Education as a political act: Freirean subjecthood as a condition of learning

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to explicate Paulo Freire’s assertion that education is necessarily a political act. He provides two general grounds for such a proposition: his theory of human nature and his theory of the nature of the real world in which we live. Learning cannot occur unless human beings are subjects who separate themselves ideally from the objective world in which they live, determine its nature and transform it into a form that provides greater opportunities for human beings to determine and change the world. In the real world, though, people are frequently treated as objects. Education in such a situation, whether in the Third World or in the First World, becomes a political act because educators will have to oppose those in power who treat human beings as objects.
INTRODUCTION

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and author of *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1970), argues that for education is a political act. Many if not all judges throughout the world would consider such a proposition to be tantamount to Marxist indoctrination and Marxist dogma. However, the question is how Freire justified such a proposition.

He did so on two grounds: his theory of human nature and his theory of the nature of the world in which we live.

FREIRE’S THEORY OF HUMAN NATURE

Freire’s conception of human beings involves the openendedness of being human. Human beings are subjects and not objects. Humans, to be subjects, must always distance themselves from what has been and posit a different future. To identify themselves permanently with what has been and become would negate the essence of being human: to be an incomplete and restive being who necessarily must create a world different from the present. Human *telos* or the aim of being human is to humanize the world: the process of becoming more human by becoming more objectively present in the world and becoming conscious of one’s increasing presence in the world.

This becoming more, however, has a condition attached to it: it must occur in such a way that it does not undercut the conditions for becoming more. In other words, if an act is to be educative, there must be both a net gain in a reconstructed life and the conditions for expanding a reconstructed life must be reproduced. The process of education and its result or product, in other words, must compliment each other or correspond to each other.
For example, in Freire’s use of codifications, or visual aids that depict some aspect or element of the concrete world of people (such as illiterate adults), he compares, in his codifications for culture, the third codification, which depicts a person hunting by using a bow and arrows, with the fourth one, which depicts a person hunting by using a gun: “They [the participants] discuss the technological advance represented by the rifle as compared with the bow and arrow” (1973, p. 69). The transition from the third codification to the fourth one represents the human capacity to change the world in such a fashion as to increase the opportunities to change the world. A rifle expands human capacity to hunt—potentially. Through the codification, the peasants come to realize that it was human beings who transformed their world into one where a modern weapon was produced and could be used in a wider sphere. Freire, though, qualifies this characterization by asserting that “this transformation, however, has meaning only to the extent that it contributes to the humanization of man, and is employed toward his liberation” (p. 69). This condition means that not just any transformation counts as educative but only one which provides for the progressive liberation of human beings. Their liberation requires that the process of transformation not undermine the process itself. The goal and the process must be consistent and, ultimately, correspond with each other.

The correspondence between means and ends is a result. Such a result presupposes that there is no immediate conscious identity between subject (human beings) and object (the world in which they live) and that there is an ideal distancing of human beings from the world which provides the basis for educational growth.
Subjecthood, which entails a gap between subject and object rather than their identity, is a peculiarly human characteristic. Human beings have the capacity to separate themselves, ideally, as subjects from the objective world. Like animals, they are *in* the world, but unlike animals they are also, or have the potentiality to be, *with* the world. In the preliminary codifications of the concept of culture in his work in Brazil, for instance, Freire distinguishes between human beings and animals on the basis of his concepts of “being in” and “being with” the world (1973, p. 63).

If human beings are immersed in this world—being in the world rather than with it—then there is no gap between subject and object and human learning becomes impossible. The foundation for any educational enterprise is the initial acceptance of an ideal gap between subject and object epistemologically. This epistemological gap also involves an ontological gap.

Freire grounds the existence or ontology of such a gap in the nature of human life as such. The gap is a temporal tension between permanence and change within human cultural life. Human life, to *be* human life, requires the ideal separation of oneself from the object:

> Education shows “duration” in the contradiction between permanence and change. That is why it is possible to say that education is permanent only in the sense of duration. In this case “permanent” does not mean the permanence of values, but the permanence of the educational process, which is the interplay between cultural permanence and change. (1973, p. 155)

Education forms a unity of the separation of the subject and object and their unification in such a way that they never become an identity, or become submerged into each other completely. The separation or non-identity is required if there is to be a subject that is a human subject by virtue of its need to transform reality (the object) according to its own
aims. The emergence of such a subject presupposes that the subject is not wholly determined by the object; otherwise, human beings would be in a closed world. In such a world, subjects would be either unaware that the world determines them, or if they were aware of such a determination, they would be unable to do anything with such information; they could not expand their being in the world. Consciousness, conceived as a mere object of reality, as a mirror image, to use Rorty’s metaphor, would involve no transformation of reality since it would be merely a part of the objective world and not distinguished from it in any determinate way other than being a reflection of the world.

The ontological gap between subject and object is expressed in the formation of limit-situations (obstacles) since the latter presuppose that there is some kind of diremption between human subjects and their world. Learning cannot occur unless the situation is such that there is a real problem to be solved by the students. Freire’s problem-posing method pertains to the limit-situations which prevent people from realizing their telos of becoming more human. Inquiry into these limit-situations forms an essential part of the educative process as the learners become aware of their limit-situations which prevent them from becoming more human. Freire thus insists that the curriculum has to involve problems that challenge the students to think and to become more human (and more humane). These problems have to go beyond the students’ immediate experience but still link up to their previous experiences.

Consciousness, by being connected to problems, does not just reflect reality but functions to alter reality in such a way that reality is more congenial to beings who are capable of ideally distancing or separating themselves from their immediate world: the humanization of the world (Taylor, 1993). The world becomes a mirror in which humans
can perceive themselves and know that they are conscious beings in the perceptual world objectively; they can know that they know not just theoretically but practically through the creation of a human world.

Consciousness as functional also means becoming aware of one’s historical being through the process of conscientization (people becoming aware of their limit-situations): “Every thematic investigation which deepens historical awareness is thus really educational…. ” (Freire, 1970, p. 101). Since history is three-dimensional (past, present and future), conscientization involves people becoming increasingly conscious of expanded connections of the past to the present as well as expanded potentialities for further action in the present.

The past as ideally present in the present and the future as ideally present in the present are a specifically human characteristic and entails the emergence of subjecthood. With the ideal objectification of the world, as temporally determinate retrospectively and prospectively, humans can vary their activity. They are not determined by a closed world (the past as present), and they can come to know that the nature of the past as present, though determining them, leaves open several options through the potentiality of the world: its openendedness (the future as present). This concrete potentiality of varying their activity provides for the possibility of becoming critical.

Human consciousness as an ideal objectification of the past in the present and the future in the present through the symbolic form is therefore functional and not an end in itself. It can lead to scientific inquiry, which involves an expanded human disposition to the openendedness of the world:

The critically transitive consciousness is characterized by depth in the interpretation of problems; by the substitutions of causal principles for
magical explanations; by the testing of one’s “findings” and by openness to revision; by the attempt to avoid distortion when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analyzing them; by refusing to transfer responsibility; by rejecting passive positions; by soundness of argumentation; by the practice of dialogue rather than polemics; by receptivity to the new for reasons beyond mere novelty and the good sense not to reject the old just because it is old—by accepting what is valid in both old and new. (1973, p. 18)

Consciousness is thus not a purely a mental state (a purely open world) nor a pure reflex of the material world (a purely closed world). It cannot be reduced to either aspect. It involves a critical attitude toward reality in which there is neither pure identity nor pure difference. It is a force of the world that permits humans to orient themselves toward the world as a prelude to praxis.

Praxis presupposes deliberation about the potentialities of the world as well as a questioning attitude toward the purpose of action. Choice becomes an integral part of being human as does transforming the world into a more human and more humane form. Education constitutes this process of enabling people—including the educator—to become self-determining beings both individually and collectively through having learners distance themselves from their immediate world via the problematization of their daily world and transforming it into a form more appropriate to their own nature as expansive beings.

FREIRE’S THEORY OF THE OPPRESSIVE NATURE OF THE REAL WORLD

This objectification (and concomitant ideal separation of subjects from the objective world) is all the more necessary because of an additional aspect of the world: its oppressive nature. In an oppressive situation, human subjects become objects: means to other peoples’ ends or extensions of the will of other people. In such a situation, there is no gap between subject and object since humans are objects.
The separation of subject and object thus does not only have an epistemological function but also a political function. In an oppressive situation, where people are treated as objects, the problematization of their immediate situation is the beginning step in the simultaneous process of opposing those who oppress them and their emergence as subjects.

In the Third World context, Freire’s linking of subjecthood to the proposition that education is necessarily a political act applies in many instances. If education is a process of enabling people to become subjects, or persons who determine their own lives individually and collectively, in an oppressive situation, education is a political act because it will be opposing those in power who are oppressing people. In many Third-World countries, people are indeed oppressed.

To understand properly Freire’s proposition that education is a political act, it is necessary to understand the extent of oppression in the Third World. In Guatemala, between 1954 and 1996, for instance, an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 Guatemalans were murdered and an additional million became internal refugees—with the help of the American terrorist organization the CIA. The latter aided in the overthrow of a democratic government in 1954 and the installation of a military dictatorship. A similar scenario played itself out in Brazil in 1964, when a military dictatorship was installed—again with the help of the American terrorist organization the CIA. It was at this time that Freire was jailed and then exiled. Freire, however, was fortunate; in Guatemala, some intellectuals, especially those at the University of San Carlos in Guatemala City, were kidnapped, some of whom became part of the “disappeared.”
Educators in such oppressive situations who attempt to contribute to having people become self-determining beings have found themselves to be targets of oppression because their endeavours are interpreted as political acts against the oppressors. However, this issue raises the question of the applicability of Freire’s philosophy to First-World conditions. If there were no connection between the Third World and the First World, the applicability of Freire’s theory would be more problematic. However, the connection is all too real. The United States is a dominant player in the region; in addition to the CIA, the United States has trained some of the most vicious armies in the world. For instance, it trained the Guatemalan army in counterinsurgency techniques, which included techniques on how to torture people. The American terrorist government has been instrumental in preventing human beings in Latin America (and elsewhere) from determining their own lives even within national capitalist limits. Hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans have been tortured and died—with the blessing of the American government. In such a situation, Freire’s dichotomy between an education that either treats human beings as subjects or as objects is understandable. Given that a major country in the First World is involved in the area, the applicability to the First World of Freire’s theory of subjecthood as well as his proposition that education is necessarily a political act seems promising.

Indeed, a personal case links the Third World to the First World. It involves an American and shows the need for some kind of revolutionary pedagogy even in the First World. Sister Dianna Ortiz, an Ursuline nun, went to Guatemala in 1987 (Ortiz, 2002). Her level of consciousness was what Freire would characterize as naïve; she believed that it was her religious calling to do that and that God would protect her. She worked with
the poor there. In November 1989 she was kidnapped and a black hood was placed over her head. Within a period of 24 hours, she was burnt about 100 times with a cigarette.

In addition to being burned, Sister Ortiz was also gang raped. While being gang raped, a man asked a certain Alejandro whether he wanted his turn. A man then realized that she was an American. In Spanish, but with an American accent, he ordered that she be released in his custody. In other words, an American was ordering her torturers what to do. Sister Ortiz feared that he was going to kill her, so she escaped from him.

It took Sister Ortiz perhaps a decade to become a subject again rather than a being who, frequently, wanted to end her existence. It also took her about a decade to come to the conclusion, after the constant dodges of the American bureaucracy, that her own government was partially responsible for the torture and death of more than 150,000 Guatemalans since 1954 as well as for her own torture and negation as a subject.

Despite Sister Ortiz’ transformation into a more critical subject, from a Freirean point of view she does not ask the logical question: How is it possible that a government, which claims to be democratic, could reduce human beings to mere objects on a systematic and large-scale basis. She does not link up her critique of American foreign policy to a critique of the treatment of human beings as objects in American society on a daily basis.

What could explain the treatment of human beings outside the physical borders of the United States but within the borders of American foreign policy as mere objects? There are some possible explanations, grounded in the nature of American society. Michael Sandel (1996) argues that before the American civil war, many artisans and independent farmers opposed slavery on the ground that its expansion would lead to their
conversion into employees, or what they considered to be part-time slaves. After the civil war, however, the labour movement gradually shifted its ideological basis, moving from opposition to the existence of the employer-employee relation as such to acceptance of control over their lives at work by employers. Emphasis shifted from production to distribution, with the slogan of a living wage. The American labour movement eventually became co-opted and did not question the legitimacy of the employer-employee relation as such. Of course, the ideologues of employers had a hand in this shift. Employers and their ideologues contended, as they do to this day, that the employer-employee relation was a voluntary contract (a relation of voluntary promises).

Is the daily life which characterizes the employer-employee relation a voluntary contract in the United States? Is it a relation between subjects and therefore a free relation? Or is it a relation between a subject—the employer—and many objects (the employees)?

In capitalist society, employees are, legally, not subjects but objects. David Ellerman (1992) contends that if electrodes were attached to employees first thing in the morning as they entered the workplace and removed when they left home, legally speaking, there would be little change. Legally, employees lose their status as persons when they become employees; they become objects to be used just like the computers and other means of production the employer purchases. They are, after all, costs of production.

Such a view is not just expressed by academics. Employers frequently imply that employees are objects to be used. For instance, substitute teachers for Winnipeg School Division No. 1, the largest school division in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, received a
renewal form for being placed on the substitute teacher roster in June 2003 for the 2003-2004 teaching year. On the form is written:

This will confirm that you have been placed on the Substitute Teacher Roster for the 2003-2004 School Year. You will be called on an as needed basis, and as such the Division cannot guarantee the number of days you will be utilized. [emphasis added]

The employer explicitly indicates that substitute teachers are to be used by the employer (the Division).

Substitute teachers, however, are not exceptional. Indeed, teachers in the same school division last year experienced an attempt by the employer to have their own representatives silenced by considering them to be extensions of the will of the employer; the employer threatened the executive of the Winnipeg Teachers Association with severe disciplinary measures if it published an insert in the Winnipeg Free Press on the issue of the Comprehensive Assessment Program (CAP), a testing device that the employer obliged elementary teachers to implement during the first months of the school year at the expense of their own teaching time.

Of course, the principle that employees are objects to be used by the employer extends to waiters, custodians, factory workers, restaurant workers, sales workers and so forth. As employees, people lose their personhood—legally—and become objects or beings who are extensions of the will of the employers.

Another example of the object-like status can be found on Main Street in Winnipeg. The following words are found on a sign across the street from one of Winnipeg’s cultural icons, the Museum of Manitoba: “Need workers? Call us and we will

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1 One term teacher had received this notice and found the reference to being utilized insulting. The reference is merely explicitly expressing what the employer-employee relation entails, regardless of the casual or permanent status of employees.
deliver them. 942-6559.” There is a market for workers in Canada. That market involves the treatment of human beings as commodities, as things to be bought and sold. The fact that a mediating agency, such as an employment agency, explicitly treats workers as things to be bought and sold, whereas most workers sell themselves (their capacity to work) does not alter the fact that they are commodities and thus objects to be bought and sold on the market. Nor does it alter the fact that once they are sold, they become the property of the employer; they become company time.

The extent to which human beings can be legally converted into objects can be seen by looking at a modern capitalist petrochemical factory in England:

The packer stands under the hopper spout at the end of the packing band. . . . A swift upward motion releases a measured hundredweight into the bag and onto the rollers. All in three seconds. . . . From here they roll to the loading bay where, at the ‘band end,’ they thud onto the shoulders of the two loaders. If the bags are going ‘to road’, the two men stack them three or five deep onto the back of a lorry. They catch the bags, turn and drop them. Catch, turn, drop . . . catch, turn, drop. . . . Every six seconds. Catch, turn, drop . . . The ‘band end’ cannot extend into an enclosed rail wagon so when going ‘to rail’ there’s a deflector which turns the bag onto your shoulder. You only have to catch and drop. But only one man can get into the door of a wagon so they take it in turns. Catch and drop . . . catch and drop . . . A hundredweight bag every three seconds. Warm bags that burn your shoulder; leaving it red raw. In the summer it’s stifling. Catch and drop . . . (Nichols & Beynon, 1977, p. 13-14)

The pressure to survive (remain competitive), even for a multinational, obliges representatives of capital to treat workers as blobs of labour time— with or without a human face.

There were 140 "donkey workers" and 40 "technical workers" in the factory. The donkey workers were controlled technically through the movement of the machinery,
which in turn was controlled by management. Management itself, through its foremen, also controlled these workers.

The technical workers were not really supervised in the sense that someone watched them constantly or controlled their movements in detail through technological processes. Looking at the technical workers and their level of autonomy, however, is instructive:

They [the technical workers] find it 'difficult to relax', they tell you that the 'thing about this job is that you spend half your life just looking for trouble'. They also tell of men who came to the job and thought it was a piece of cake, who sat around drinking tea, reading, falling asleep. But the job got back at them, the plant went off line and they left. (Nichols & Beynon, 1977, p. 19)

Those who tried to read when the plant was running well were criticized by foremen because they were not getting paid to read but--to work. After all, they were on "company time," and company time meant that they were not--persons, but mere workers.2

Many other illustrations of the principle that human beings are objects once they become company time could be given. Consider, for instance, the issue of whether voiding is company time or workers' time (Linder & Nygaard, 1998). In the United States, voiding is generally legally treated as a negative encroachment on company time. Human beings are hired by employers--to work, obviously. The need by workers to void is treated in various ways as a necessary evil. The extent to which workers, being organic beings, have had to suffer throughout the capitalist epoch because they have been treated, in one form or another, as pure labour time, is well expressed in the denial of the right to

2The factory had a union, and there was a collective agreement. That the latter did not alter the essential relation should be obvious. Management permitted job rotation and was versed in the most up-to-date managerial ideology concerning the humanizing of the workplace. For the view that collective agreements do not alter the fundamental subordination of workers to employers, see Glasbeek (1982).
void on "company time." Employees, even quite recently, have had to suffer the requirement that they "hold it in." Women workers in one factory had to wear diapers since the employer would not let them urinate. Elementary school teachers, the majority of them women, have an inadequate number of assistants (due, undoubtedly, to restrictions in finances--monetary and hence quantitative considerations), so that many either have to line up their students up and have them wait while they void or defecate, or they simply "hold it in." There are negative physiological consequences for "holding it in," especially for women, but this issue does not receive much notice by most intellectuals, who do not suffer from such things. These "little" things count in the struggle against the employer's attempt to reduce workers to mere labour or "company" time.

Some personal Canadian examples of how human beings are treated as objects when they become employees will further illustrate the issue.

When I was doing my practicum for a library technician diploma at the library at the University of Calgary, I told a library technician working there that the structure of the library personnel seemed to be quite hierarchical and dictatorial. She commented that at least her supervisor was a benevolent dictator and that she would prefer to have a benevolent dictator than a mean one. She was conscious of the unequal power relations between herself (and her fellow employees) and those above her. Of course, she would never have said that to her superior; she probably would be disciplined for "insubordination". Indeed, the issue of the hierarchical nature of work in the First World is not a topic for explicit discussion; it is a part of what Freire calls the culture of silence. Whether human beings can be subjects in such a situation is not discussed; whether human beings are, necessarily, treated as objects is never directly discussed.
Another example of how human beings are treated as objects was when I was working as a library technician for School District No. 57, in Prince George, B.C. One of the library clerks, Nasib, input data into the computer database in order to convert the catalogue record from hard copy on cards into the computer database. The project had already been reduced from four staff members to two staff members due to budgetary constraints. To maintain productivity and ensure that the project would not be further eroded, her superior (and mine as well) told her that she could not talk to anyone while inputting data despite the fact that Nasib was both sociable and had been talking for around three years while working on the project. A few days later, Nasib was working behind me while crying. Being the union steward for the Board office, I asked her whether she would want me to phone the union office. She replied that she did not want that—-that the problem of her not being allowed to talk was personal.

In Freirean terms, Nasib, like many other employees, shared in a culture of silence; there was no public voicing of her exploitation and oppression.

Being the union steward, and not appreciating the post-modernist turn of respecting multiple identities, which presumably includes respecting a culture of silence, I called the union office. The union representative called Nasib. Nasib, however, called our superior, claiming that I had breached her right of privacy. Since I had filed a union grievance against our superior almost a year before (it had still not been settled), my superior was delighted to find an excuse to hall me in and criticize me for breaching Nasib’s so-called right of privacy. Nasib did later regret having complained to our supervisor (superior); she herself at least was becoming conscious of the power of
management in a particular workplace and how her own superior treats human beings as objects.

One final example. When I came to Winnipeg, I worked in Dafoe Library at the University of Manitoba on a project for a few months. One of the workers there complained of racism within the department. One day, on the bulletin board in the staff lounge, there was posted a request for signatures for an ombudsman of racism. I showed it to that person. The person wanted to circulate it to all staff. That person and I signed it, and the person circulated it around the department, trying to obtain signatures. Only a handful, including us, signed the sheet. It may be concluded from the lack of signatures that there was little racism within the department. However, the person told me that many did feel that there was racism within the department, but that they were afraid to sign it out of fear of retaliation from their superiors. The object-like status of employees prevented human beings from opposing racism.

Hence, the employer-employee relation presupposes the treatment of human beings, systematically, as objects. In such a situation, educators who try either to stay neutral or to integrate students into the social system (with minor improvements) in effect function to negate the educational process. If education is a process of self-determination, then real educators need to expose the treatment of human beings as objects by posing problems derived from the ordinary lives of the students. Simultaneously, educators need to have those who are oppressed expose that oppression to the educators through dialogue so that both can come to understand the situation in which both live so that they can both engage in praxis as subjects and not as objects. The culture of silence must be broken if human beings are to be self-determining beings through the educational process.
Freire’s concept of the culture of silence and the need for rupturing that silence applies to the First World just as much as to the Third World. Indeed, a culture of silence exists concerning the power of employers as a class in general in our society. For instance, I substitute in Winnipeg School Division No. 1 (WSD No. 1) and was on the ad hoc committee as a representative. I have seen how substitutes are treated in general and in particular. I wrote several letters to the editor of the Winnipeg Teachers’ Association (WTA), two of which were published. The first set up the question of whether it was the Winnipeg School Division No. 1 as Winnipeg School Division No. 1 (a specific employer) who intimidated substitute teachers, or whether it was Winnipeg School Division No. 1 as an employer, that is to say, whether the intimidation was a function of WSD No. 1 being a specific employer or whether it was a function of WSD No. 1 being an employer, any employer. In my second letter, since no one, including the executive members of the WTA, responded to the first letter, I indicated that in all probability substitute teachers felt intimidated not because Winnipeg School Division No. 1 was the employer but because it was an employer. Subsequent letters to the editor attempted (among other things) to differentiate three different sets of employees—teachers in general, other substitute teachers and non-teaching employees. I attempted to differentiate the nature of teachers as employees from other employees, on the one hand, and the nature of substitute teachers as employees from teachers as employees on the other. All subsequent letters were suppressed—the culture of silence was imposed this time explicitly through an employees’ organization. When I queried whether my letters would be published, I eventually received a letter. The letter contains the following:
Dear Fred:  

**Re: Request for Information about Letters to the Editor**

I am sorry for not responding to your request for information re the above. I wanted to discuss your draft and my response with the WTA Table Officers at our January 16th meeting.

Your last two submissions to our newsletter have been shared with the WTA Administrative Assistant, WTA Newsletter Editor, WTA Business Agent, Vice-President and Table Officers. The general consensus of those who have read your material has been not to publish it in our newsletter.

The articles you have submitted do not discuss teachers, school boards or their relationship in any clear direct fashion. Your December 20th letter tries to describe the relationship between employers and employees in non-educational situations. Your last sentence attempts to link your example to teachers. This article is related in some way to the others you have submitted, but again the connection to our members and the Board is very weak. Much of what you have written may be appropriate for a university paper on labour relations, but not our newsletter.

I encourage you to write about the WTA and/or the WSD and their relationship if that was your ultimate goal. If you wish to have material published your content needs to discuss issues that directly impact on our membership and the Division at present. In writing your letters you also need to be aware of the fact that the WTA will not publish material that could put you or the Association into any type of legal difficulty.

I hope this has addressed your questions. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have on this issue or any other.

Sincerely,

Dave Najduch,
President

In reply, I wrote that teachers are supposed to expand the horizons of their students. To restrict the content of the newsletter to the specific relationships at present between the WTA and WSD No. 1 was tantamount to censorship and unduly restrictive. To determine the relationship between the WSD and the set of employees represented by the WTA, it is necessary to determine the general relationship between employees and employers and differentiate what is specific to the employer-employee relation between
WSD No. 1 and the members of the WTA. The culture of silence concerning the nature of the employer-employee relation as such, and whether employees as a class face employers as a class points to the relevance of Freire’s concentration on the relation of subject and object—even in the First World. An organization of teachers cannot even face the fact that employers as such possess power, with a particular school division being merely an instance of such power.

Freire’s insistence that education involves equality among subjects also serves as a warning to would-be educators (and revolutionaries) who assume that their knowledge provides a ground for obliging others to accept their theories and conclusions. For example, Freire casts suspicion, usually not on the use of experts, but the imposition of experts. As Antonio Faundez points out, refrigeration was proposed as a solution to preserving increased food production (necessary to solve the problem of malnutrition) in Equatorial Guinea. Freire, in his response to Faundez’s example, criticizes the use of experts independently of the knowledge of the people:

The organization in question did not ask the population anything. It brought with it the answer of technology in the form of refrigeration, of a refrigerator! If they had asked, they would have discovered how the population had in the course of time in their struggle for self-preservation found answers to some of their basic questions. (Freire & Faundez, 1989, pp. 88-89)

Freire sees that experts, in their arrogance concerning the knowledge base of the oppressed, will simply discount their experiences and impose their own scientific understanding of the world. Since, however, scientific understanding is a means to an end, and not an end in itself, it is understandable and justifiable for Freire to demand that scientists and other experts engage in dialogue with the oppressed: their raison d’être, ultimately, is subordinate to human ends. Dialogue may not be the only solution to the
problem of the relation between experts and scientists, on the one hand, and the
oppressed on the other, but it is certainly a necessary one. Educators, as a certain kind of
expert, need to listen to students in order to provide them with the means to become self-
determining beings.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

One could, of course, still respond with the question: What else is to be done
besides dialoguing with students? In the first place, what needs to be done is to make the
question of the employer-employee relation as such part of public discourse. Every
opportunity to expose the issue needs to be exploited. Discussion of the issue must not be
limited to the particular relation between a set of employees and their employer. In the
second place, it is necessary to recognize that different people have different means
available to them to address the issue because of their specific situation; there is, in other
words, no universal policy that can be formulated a priori. A universal policy is to be a
result and not a point of departure. For example, a professor of science teachers could
bring out, in her classes, the political forces which inhibit the integration of scientific
processes into the curriculum. Apple (1990), for instance, argues that most curricula,
including scientific curricula, exclude conflict. One set way is presented as the way—a
closed world which contradicts the open world of human beings and, indeed, the open
world of class struggle. She would have students inquire into the possible resistances to
the creation and implementation of a science curriculum based more on process than
product. Moreover, she could have the students consider the connection between the costs
of providing an adequate science education that emphasizes processes and
experimentation and the costs of learning science through theory and books. Since
students, for the most part, become commodities later in life, the costs of producing the specific commodities which they will offer on the market (their capacity to work for an employer) are hardly irrelevant in relation to the creation of curricula. She would have her students consider to what extent considerations of cost influence the writing of science curricula. Simultaneously, she would not confine her activities to the classroom. Such efforts, although necessary at the micro level, are insufficient and need to be linked to wider connections with others outside the classroom, especially those connected to organizations connected to teachers as employees, such as teachers’ associations. Of course, others who are situated in different circumstances would have to address the specific issues which they face while attempting to connect them to the wider world. What is required, in other words, is a simultaneous effort to address the immediate world of the teacher activist with the wider world in which she finds herself.

CONCLUSION

Freire’s proposition that education is a political act applies to both the Third World and the First World—despite the dogma of judges and the capitalist legal system in general throughout both worlds. When people are treated as objects systematically and on a massive scale, as they are in both the Third World and in the First World, real education becomes very difficult. It threatens those in power who oppress people, and the latter’s interests oppose attempts to enable people to become self-determining beings individually and collectively, which constitutes the essence of education. Freire’s proposition that education is a political act, his theory of human nature and his theory of the nature of the oppressive world in which we live therefore provide a basis for a powerful indictment of the forces which real educators face when they attempt to educate
people. Education requires the formation of subjects, and the formation of subjects in an oppressive society constitutes a political act.
References


Footnotes

¹One term teacher had received this notice and found the reference to being utilized insulting. The reference is merely explicitly expressing what the employer-employee relation entails, regardless of the casual or permanent status of employees.

²The factory had a union, and there was a collective agreement. That the latter did not alter the essential relation should be obvious. Management permitted job rotation and was versed in the most up-to-date managerial ideology concerning the humanizing of the workplace. For the view that collective agreements do not alter the fundamental subordination of workers to employers, see Glasbeek (1982).