

# The False Consciousness of “Consciousness Raising”

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In the early 1960's, before the military coup, Paulo Freire and his collaborators experimented with a new method of literacy education in the Northeast of Brazil. The basic idea was simple: Teaching literacy was not to be an isolated activity but part of a larger broadening of the intellectual horizons of the previously illiterate. An important aspect was political. The illiterate were to learn reading and writing at the hand of topics (Freire called these “generative themes”) that concerned everyday experience. For the impoverished and rural proletariat of the Northeast this was to a high degree an experience of deprivation, exploitation, and oppression. The educational purpose was to combine “alphabetization” with inculcating an awareness of the facts of oppression, as well as an understanding of the forces (economic, political, social-structural) that supposedly caused these facts. This political awareness, rather than literacy for its own sake, was what Freire was primarily interested in. His method was thus, in essence, one of political education—more precisely, of education for political activity. After 1964, not surprisingly, the military regime put a stop to the program, forcing Freire to leave the country.

From a purely pedagogical viewpoint, Freire's method has shown itself to be very successful. It has demonstrated that adults of average intelligence can be taught literacy in about six weeks. The clue to success is in the motivation. People learning to read and write around topics that relate directly to their everyday experience will do so more easily than if they use texts having nothing to do with their own lives. The learning process is further stimulated if

results are directly related to actions desired by the learner—in this instance, political actions designed to alleviate his overall condition.

Freire called his method *concientização*—literally, “making conscious.” This name has caught on internationally—as *concientización* in Spanish-speaking Latin America, as *Bewusstmachung* in the West German Left, and (a very apt translation) as “consciousness raising” in the United States. In most current usage of the term the original educational context has been left behind. Rather, “consciousness raising” is the method by which any oppressed group is taught to understand its condition and (in a unity of theory and praxis) to be activated politically for the revolutionary transformation of this condition. In its Left context, “consciousness raising” is the cognitive preparation for revolutionary action.

Even if one has great sympathy with Freire's original intentions, and also concedes that there are situations in the world calling for revolution and requiring something like revolutionary consciousness, the concept of “consciousness raising,” as currently used, implies some highly questionable assumptions. To wit, it implies philosophical error and political irony.

Whose consciousness is supposed to be raised, and *who* is supposed to do the raising? The answer is clear wherever the term is used in political rhetoric: It is the consciousness of “the masses” that must be raised, and it is the “vanguard” that will do the job. But who are these people? “The masses” are, of course, whatever sociological category has been assigned the role of the revolutionary proletariat by the ideologists of the putative revolution—industrial workers (in countries where this particular assignment seems plausible), peasants, landless rural laborers, even white-collar “wage slaves” or students. The “vanguard” consists of the ideologists—typically intellectuals, who may

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be defined for our purposes as individuals whose major preoccupation is the production and distribution of theories. Such people have usually gone through a long period of formal education and usually come from the upper middle or upper classes of their societies. It may therefore be said: "Consciousness raising" is a project of higher-class individuals directed at a lower-class population. Moreover, the consciousness at issue is the consciousness that the lower-class population has of *its own situation*. Thus a crucial assumption is that lower-class people do not understand their own situation, that they are in need of enlightenment on the matter, and that this service can be provided by selected higher-class individuals.

Concretizing the concept in this way reveals that it is not necessarily linked to the political Left. In the United States, for example, a left-wing ideologist may be convinced that he understands the real interests of the working class much better than most workers do. But a right-wing politician or a middle-of-the-road liberal social worker may be animated by precisely the same conviction in dealing with other clienteles. "They don't understand what is good for them" is the clue formula for all "consciousness raising," of whatever ideological or political coloration—and "we do understand" is the inevitable corollary. Put differently, the concept allocates different cognitive levels to "them" and to "us"—and it assigns to "us" the task of raising "them" to the higher level.

One philosophical assumption lies in what we might call the hierarchical view of consciousness. There is something medieval about this, rooted perhaps in the old Scholastic notion of the "chain of being"—the mind of God is at one end, that of the dumb animals at the other, and in between are we humans, carefully stratified in terms of proximity to either pole. The divine pole is hardly visible in the universe of discourse under consideration, but the animal pole certainly is. Even Freire himself, a man reputed to be personally unpretentious, says about the consciousness of peasants (in his rather unfortunate essay "Cultural Action"): "This level of consciousness . . . corresponds to such a dehumanized reality that existence in it, for men, means living like animals. It is often impossible for such men to recognize the differences between themselves and, say, horses." One may wonder about the ethnographic data on which such an assertion is based. But there is no ambiguity about the implications for the "consciousness raising" program: Someone, whose consciousness is on a less than human level, is raised to the level of humanity by someone else—who, by definition, is more human already.

There is, of course, an affinity between "consciousness raising" and the Marxist concept of "false consciousness." There, too, the intellectual identified with the "vanguard" lays claim to a cognitively privileged status: He and only he has reality by the short-

est possible hair. The cognitively superior individual is, by virtue of his consciousness, at a higher level of freedom, and thus of humanity. It cannot be our task here to pursue these conceptions to their roots, but it is possible to make some fairly simple observations.

If the hierarchical view of consciousness simply referred to levels of information on specific topics, there would be no quarrel with it. One might stipulate (even if one sometimes wonders) that bourgeois intellectuals as a group know more about economics than peasants as a group. If the process of imparting information from the first group to the second is called "consciousness raising," there would be nothing more wrong with the term than a certain maladroitness in choice of words. But the term, of course, is not that innocent. It implies the aforementioned cognitive and indeed ontological hierarchy. For that, however, there is no evidence whatever—at least not for anyone who has not performed an act of faith. Intellectuals may be superior to peasants in their information and perspectives on *specific topics*. If one wishes to extend this superiority to information and perspectives *in general*, plausibility disappears, for peasants very clearly have far superior information and perspectives on *other topics*—such as plant and animal life, soil conditions, the weather, and a multitude of manual skills and material artifacts (not to mention the intricacies of kinship and the true significance of dreams).

It is *not* possible to claim intrinsic superiority for either the intellectual's or the peasant's body of information. Furthermore, even if it were possible, superiority of information is not *human* superiority. To assume the contrary exhibits the most obviously self-serving myopia of those who have invested their lives in gathering and organizing information, and who then claim that this activity, more than any other, defines what is truly human. The peasant who has even a vestigial relationship to the mythology of his tradition can easily turn the tables in this argument: It is the soil that gives life, he may say, and to be human is to adhere to the soil.

The philosophical error implied by the concept of "consciousness raising" is closely related to its political irony. Those who employ the concept usually see themselves as genuine democrats, close to the throbbing life of "the masses," and emphatically "anti-*élitist*." In the same essay in which Freire tells us that peasants cannot distinguish themselves from horses (on the very next page, no less), he denounces the allegedly reformist activities of the higher classes: "The more representatives of the *élites* engage in paternalistic action, the more generous they consider themselves. The practice of this false generosity . . . requires men's misery, their alienation, their docility, their resignation, their silence." It is hard to imagine a more "*élitist*" program

(and, for that matter, a more "paternalistic" one) than one based on the assumption that a certain group of people is dehumanized to the point of animality, is unable either to perceive this condition or rescue itself from it, and requires the (presumably selfless) assistance of others for both the perception and the rescue operation. The "paternalistic" social worker perhaps has a slight moral advantage over the revolutionary intellectual, because he at least does not delude himself that *his* consciousness embodies the true will of "the masses."

The critique of the concept of "consciousness raising" is important because it may serve as an introduction to a very different approach to the relationship of theory and policy. Such an approach begins with a *postulate of the equality of all empirically available worlds of consciousness.*

Every human being lives in a world. That is, he is conscious of reality in terms of specific cognitive structures that give cohesion and meaning to the ongoing flux of his experiences. No individual has a world identical with that of any other, but human groups do live together in shared worlds, and indeed society would not be possible otherwise. Thus the world of a middle-class intellectual differs greatly from that of a peasant, and so do the consciousnesses of these two social types. It is possible to argue that the one consciousness is superior, or on a higher level, than the other in terms of specific contents. In other words, people know different things, and one body of knowledge may be more useful in a given situation than another. It is also possible to make moral judgments concerning different worlds and consciousnesses. For instance, one might propose that the intellectual's consciousness is superior in compassion but that the peasant's is on a higher level of personal integration (peasants, that is, tend to be callously indifferent to the suffering of outsiders, while intellectuals are a notoriously neurotic lot). Such moral evaluations, however, are debatable. How is one to decide on the weight of these two traits, compassion and integrity, in a hierarchy of consciousness? One thing is clear: No objective, scientific analysis of empirical data will help in making a decision.

Moral judgments apart, every human world must be deemed, in principle, as being equal to every other human world in its access to reality. Perhaps one might want to modify this proposition with respect to very young children or mentally deficient individuals. The proposition nevertheless holds for any world that gives meaning to the lives of any collectivity of adults. In the nineteenth century, in sharp opposition to the Hegelian metaphysics of progress, the historian Leopold von Ranke insisted that "every age is immediate to God." Thus Western civilization could not view itself as the pinnacle of human history—nor, in principle, could any other civilization or era. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same pro-

position may be made against any attempt to order different human worlds hierarchically: "Every consciousness is immediate to reality."

On the level of meaning, every "inhabitant" of a world has an immediate access to it which is superior to that of any "noninhabitant." Thus the peasant knows his world far better than any outsider ever can. Now this does *not* mean that the outsider may not have information and perspectives bearing on the peasant's world which are not in the peasant's possession. Such information and perspectives may be transmitted, conceivably to the peasant's benefit. What is involved in this kind of transmission is the "exportation" of the cognitive contents from one world to another. What *may* be involved, moreover, is that eventually one world swallows up the other: Empirically, this will mean that the "inhabitants" of one world impose their particular modes of perception, evaluation, and action on those who previously had organized their relationship to reality differently. This kind of "cognitive imperialism," as one might call it, is a crucially important component of modernization. The process may be welcomed or deplored. But it is not very helpful to call it "consciousness raising." A better term would be *conversion*, and a very good way of understanding anyone claiming to raise the consciousness of other people is to see him as a *missionary*.

If one society "converts" the other to its order of priorities, there will be a shift in the contents of consciousness. People will become attentive to one set of data (such as the data of science and technology), and they will "forget" another set (such as the data obtained from mystical exercises or from other forms of "irrational" intuition). Again, the term "consciousness raising" is misleading when applied to this change. It immediately implies a value judgment. To designate a rearrangement of cognitive contents more objectively, one may call it a *trade-off*. There will probably be different opinions as to who made the better bargain. Put simply, no one is "more conscious" than anyone else; different individuals are conscious of different things. Therefore there is no such phenomenon as *conscientização*, unless one is reviving someone who's just been hit over the head.

The moral implication of this critique of the concept of "consciousness raising" is exceedingly simple: It is tantamount to a lesson in humility. The political implication is essentially an injunction to be skeptical of any outsider's claim to superior knowledge of an insider's world. What people say about their own social reality must always be taken with great seriousness—not only because this is morally right, but because failure to do so may lead to great and sometimes catastrophic practical consequences. The area of development policy is full of cases in which costly disaster could have been avoided if the policy-makers had paid less at-

tention to alleged experts brought in from the outside—and correspondingly more attention to what the insiders in question had to say.

All this has to do with what we might call “cognitive respect.” It is an attitude based on the postulate of the equality of worlds of consciousness. The term leads to another—that of “cognitive participation.” One of the most-quoted maxims of sociology is the statement by W.I. Thomas: “If people define a situation as real, it is real in its consequence.” All action in society depends upon specific “definitions of the situation.” A crucial question, therefore, is: “Who does the defining?” Every “definition of the situation” implies specific theoretical presuppositions, a frame of reference, and in the last resort a view of reality. Once a situation has been defined in certain terms a number of practical options are foreclosed. It is a very limited notion of participation to let an élite define a situation in complete disregard of the ways in which this situation is *already defined* by those who live in it—and then to allow the latter a voice in the decisions made on the basis of the preordained definition.

An individual, by virtue of his power or his status, can say to a group of people that what they need right now is to repair the roofs of their houses, and he can then ask them to vote on different methods of doing this job. It is quite possible, however, that this group of people is perfectly satisfied with their roofs, and greatly concerned with their ancestral shrines. Does the individual with the power and the status allow them to propose a different order of priorities—different not only in terms of perceptions but of values? If he does, whatever one calls the resultant process, it will be participation of a more fundamental and ample sort.

Two issues having large significance for the methodology of the social sciences are also relevant to understanding any human situation. These are the issues of “ethnocentrism” and “value-freedom.”

“Ethnocentrism” is a pejorative term, coined in the early years of this century by William Graham Sumner. Since then it has acquired wide usage also outside the social sciences. The term refers, of course, to an attitude that is narrowly bound by the cultural or social biases of an individual. It has long been a truism of social-science training that this attitude is bad for the scientist; largely in conjunction with the diffusion of liberal ideals of tolerance, it is now widely assumed that the attitude is bad for anyone. The good social scientist, and by extension the good liberal citizen, will constantly seek to overcome his “ethnocentric” prejudices in dealing with people or situations outside his own sociocultural background.

In the area of development the label of “ethnocentrism” is commonly used to denigrate the imposition of Western perspectives and Western values on non-

Western situations. For example, for a long time American political scientists tended to view the political side of development as a progressive approximation to Western institutions of representative democracy—the closer a society could be placed to the latter, the more developed it was pronounced to be. This viewpoint has been criticized in recent years (vigorously so from within the discipline of American political science) as an ideological expression of “ethnocentrism.” Of all social scientists it is probably the anthropologists who have for the longest time and with the strongest emphasis placed the battle against “ethnocentrism” at the heart of professional training. The anthropologist must rigorously discipline himself to suspend his sociocultural bias and to immerse himself, in complete openness, in the alien situation he is studying.

As far as development is concerned, however, the injunction against “ethnocentrism” has recently taken another turn: It is no longer just a methodological caveat against the imposition of Western frames of reference, but is, in addition, a moral attack on Western values as such. The difference between these two variants of anti-“ethnocentrism” must be clarified.

Consider an extreme example. Suppose an anthropologist is studying a cannibalistic society. In order to understand this society he must try to suspend or control his own horror and moral outrage, at least for the duration of the study. Unless he does this he will be incapable of accomplishing the art of understanding. He knows that he could participate in a cannibalistic ritual only by fighting down intense nausea, and that he would be plagued with terrible guilt feelings afterwards—but he must refrain from projecting such nausea or guilt onto the actual participants. Needless to say, this does *not* mean the anthropologist must cultivate moral approval of the practice, recommend it to others, or enthusiastically join in it. But now suppose that the same anthropologist is called upon to contribute to the formation of development policy in this particular society. Suppose further that the nationalist leadership of that society is quite willing to build cannibalism into the development plan (perhaps for the purposes of population control?). Is the anthropologist meekly to assent to this, in the name of anti-“ethnocentrism”? Is he perhaps even to express a sense of inferiority about his Western soft-heartedness, and admiration for the robustness of the other society’s moral code?

Actually, the example is not that extreme. The Third World today is blessed with a number of development strategies that calmly include (implicitly or explicitly) the sacrifice of large numbers of human beings, be it by direct violence or by policies that deliberately refrain from alleviating suffering. Criticisms of these strategies are routinely turned back by negative reference to Western “ethnocentrism.” If the strategies are by right-wing regimes,

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the critics are labeled “bleeding-heart Western liberals.” If it is left-wing regimes that are engaged in the “cannibalism,” the critics are denounced for their “Western bourgeois morality.” In both instances the anti-“ethnocentric” proposition will be that “there is a different attitude to the value of individual life in society X.” This proposition is put forth not only as an empirically valid description but as a moral justification.

Some basic confusions are involved in this expansion of the notion of “ethnocentrism.” Most basically there is no ready nexus between methodology and morality: To accept a fact as empirically existent is by no means to accept it as morally right. Within the moral universe of discourse, furthermore, it is not consistent to apply Western values to one set of facts and denounce such application as “ethnocentric” in relation to other facts. For example, one cannot quiver with moral indignation at exploitation of the peasantry in society Y but reject as “ethnocentric” Western bias any indignation about mass executions in society Z. If “ethnocentrism” is bad in the realm of moral judgment, the only proper attitude toward *both* situations is moral acceptance of the fact that these people just happen to have different values.

Western civilization has produced historically unprecedented values concerning human rights, human dignity, and human freedom. These values are today at the heart of *all* politically relevant ideologies of development and liberation. If it is “ethnocentric” to adhere to these values, we would suggest that one be “ethnocentric” with enthusiasm. The currently fashionable denigration of Western values is as intellectually confused as it is morally distasteful. To hold values, however, means to engage in moral judgments. If one believes that human beings are entitled to certain fundamental rights simply by virtue of being human (a Western value *par excellence*), then one is morally constrained to condemn situations in which these rights are denied. If, on the other hand, such moral judgments are deemed impermissible, then they will be impermissible in all cases—and, logically, the only political attitude possible will be one devoid of any morality. Such an attitude, we would contend, is tantamount to dehumanization.

“Cognitive respect,” then, means that one takes

with utmost seriousness the way in which others define reality. It does *not* mean that one makes no moral distinctions among these definitions. Similarly, “cognitive participation” means that one tries to safeguard the right of others to codefine those aspects of reality that are relevant to policy. It does *not* mean that one accords the same moral weight (and, if one has the power, the same political support) to the definition of the cannibals and of those who would do away with cannibalism. Put simply: To understand is *not* to choose, but to accept as facts the choices of others. To act politically is to choose—and that means, whether one sees this or not, to choose between moral alternatives. Such choice, when there is power behind it, inevitably means *imposing* some of one’s values upon others.

The intrinsic relations among theory, policy, and morality may be further clarified by a consideration of the concept of “value-freeness.” This concept was coined in Germany by Max Weber at about the same time that Sumner was teaching his American students not to be “ethnocentric,” and there was a similar intention behind it. The ideal of “value-freeness” is that the scientific observer of human affairs should subdue his own values for the sake of understanding. It is virtually identical with the notion that science should be objective.

In Weber’s time there was an intense controversy over this matter, most of it centering on the question of whether “value-freeness” was possible in the first place. In American social science there has been a reiteration of the controversy in recent years, most of it based on misinterpretations of Weber and most of it marked by a lack of methodological sophistication. One interesting aspect of the recent debates is that the *same* people who have rejected “value-freeness” as an ideal for social scientists have also been exhorting the latter to divest themselves of their Western “ethnocentrism”—a rather remarkable contradiction. This cannot be the place to review either controversy, but a few basic clarifications might be useful.

“Value-freeness” is an ideal for theoretical understanding. It does *not* imply (and was never intended by Weber to imply) that the social scientist who aspires to it is himself free of values, is unaware of

the values operative in the situation he is studying, or has the notion that one can engage in policies devoid of value consequences. To the extent that all these implications have been falsely deduced from the term, it is perhaps poorly chosen. In essence "value-freeness" means that one tries to perceive social reality apart from one's hopes and fears. This does not mean that one has no hopes or fears, nor does it mean that one refrains from acting to realize what one hopes for or to avert what one fears.

The value-free analysis of situations pertinent to development means that one tries to understand, even if that understanding is contrary to one's wishes. It especially means that one tries to gain a detached view of the probable consequences of one's favorite policies—including the probable unintended consequences. It also means that one carefully observes the interaction between values and facts, regardless of whether one adheres to the values in question. In all this "value-freeness" pertains to the theoretical attitude; it cannot pertain to action. One may aspire to value-free science; value-free policy is an absurdity.

The recent controversy about "value-freeness" has to a large extent been an exercise in shadowboxing. The real debate has been about something else—to wit, the question of who is served politically by the social scientist, and who *should* be served. In the United States revelations about Project Camelot and utilization of the social sciences in "counterinsurgency" research have brought this question into sharp focus. But it is a moral rather than a methodological question, and it would be helpful if it were dealt with as such. It is a moral, not a methodological, principle that a social scientist is responsible for the political uses to which his findings are put. If, in a given situation, one says that social scientists should support the revolution rather than support those trying to suppress it, one is making a moral judgment rather than taking a philosophical position on the possibilities of scientific understanding.

In the area of development a social scientist may be propelled by his values in different directions. He may want to advocate socialism, to search for capitalist alternatives, perhaps to find methods that will resist modernization and preserve traditional ways of life. Given favorable circumstances, he may want to engage in any number of actions that will foster these value commitments. However, his greatest usefulness qua social scientist is going to be the calmer business of clarification. Probably the most useful statements he can make will be in an "if/then" form: "If your development policy is based on such-and-

such values, *then* these are some of the likely consequences." Or: "If you take action A, *then* you are implicitly choosing value B over the alternative value C." Or: "If you take this action, *then* you should be aware of these particular side effects that you did not originally intend or foresee." Such statements are, if you will, value-neutral—but they are not value-blind. Nor do they preclude the addendum: "This is all I can tell you as a social scientist—but here is what I believe you ought to do, given that both you and I adhere to value C." Or: "If you do this—give me a gun, I want to join you." Or, for that matter: "I regret that, for reasons of conscience, I must herewith submit my resignation—and I've already given a copy of my report to the opposition."

"Cognitive respect," therefore, is a category very close to that of "value-freeness." It is, as it were, a theoretical virtue. "Cognitive participation," however, is a political rather than theoretical category. As such, it cannot be divorced from considerations of value, since politics is never value-free. Thus one will seek ways to *deny* participation, cognitive as well as active, to those who would define reality in terms of cannibalism, or of racial hatred, or of the right of one group to enslave another. It will be helpful if, in doing this, one is clear about the clash of both values and power—that is, if one does *not* delude oneself that the values one is seeking to impose are really "their" values as well.

A critique of the concept of "consciousness raising" leads to the proposition that there can be no such thing, because all of us are, in principle, equally endowed when it comes to having consciousness.

Any approach to the problems of development (and, indeed, to the politics of social change in general) that claims to be moral in intent will have to face up to some of the questions we have discussed. In addition to the "merely technical" (value-neutral if not value-blind) accounting of the probable costs of different policy models, there must be added a moral accounting. Needless to say, this cannot be an exercise in pure science; from the beginning it will entail value considerations and at least the possibility of moral judgment.

We will all be further ahead if we replace the self-deceptive concept of "consciousness raising" with a more candid acknowledgment that we are faced with the problem of differing information and differing values. From this new beginning all parties involved can truly participate in shaping both the theory and practice of development.