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IMPOSSIBLE TO EXIST WITHOUT DREAMS¹



I believe that, as progressive educators, we have the ethical responsibility to reveal situations of oppression. I believe it is our duty to create the means to understanding political and historical realities so as to bring about the possibility of change. I feel it is our role to develop work methods that allow the oppressed to, little by little, reveal their own reality.

At this point in history, it seems that there are certain responsibilities that fall to us. Recently, reactionary forces have obtained success in proclaiming the disappearance of ideologies and the advent of a new history, one devoid of social classes and, therefore, without antagonistic interests or class struggle. At the same time, they maintain that there is no need to keep talking about dreams, utopia, or social justice. However, to me, *it is impossible to live*

without dreams. How can we accept these neoliberal discourses which have been preached as if they were real and also keep our dreams alive? One way to accomplish that, I believe, is to awaken the political consciousness of educators.

Neoliberal doctrine seeks to limit education to technological practice. Currently, education is no longer understood as formative, but simply as training. I feel we must keep on creating alternative work models. If implemented in a critical manner, educational practice can make an invaluable contribution to the political struggle. Educational practice is not the only path toward the social transformation necessary for conquering human rights; however, without it, I believe, there will never be social transformation. Education manages to provide people with greater clarity in "reading the world," and that clarity opens up the possibility for political intervention. Such clarity is what will pose a challenge to neoliberal fatalism.

The language of neoliberals speaks about the need for unemployment, for poverty, for inequality. I feel it is a duty of ours to fight against such fatalistic mechanical forms of comprehending history. So long as people attribute the hunger and poverty that destroy them to destiny, to fatality, or to God, there will be little chance to promote collective action. Likewise, if we allow ourselves to fall for the trickery of neoliberal economic discourses, which affirm realities of homelessness and poverty as inevitable, then opportunities for change become invisible, and our role in fostering change becomes absent. In my view, "being" in the world means to transform and re-transform the world, not to adapt

to it. As human beings, there is no doubt that our main responsibilities consist of intervening in reality and keeping up our hope. While progressive educators, we must be committed to those responsibilities. We have to apply ourselves to creating a context in which people can question the fatalistic perceptions of the circumstances where they find themselves, so that we can all fulfill our role as participants in history.

TOWARD A "PEDAGOGY OF DESIRE"

Let us take, for example, the work done with people who live on the streets. I surround myself with caution when speaking about specific cases, since every context is different, and I do not believe in prescriptive approaches. In order to develop work alternatives in every situation, we have to go to the people involved and discuss together what needs to be done in their context. Nevertheless, in all contexts, through language and actions, I am interested in finding ways to create a context where people who live on the streets can reconstruct their wishes and desires—a desire to start again or just to start being in different ways. I am interested in the creation of a *pedagogy of desire*.

As progressive educators, one of our main tasks seems to be with respect to generating political dreams in people, political yearnings, political desires. It is impossible for me, as an educator, to build up the yearnings of other men and women. That task is theirs, not mine. In what way can we find work alternatives that provide a favorable context for that to happen?

As I seek to develop a pedagogy of desire, I am interested in exploring possibilities for making it clear that living on the streets is not a “natural” event but rather a social, historical, political, and economic event. I am interested in exploring the reasons for living on the streets. This type of investigation will lead us to some discoveries. We might discover that people do not live on the streets because they want to. Still, they might come to realize that indeed they want to stay on the streets, but then, they might engage in a different kind of questioning, seeking to find out why they want things that way, seeking the origins of such desire.

In that type of search, the search for reasons, we prepare ourselves and others to overcome a fatalistic understanding of our own situations, of our contexts. Overcoming a fatalistic understanding of history necessarily means discovering the role of consciousness, of subjectivity in history. Overcoming fatalistic comprehensions as to “being” on the street is synonymous to probing the social, political, and historic reasons for being on the streets—against which we can fight, in this way, collectively and consciously.

BEYOND CHARITY

It is necessary to establish an important distinction between that process and charity. In the campaign against hunger launched by sociologist Herbert de Souza, Betinho, assistance has been provided to some needy people in the form of food. However, in Brazil alone, there are thirty-three million people who starve. There

is absolutely no possibility that charitable initiatives alone can solve the problem of hunger. In order to solve this problem, we need to understand the relationships between hunger and food production, food production and land reform, land reform and reaction against it, hunger and economic policy, hunger and violence, and hunger while violence, hunger and democracy. We will have to realize that victory over destitution and hunger is a political struggle in support of profound transformation in the structures of society.

For that reason, we need to approach problems in such a manner as to invite people to understand the relationship between the problem and other factors, like politics and oppression. I believe that is what the campaign against hunger is doing. It is making hunger into a shocking, embarrassing, and revolting presence among us. I have no doubt that Betinho never did intend to simply organize a charitable campaign. The campaign has provided assistance in a manner that feeds the curiosity of the "assisted." That seems crucial. Gradually, it has made it viable to them to accept themselves as subjects of history, through their involvement in the political struggle. It is up to us to make history and to be made and remade by it. Only by making history in a different manner, will we be able to put an end to hunger.

RECOGNIZING GRASSROOTS WORK AND IMAGINING THE FUTURE

As subjects capable of promoting change, at times we do not notice changes that are in progress. Sometimes we

do not realize the grassroots work we do with our sights on awakening revolutionary consciousness. Sometimes we fail to recognize the importance of that work and the potential for change that can be developed from it. For example, let us look at the advances made by the popular movements throughout the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s, a decade many considered lost. Look at all the advances that the landless have accomplished in this country [Brazil]. They experienced many victories in their struggle for land rights, while working the land under the regime of cooperatives and creating camps. This movement, which now counts on tremendous popular support, has a long history. Its popularity has increased a great deal in the past ten years, but its origins reach back to a distant past in Brazilian history. One of its many origins is in the kilombos² created hundreds of years ago by Brazilian blacks of African origin who resisted against slavery. The kilombos were places where the black slaves of Brazil found refuge, living in community, on the basis of solidarity. The slaves who organized this resistance created practically self-supporting cities and, in doing so, created an alternative and symbolic country. They fought against the white state hundreds of years ago. They manifested the Brazilian desire for life and for freedom, presently synthesized, in fantastic ways, by the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST).

It is hard to imagine what directions MST will take. The landless count on very strong political consciousness. They know their project. They are beginning to invite the unemployed to join them in the struggle. They know what must be done—today or in the future.

I am sure that they also know what will be necessary in order to involve those who live on the streets. They know that land reform will, if not immediately, at least in ten years, count on the support of the people who live in the streets of cities.

About three or four years ago, I had the opportunity to teach a closing class to a group of young popular educators on a farm that had been successfully claimed by MST. The following day, the educators would part ways and go on to the different camps the farm had been divided into. At a given moment, a young man who worked with literacy and was a very active voice in the movement spoke to all of us. In his speech he said, "During one of the initial moments of our struggle, we had to cut, with the strength we gained in our union, the barbed wire that surrounded this farm. We cut it and went in. However, after we entered, we came to realize that, in the process of rupture of physical barriers, we had also cut other chains, other fences. We were cutting through the shackles of illiteracy, of ignorance, and of fatalism. Our ignorance makes for the happiness of landowners, the same way that our learning, our reading, the improvement to our memory, and the advances we have accomplished culturally make those same landowners tremble in fear. We now know that it is not enough to turn the land into economic production centers for all of us, we must also turn it into centers of culture, of learning."

Today, it seems possible that the landless are capable of promoting real changes and of transforming this country without violence. It seems to me like a time

of great possibilities. The progressive educators of the past played their role in bringing us to this point, in revealing practices of oppression and injustice. We still have crucial roles to play. We must envision our work with a base on a sense of perspective and history. Our struggle of today does not mean that we will necessarily accomplish changes, but without this fight, today, the future generations may have to struggle a great deal more. History does not end with us; it continues on.

ENDNOTES

1. *Kilombos*, spelled *quilombos* in Portuguese, are communities created by escaped slaves that survived for generations in hiding in Brazil.

2. This piece was originally published in Australia, under the title "Contribuir para a historia e reveler a oppressão," in *Dulwich Center Journal* 3 (1999): 37-39. The translation is by Klauss Brandini Gerhardt. The commentary was recorded at Paulo Freire's house in São Paulo on April 24, 1997. David Denborough and Cheryl White, who work for an organization providing aid to the homeless, were present, in addition to Walter Varanda.