its "overdetermining" power, in order to render it less powerful. It is precisely this phenomenon which gives cultural action its liberating character.

Since education as cultural action (for domestication or for liberation) is always related to the social structure, it is, therefore, also related to the dialectical relationship between the infrastructure and the superstructure. Its neutrality is impossible in the same way that neutral human praxis is impossible. For this very reason, cultural action or education for "domestication" systematically encourages man's alienation. In the final analysis, such action regularly reinforces the introjection of myths that are verified in the inversion of praxis. Together, therefore, these forms of cultural action (for either domestication or for liberation) are ways, although nevertheless distinct, to confront culture, culturally.

The efficiency of cultural action (for liberation or for domestication) can never be understood in critical terms if one does not understand the "dialectic of overdetermination".<sup>6</sup> That is, it can never be understood if one does not comprehend, concretely, the manner in which the superstructure, upon influencing the infrastructure with which it forms an integral part of the total structure, overdetermines it. Such a critical perception of the "dialectic of overdetermination" must be developed, above all, by the educators, who intend to become engaged in a liberating praxis and thus in a truly humanistic praxis. While cultural action for domestication is inherently conducive to the reinforcement, perpetuation or



reactivation of cultural myths, thus preserving the state of consciousness at its "real level", cultural action, or education for freedom, on the contrary, ultimately leads to the extrojection of myths and the overcoming of "real consciousness" by "critical consciousness".

For this reason, cultural action or education for domestication can never be a real act of knowing, since it is always, on the contrary, a mere transference of knowledge. Cultural action for freedom, however, cannot be anything but an authentic act of knowing, an act in which the real overdetermining force of the superstructure manifests itself to the cognoscent subjects - educator and educatee - as a knowable object.

For this reason, cultural action - or radical education for freedom - can't be reduced either to the mere improvement of educational techniques or to the employment of audio-visual aids or finally, to increasing the availability of easy access to the sources of information. Undoubtedly, these educational techniques are fundamental to radical cultural action for freedom since they can be employed as methods of unveiling reality. To accomplish such a task, however, these techniques must be employed by those engaged in an authentic act of knowing rather than by those who wish to provide a mere transference of knowledge. Since neutral education or neutral cultural action is non-existent, moreover, the truly radical education which brings about man's de-alienation actively engages its subjects in the process of transforming reality.

This, however, is not the result of either cultural action for "domestication", whose fundamental preoccupation is that of adjusting men to reality or of the falsely humanistic positions that do not go beyond what Althusser calls the "simple moral denunciation of myths and fallacies".

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Cultural action for freedom, intrinsically dialogical, presupposes actors who, influenced or determined by the reality in which they act more or less in a state of alienation, seek to know the reality (and the reasons that explain their own ways of acting) in order to transform it and thus bring about man's liberation.

Cultural action for "domestication", essentially anti-dialogical, implies the existence of actors who exercise their action upon "spectators" thus maintaining the status quo and preserving the social order of domination.

In cultural action for freedom the actors, therefore, find themselves in communication, while in cultural action for "domestication" there is no communication, there are only actors and "spectators". It is precisely in this phenomenon that one recognizes the problematizing character of the first type of cultural action in contrast with the sloganistic nature of the second. Implying that the actors "take distance" from the object, problematization begins as a decisive moment in the act of knowing in which both the educator and the educatee find themselves involved.

Upon problematizing the object, the actors problematize themselves who, in this way, initiate a process of search in which their critical curiosity becomes increasingly challenged. Nevertheless, the more they penetrate the essence of the knowable object, the more they perceive their neutrality to be inviable in the face of reality. For this reason, any supposedly neutral judgement is, in actuality, always a hidden choice. Those who declare themselves neutral actually do nothing more than engage in a form of action that preserves the status quo. Cultural action for freedom, then, implies on the one hand, "subverting, culturally, the culture of domination", as Professor João Coutinho emphasizes, and it implies, on the other hand, the constant problematization of the new culture that is continually being created.



The unveiling of reality, its de-mythification and the denunciation of its dehumanizing structures are some of the rigorous tasks that cultural action for freedom confers upon its actors. Let us repeat once again that it is precisely for this reason that cultural action for liberation cannot be anything other than an authentic act of knowing. Because this is an authentic act of knowing, moreover, its subjects must participate in developing the "curriculum" by which they will come to know the knowable object. This means, in effect, that the educator, as one of the actors, cannot by himself create the "curriculum".

Nevertheless, this is the normal procedure in anti-dialogical cultural action in which the educator, as an actor, develops the curriculum on his own and then transfers or deposits it in the educatees, mere "spectators", in the hopes that some day they too will become actors confronted by other "spectators". Thus, what is an authentic act of knowing in cultural action for freedom, remains nothing more than a transfer or deposit in cultural action for "domestication".

Upon demanding the participation of the actors in specifying and delineating the "knowable objects", cultural action for freedom, as an authentic act of knowledge, has as its point of departure the investigation of what we call the GENERATIVE THEMES of the educatees. And this investigation, which results in the knowledge of the reality perception levels of the educatees, begins the dialogicity of cultural action for freedom. The investigation initiates a real act of knowing which is characteristic of this type of action.

Upon investigating the generative themes, the actors begin the very act of unveiling reality. And upon taking as an object of their critical reflection the thematic results of the investigation, the actors continually extend and expand the unveiling initiated in the investigation. Thus, new themes result which render themselves to new reflective action. It is precisely in this process that cultural action is realized as a praxis which one performs and reperforms constantly.

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Let us concentrate now on the analysis of what we call GENERATIVE THEMES. In the first place, the themes exist due to the dialectical relations between men and the world; they exist because men are capable of creating their own world, a world of specific historical-cultural "situations" or "climates" which delineate the profiles of epochs. The themes, resulting from the dialectization in which men act dynamically upon the world, imply tasks to be realized by men. For this reason, between the themes and the realization of them, there exists an historical space to be traversed in which the tasks must be completed. In order to complete the tasks, however, men must be "above" the themes; that is, they must recognise the "principal contradiction and the principal aspect of the contradiction" in which they find themselves involved.

The critical perception of themes, moreover, and a clear comprehension of the tasks related to them cannot be obtained except in true praxis, that is, in the unity of action and reflection. This does not occur, however, in the "simple moral denunciation of myths and fallacies" or in pure activism. In a wider sense, the generative themes, embodied in concrete "limit situations", are the "untested feasibility" which "hopes" to be realized.

Emerging historically from the dialectical relationship which characterizes the social structure in which the "limit situations" are formed, the themes find themselves always related to their opposites. Thus to recognize the theme of liberation implies not only recognizing the theme of oppression but, above all, the objective "limit situation" of oppression. This explains how the theme of liberty, even though it remains a mere "untested feasibility" in a limit situation of oppression, thus becomes a "limit situation" for those who benefit, whether consciously or not, from a situation of oppression. Hence the necessity that the theme of "making unfeasible" the realization of the "untested feasibility".

Dependence, as an historical and a contradictory situation, profiles



the Third World. This is her principal contradiction. In such a situation, obviously, the fundamental generative theme is the autonomy of the Third World, which at the same time is the "untested feasibility". Consequently, what on the one hand is the "untested feasibility" in the "limit situation" of the Third World, thus becomes, on the other hand, the "anticipated limit situation" for the First World.

Enveloped by and enveloping the historical "limit situations", the generative themes provoke tension in men in various ways. That is, the more that the themes are capable of motivating men to seek their realization, the more they are, at the same time, capable of bringing men to assume either a magical or a mystical position depending upon varying conditions.

In the first instance, when the themes are capable of motivating men to seek their realization and when men succeed in placing themselves "above" the themes, the tension provoked by the themes is resolved in the dialecticity inquietude-peace which characterizes critical or historical consciousness. In this way, men become aware of the deep meaning of the themes which "unveils" the way for the completion of their tasks.

In the second instance, in which the "limit situations" are insurmountable and in which the "maximum of possible consciousness" is reduced to the mere level of "real consciousness",<sup>7</sup> the themes do not come to be comprehended in their deepest meaning. Consequently, the way of overcoming tension becomes a defense mechanism which men establish between themselves and higher institutions which are responsible for objective conditions.

In the third instance, the picture changes completely. The relationship between men and "limit situations" is no longer the magical-defensive element involving the themes. At this point it is the myth which mediates and operates the resolution of tension. Thus,

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"real consciousness" in the underdeveloped and pre-capitalistic societies and above all in their rural areas is preponderantly magical, while "real consciousness" in the highly technical and capitalistic societies is preponderantly mythical and irrational.

It is precisely in these societies that one encounters "massification". Thus, "rationality" in the Weberian sense which "results in the scientific specialization and the technical differentiation of Western civilization" is increasingly transformed into "irrationality" while efficiency, which is reduced to the exact accomplishment of the right orders at a given time, conditions the transformation of specialization into "specialism". Thus technology becomes a myth, a new god in which and only in which men believe.

In such situations it is not unusual, then, that man's search for emotional security becomes one of his fundamental preoccupations. But, as insecure and frightened beings, men run to the mythified and technological world for security. In their relations with the machine, perceiving themselves also as a machine, men search for the peace which they no longer find in human relationships. As frightened and insecure beings "men prefer to return," asserts Dr. Macoby,<sup>8</sup> "no longer to the maternal womb but to the mechanical womb, in whose functional exactness they hope to find peace and security."

But through what Nicol<sup>9</sup> call the "horizontal structure", or that which assures historic continuity, (without necessarily negating the uniqueness of each epoch), the "vertical structure" of one epoch thus penetrates another epoch. Due to this phenomenon, the generative themes, viewed from a wider perspective, can reveal themselves as:

- (a) "ante-projects" of the previous epoch in realization in the contemporary epoch.
- (b) "ante-projects" of the previous epoch and projects of the contemporary epoch.



- (c) "ante-projects of the contemporary epoch which can become its own projects or be left for the future.

Nevertheless, it is not in this wider area that one conducts a thematic investigation in order to initiate cultural action for freedom but, in the area of the "background awareness" of the popular consciousness. Here, what interests us is surprising the "universe" of "isolated perceptions"<sup>10</sup> as well as the level of perception of the "perceivers". The importance of such a knowledge of "perceptions" for cultural action is obvious. It is only after the problematization of "perceivable objects" in the "background awareness" that we can reach an understanding not only of what is "singled out in itself" but also of what is not "singled out". Only in this way, moreover, can we pursue the related task of "isolating".

After the investigation and the problematization of the "perceptions" in the background knowledge of popular consciousness, one of the tasks of cultural action for freedom is that of clarifying its relationships with national projects, which are the fundamental generative themes of the country.

Let us emphasize that the Latin American rural masses, either "semi-immersed" or "semi-emerging", have not yet transcended the first level of knowing. At this level we do not encounter themes, as either "ante-projects" or defined projects, but "subjects". It is necessary, moreover, as Professor João Coutinho emphasizes, to distinguish between themes and "subjects".

A topic, for example, relating to the better cultivation of the land would be the "subject" of whose "theme" would be the socio-economic development of the country. The campesino - and not only the campesino - perceives "isolatedly" his vital necessities, that is, the "subjects", but not the rational imperatives, which are the themes.

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While in cultural action for "domestication" we remain merely at the level of the "subject" imposing upon the campesino, for example, what we believe to be the best available technical assistance for the cultivation of the land,<sup>11</sup> in cultural action for freedom, leaving the level of the "subject" we attempt to reach the level of the "theme". In the first case, the "curriculum" is developed vertically based upon the interests of the educator; in the second case, however, the "curriculum" is based on the knowledge not only of the "isolated perceptions" of the people, but also on their level of perception of reality.

In this way, even though cultural action for freedom- just as cultural action for "domestication" - is born of an induced method, its dialogicity, already in its first step which is that of investigation, increasingly transforms induction into collaboration. This does not occur in cultural action for "domestication" whose induced character is permanent. While cultural action for freedom implies a "cultural synthesis" resulting in the process by which educator and educatee, conditioned by the same reality, educate themselves together, cultural action for "domestication" on the other hand brings about a cultural invasion.

Thus the first type of action is based upon the collaboration of the actors while the second is based upon the manipulation of the "spectators" by the actors. In this second type of action the actors think "about" the "spectators" so that, by knowing them better they are more capable of dominating them; in the first type of action the actors seek to know each other so that, by transforming the world together they can become more human. In anti-dialogical cultural action, the actors domesticate the "spectators; in dialogical cultural action, no one teaches anyone, no one frees anyone, no one educates anyone. As subjects of these processes, men teach themselves, men educate themselves, men free themselves together.



Cultural action for freedom is utopian, prophetic and hopeful. Utopian in this sense, however, does not mean idealistic or unfeasible. On the contrary, as a concrete action it implies the acts of denunciation and annunciation. It implies the denunciation of a dehumanizing reality and the annunciation of its transcendence by another reality in which men will be more fully human. But, in order that this type of cultural action be authentically utopian, it follows that the acts of denunciation and annunciation cannot be empty words, but historical commitments. Denunciation and annunciation are only possible through praxis, just as it is only through praxis that one can realize the "announcement" proclaimed in the denunciation. Cultural action for freedom must be recognized, once again, as an authentic act of knowing since one can neither truly denounce or announce without the knowledge, on the one hand, of the reality which is being denounced and, on the other hand, of the tasks for the new reality. Its humanism, therefore, must also be scientific; otherwise, it will be wasted by idealistic men with abstract and alienated models. Cultural action for freedom is at the service of realistic men who live in realistic situations.

One can easily understand why, then, for this type of cultural action we have constantly emphasized the necessity of not only demythifying reality but also "de-ideologizing" it as well. In the same way we can thus understand why, in cultural action for "domestication" which can never be utopian, prophetic or hopeful, the mythification of reality is indispensable. Prevented by its very nature from being utopian since it is an instrument of domination, it can envision nothing in the future other than the preservation of existing reality. For this reason the first type of cultural action unveils, the second conceals; the first problematizes, the second, "sloganizes". The first seeks a cultural synthesis; the second brings about cultural invasion. The first is an exercise in freedom; the second is a manipulative practice.

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Those who adhere to the theories of cultural action for "domestication" (and this does not always mean the educators), those who postulate the neutrality of education, those who consider existing reality merely as a "fact of life", those who are unaware of the question of power that exists in the analysis of educational policy will consider those who defend the theories of cultural action for freedom as mere idealogues. In reality, however, their neutrality, as we have affirmed previously, is merely a way of concealing their defense of the existing social order.

By their very nature, the theorists of cultural action for freedom do not intend nor are they capable of "hiding the sun with a sieve". They know well, scientifically rather than ideologically, that neutral action is non-existent, that static reality is non-existent and that one cannot think about education except in terms of the social structure and this, then, implies a question of political power.

The education of adults, and not only of adults, as cultural action cannot escape either one of these directions: either it is an instrument of domination or of freedom.



## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The meaning, in Logic, of intension or comprehension of a noun or concept is the collection of partial characteristics which convey the general idea of the noun. The extension of a noun, on the other hand, is all of the "things" to which it is possible to employ the noun. The intension and the extension of a noun are inversely proportional. Therefore, the intension of the noun "king" is larger than its extension. If, on one hand, every king is a man, on the other hand, not every man is a king.

<sup>2</sup> In other words, as men become progressively subjected to a process of adaptation in which their creative power is asphyxiated, they will progressively become dehumanized. In general, that is what is happening in intensely bureaucratized social structures, in which men cannot develop their capacity of expressing themselves and their world. It is this process of bureaucratization that explains the resulting distortion of the real meaning of "efficiency", so that in such societies efficiency does not mean creation or recreation but the accomplishment of the given orders at the right time.

Such an understanding and practice of efficiency thus naturally characterizes the diverse activities of men in these societies. So efficiency becomes a myth to which men enslave themselves. Very early in their school years, men discover, on the one hand, that it is necessary for them to become in order to survive, and, on the other hand, they discover that to be efficient means accomplishing the given orders at the right time. So their existence in such a structure becomes, necessarily, a permanent pursuit of ways of becoming efficient. (It is interesting to observe the quantity of books on, for example, "how to become rich"; "how to become efficient or famous"; "how to influence people"; "how to be happy in love", etc.)

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mechanistic and bureaucratized form of survival. Instead of risk-  
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projecting or of loving, men live dominated by fear. Fear of hav-  
ing feelings, emotions, surprises, friendships and love. Fear of  
change, of time, of the future and fear of freedom.

A dominantly technological and consumptive civilization, in which  
men are frustrated in their creative efforts, is inherently condu-  
cive to alienation. Nevertheless, and in spite of all this, and  
because of the very power of such a process of alienation, men to-  
day, perhaps more than ever, have begun to inquire about themselves.  
More and more, men refuse to be adapted.

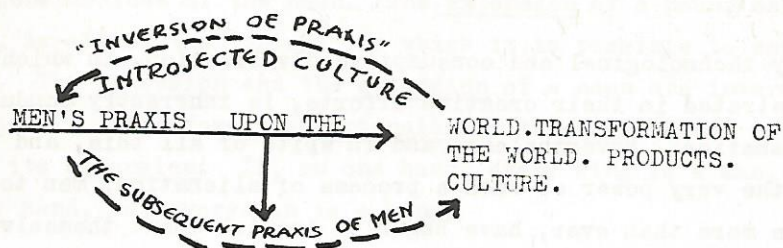
<sup>3</sup> ... "But the existence of this world, as also the actuality of  
self-consciousness, depends on the process that self-consciousness  
divests itself of its personality, by so doing creates the world,  
and treats it as something alien and external, of which it must now  
take possession. But the renunciation of its self-existence is it-  
self the production of the actuality, and doing so, therefore, self-  
consciousness ipso facto makes itself master of this world." Fur-  
thermore, "The means, then, whereby an individual gets objective  
validity and concrete actuality here is the formative process of  
culture. The estrangement on the part of the spirit from its natural  
existence is here the individual's true and original nature, his  
very substance. The relinquishment of this natural state is, there-  
fore, both his purpose and his mode of existence; it is at the same  
time the mediating process, the transition of the thought-constitu-  
ted substance to concrete actuality, as well as, conversely, the  
transition of determinate individuality to its essential constitu-  
tion. This individuality moulds itself by culture to what it in-  
herently is, and only by so doing is it then something per se and  
possessed of concrete existence." Hegel, The Phenomenology of Mind,  
pp. 514-15. Apropos this subject, it is fundamental to read: Hyp-  
polite, Jean, Genese et Structure de la Phenomenologie de L'esprit  
de Hegel, Aubier, Editions Montaigne, Paris, 1946.



<sup>4</sup> See: Freire, Paulo, Annual Report, Activities Completed in 1968, ICIRA (Agrarian Reform Training And Research Institute), Santiago de Chile.

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<sup>6</sup> Althusser, Louis, Pour Marx, Paris, Francois Maspero, 1967. There is a Spanish translation. Siglo XXI, 1968.

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<sup>7</sup> See: Lucien Goldman, The Human Sciences and Philosophy, The Chaucer Press, Ltd., 1969.

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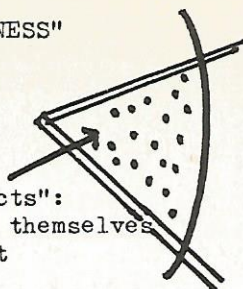
<sup>8</sup> Seminar - December, 1969, Center for Studies in Education and Development, Harvard University.

<sup>9</sup> For Eduardo Nicol there is no possibility of a correct and critical vision of the historical process, to the extent that it is a process, without an understanding of the "vertical unity of meaning" in dialectical relationship with the "horizontal unity". This means, in effect, that human cultural production has a vertical meaning which implies its integration with contemporary reality. There is also a horizontal meaning to human cultural production which implies the extension of its meaning to other epochs. Only through that which he calls "organic continuity" between the vertical and the horizontal can one find the true meaning of history as a process. "The authentic perspective", he asserts, "embraces the process and merely the situation." Nicol, Eduardo, Los Principios de la Ciencia, Fondo de Cultura, Mexico, pp. 57-58.



"BACKGROUND AWARENESS"consciousness"Perceivable Objects":

- a) singled out in themselves
- b) not singled out



See Husserl, Edmund, Ideas, General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology, Cillier, Mcmillan, London

See Husserl, Edmund, Ideas, General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology, Collier, McMillan, London, 1969.

<sup>11</sup> See: Freire, Paulo, Extension o Comunicación?, ICIRA, Santiago de Chile, 1969.