

What Paulo Freire might say to Jeremy Corbyn

We print here an article version of a talk given by Colin Waugh at Independent Working-Class Education Network (IWCE) meetings at the Zest Centre, Sheffield on 10 November and at Unite HQ, London on 17th November 2018.

I will be talking here about what Paulo Freire might say to Jeremy Corbyn. Why? The people involved in The World Transformed (TWT) initiative, who are also as far as I can see involved in Momentum, are aiming to develop TWT as a 'popular education' movement. In Momentum itself we have seen a strong influence from US models of electoral and community organising, and if they now take this other step we are likely to see a further influence of such models. Freire's model of adult education, usually called 'critical pedagogy', has been much more influential in the US than it has been here, and hence is likely to exert a big influence also on any such TWT education initiative. So in this lead-off I'm really posing the question: what is the relevance to the Corbyn movement of Freire's approach to education?

Paulo Freire was born in 1921 in Recife, in the North East of Brazil. Recife stands at the point in Brazil that is nearest to Africa. Slavery in Brazil was not abolished till 1888, and there are estimated to be at least 60 million people of African descent in Brazil now - after Nigeria, the biggest such population in any country.

Freire was born into a middle-class family that experienced some poverty in the depression. He studied law at university but then changed direction to become a teacher (of Portuguese). Fairly soon he became a professor of education in Recife. He was at this stage involved in a liberal movement amongst Catholics that was concerned especially about the poverty which existed across much of the North East of Brazil.

Freire was influenced by existentialist ideas, for example those of the French thinker Emmanuel Mounier, and then by what would later be called Liberation Theology, an intellectual current that became especially important following the 1962 Vatican Council, conducted under the direction of Pope John 23rd. However, Freire was also influenced by ideas put forward by Karl Marx in some of his early writings, for example, especially, his 1845 'theses' on Ludwig Feuerbach. He developed a distinctive approach to literacy teaching, and, beginning in 1962, with others, including with the support of the mayor of Recife, Miguel Arraes, he was able to implement this across much of North East Brazil. These initiatives were supported by a leftwing section of the Brazilian Christian Democratic Party, and also, because the Kennedy administration thought North East Brazil was likely to become another Cuba, by funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

To my knowledge, Freire was not a member of a political party. Nevertheless, in 1963, the president of Brazil, Joao Goulart, made him Director of the National Literacy Programme. However, his development of this programme was cut short by the rightwing coup that took place on 1st April 1964. Freire was imprisoned for 75 days, and then exiled, eventually settling in Chile, where he was involved in a government-sponsored agronomy/literacy programme aimed at peasants.

In 1969 - that is, before Salvador Allende was elected president in 1970 - Freire left Chile for a job

at Harvard University, and in 1970, he took up a post with the World Council of Churches (WCC), based in Geneva. Through the WCC, he organised literacy work, mainly in former Portuguese colonies in Africa, especially Cabo Verde and Guinea Bissau. He returned to Brazil in 1980, when democracy had been restored, and died there in 1997. What, then, were Freire's key ideas?

As indicated, his focus was on adult literacy. In the early 1960s there was a literacy qualification for voting in Brazil. In the North East especially there were high levels of illiteracy, along with low life expectancy and grinding poverty, especially amongst the large section of the population composed of poor peasants, waged agricultural workers, and people in the process of being driven off the land. A high proportion of illiterates were women, many of whom worked as domestic servants. Overall, many if not most of those we're talking about were descended from people who had worked on the sugar plantations as slaves.

Freire defined these sections of the population as 'the oppressed'. Like other Catholic radicals of the time he took the view that they were buried in a 'culture of silence', and seems also to have accepted the assumption that this could end only if middle class liberals stimulated them to break out of it. Against this background, he took as his central principal the concept of *conscientizacao* (normally translated as 'conscientisation'). This idea, which may have come from Franz Fanon's 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks*, had a wide currency amongst Catholic radicals in Brazil in the 1950s. What does it imply?

First, it was a model for the process by which radical intellectuals like Freire aimed to stimulate 'the oppressed' to lift themselves out of the 'culture of silence', by getting them to realise that they were oppressed, and that they themselves possessed - or could develop - a capacity to break out of this. Secondly, the concept of *conscientizacao* was and is opposed not only to the 'culture of silence' but also to what Freire termed 'massification' - that is, to mass indoctrination as carried out, for example by fascist, right-wing populist or other totalitarian regimes. Thirdly, it implies also a rejection of mechanical materialism, associated by Freire with the Brazilian Communist Party as it was at the time. Fourthly, it rejects also what Freire termed 'banking education' - that is, a top-down lecturing approach in which unquestioned knowledge is 'deposited' in students' memories. Fifth, *conscientizacao* stresses the need for 'the oppressed' to be proactive, and thus to reject both fatalistic submissiveness and any idea that history is automatically on their side. On top of this, the version of *conscientizacao* specific to Freire also

emphasised that those who sought to trigger the self-liberation of 'the oppressed' could not do so without entering into dialogue with them. Lastly, however, Freire's key innovation was to attempt to integrate conscientisation with literacy skills training. This integration implies that when people are taught a technique or procedure, they know why they're learning it, and are learning it because they have chosen to do so. What, then were the main features of Freire's literacy method?

Volunteer literacy workers were recruited from amongst people judged willing to undergo an 'Easter experience' - that is, 'dying' to middle class values and 'rising again' as committed to the cause of 'the oppressed'. Those recruited were given training (ideally for 8 months). A section of these organisers would live in an 'oppressed' community and familiarise themselves with the subcultural preoccupations that prevailed there. They would then prepare 'codified existential situations' - that is, drawings of situations characteristic of the lives of 'the oppressed', pictorial versions of what we in further or adult education now would call scenarios. A 'culture circle' of volunteers from amongst 'the oppressed' who wanted to read and write would then be assembled for a series of evening meetings, at which drawings were displayed on a projector and a dialogue - that is to say, a genuine discussion - conducted. From this dialogue, the volunteer organisers would elicit a set of key words, for example *favela*. Syllables composing these words - for example fa, fe, fi, fo, fu / va, ve, vi, vo, vu / la, le, li, lo, lu - were then used to teach literacy, with circle members being taught to recognise these syllables in writing, and then compose other words from them.

Despite the great strengths of this approach, I think there is also a problem with it that still needs to be addressed. Although Freire was right to reject 'banking education', this rejection, even when, coupled with an 'Easter experience', is not a sufficient basis for producing oppositional educators, because it underestimates the extent to which the ruling class uses 'education' as an ideological weapon. I believe that a deeper and wider understanding of this is needed. With this reservation in mind, let us pose the question: what is the main challenge facing efforts to rebuild workers' education in the UK now?

Traditional working-class collective self-organisation in the UK was rooted in large concentrations of industrial workers. It had a background in industrial workers' struggle for the franchise, going back to Chartism and beyond, and a background also in working-class struggle for education, in the autodidact tradition, and in the collective self-education of working-class activists, as for example in the Plebs League. All the above

gains have been eroded, if not cancelled out, by the repeated de-industrialisation and globalisation of the UK economy from the 1980s till now. The UK in 2018 is still de-industrialising, still driving people out of industrial work here, and still off-shoring such work to repressive regimes elsewhere. The effects of these developments have included the regrowth of a petty bourgeoisie of small employers, alongside a big layer of nominal sole traders, plus layers of precarious service sector workers, plus a concentration of unionisation in the public sector. At the level of ideological struggle, the UK ruling class has shown that it can withstand both the working class becoming literate and the working class getting the vote. In fact, the ruling class has continuously strengthened its use of 'education' as an ideological weapon, while we have let our capacity to use education properly so-called decay. The result is that key sections of the UK working class now reject both electoral politics and education in general as swindles.

The Corbyn movement is based mainly on young people with higher education qualifications, on pre-Blair Labour Party activists, and on public sector union activists. Hence it leaves big sections of working-class people untouched. But until people in these sections begin to develop strong forms of collective self-organisation in relation to their paid work, the Corbyn movement will remain vulnerable. In this situation, then, what would Freire say to Corbyn?

I think he would be most likely to argue for a focus on building people's capacity to promote from-below democracy. I think he would do so, putting it crudely, for the following reason: that whereas people at the bottom of Brazilian society in the 1960s were disempowered by illiteracy, people at the bottom of UK society now are disempowered by a deprivation of democratic 'skills'.

Both traditional union democracy and parliamentary/local council-style democracy have been discredited by a long series of betrayals, defeats, swindles and the like. For many workers, this effect combines with a fear of victimisation, and a loss of experience of democratic organising. At the same time, there is now a growth of anti-democratic ways of organising, commonly justified by a rejection of bureaucracy and by a facile equation of top-down, hollowed out 'democracy' with democracy properly so-called. This additional anti-democratic impetus is associated with the emergence of what we can call 'internal NGOs' - groups of paid activists funded by charities - and the fetishisation of organisation as a set of neutral techniques that can be applied mechanically.

I believe Freire would therefore argue that the central requirement here and now is that working-

class activists and potential activists knowingly and willingly equip themselves, through mutual education, with capacities that allow them to democratise the struggles they become involved in. Further, I think he would say that this needs to start from two different directions simultaneously: on the one hand, in the sphere where ideas are developed and exchanged; and on the other, in the sphere where decisions about action are taken. In both spheres, those seeking to help people develop democratising capacities will need to use scenarios, case-studies and the like drawn from real-life experience. In the sphere of ideas, an example of something that needs to be re-learned is how people can discuss theoretical differences rigorously without destroying their ability to work together, while in the sphere of activity, an example is how to chair a decisionmaking meeting under time pressure and where formal rules contradict one another. There are many other examples that could be given. In short, a from-below renovation of the labour movement needs to include within itself education and training in from-below democracy as an integral dimension of this renovation.

I believe Freire would also say that there are within or close to the Corbyn movement two groups of people who can and should play a key role in supporting this: first, people who are mainly labour history and economics academics, especially women without tenure and postgraduate students used to teach - in short, sections of the rapidly emerging 'academic proletariat', and secondly: existing, experienced union activists. I think he would say that these two groups need to get together, and through dialogue with one another organise themselves to support the extension of democratising capacity that I've described.

So if we want to support the TWT/Momentum 'popular education' drive in the spirit of Paulo Freire, the above is the kind of approach I feel we need to push for.

