CHAPTER 11

CHALLENGING EDUCATION, CREATING ALLIANCES

The Legacy of Paulo Freire in the 21st Century

Key words and themes: the limits of empiricism, communication as dialogue, the culture of silence, gender and subjectivity, the high-modernising paradigm, identification with the aggressor, the community high school movement, codification and decoding, democracy and the possibility of multiculturalism, race and racism, the experience of ambiguity, anti-dialogical sectarianism, educacao popular, saper popular, poder popular, transforming the school system, integration or self-determination, citizens or degraded consumers.


INTRODUCTION

When Alex Downie invited me to contribute a retrospective piece on Paulo Freire for this edition of The Scottish Journal of Community Work and Development, I was glad of the opportunity to reflect again on the significance of Freire’s life and work. The immediate context is, of course, his death on 2 May 1997, at the age of 75. He is no longer with us in the flesh, and in that sense his work is completed. I can think of people who will be glad he is gone, and others for whom his departure, like his earlier presence, will be a matter of indifference. A prominent British professor of education once asked me why we should pay attention to a Latin American theorist. I was so astonished that I was unable to formulate a reply.

We in Britain now live in a post-imperial society recently dubbed (with unintended irony) ‘Cool Britannia’, in a technocratic period in which empiricism has come to dominate not only the physical sciences, where it is an appropriate orientation, but also the social sciences, where it has largely succeeded in displacing the perspectives offered by philosophy, ethics, theology, literature, history, psychoanalysis, feminism and the more imaginative versions of sociology, as a means of understanding human society and the human situation.

Not that Paulo Freire devalues the significance of empirical evidence. On the contrary, he refers repeatedly to the empirical dimensions of reality, which he regards as real and knowable through inter-subjective investigation. Freire is no subjectivist, no mystic, and no post-modernist either. He differs from the still dominant empiricist paradigm by virtue of his old-fashioned belief that there are
dimensions of being human – ideas, values, cultural practices, feelings, ways of being, ways of relating – that are not reducible to empirical considerations alone.

Receipt of Alex’s letter and subsequent conversations with him reminded me of an important international event which, to the best of my knowledge, went unreported in the academic journals of Cooling Britannia. This was the Institute, or Conference, held in honour of Paulo Freire’s 70th birthday at the New School for Social Research in New York in December 1991. This event, to which my wife Gerri Kirkwood and I contributed, was illuminating cross-culturally and intellectually, and it had been my intention to write an account of it for publication. Pressure of other tasks had led me to set this project aside in an unfinished state, and it lay in a folder together with the original records of the event itself, until conversations with ALP workers Stan Reeves and Vernon Galloway shortly after Paulo Freire’s death reminded me of its existence.

It was suggested by Stan that we should hold a wake for Freire. We agreed that a forward-looking celebration of his work might be more fitting, but the idea of a wake was not entirely inappropriate, if it could be managed in such a way as to convey the sense of a creative rising from the dead, like that of Tim in The Ballad of Finnegans Wake. In Freire’s case, it would be his ideas, values, and methods that would rise, into the new millennium, surviving his own mortality, just as he himself gave new life to the ideas of Aristotle, Christ, Hegel, Marx, de Chardin, Fromm, Buber, Mounier, and Kosik.

The title of the present paper incorporates that of the 1991 conference, which was Challenging education, creating alliances.

REPORT AND REFLECTIONS

Gerri and I were met on arrival in Manhattan by a representative of the conference steering committee who helped us make contact with our hosts Nancy Mohr and John Dichter. Nancy and Alan made our visit a pleasure, providing enjoyable meals, taking us for walks, and discussing the difficulties and achievements of the alternative high school movement, which forms an integral part of public school provision in New York. Alan and Nancy both worked as principals of these schools and we were fortunate enough to visit one of them.

We learned that Freire events had been arranged throughout the week in the New School for Social Research, in the City University of New York (CUNY) and in the private houses of senior academics. Our friend Ira Shor had arranged invitations for us to attend these events. It was good to meet Ira after corresponding with him for many years. It was also a pleasure to meet Paulo and Nita again: they had stayed with us in Edinburgh in the late 1980s during Freire’s visit to the Adult Learning Projects in Edinburgh and Dundee organised by Fraser Patrick.

Dialogue or monologue?

The first event, under the title Extension or communication revisited (referring to the second part of Freire’s early book Education the Practice of Freedom, first