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# CÉLESTIN FREINET

(1896-1966)

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## **An exceptional life**

Célestin Freinet was born on 15 October 1896 in Gars, a small town on the slopes of the Alpes Maritimes in France. His early days, like those of any village child of the time, were spent among labourers in the fields, in a poor region where the climate, despite the proximity of the Mediterranean, was harsh. He knew all about looking after sheep: his wife Elise wrote of him that ‘his experience of shepherding was to be the leitmotiv of Freinet’s educational experience’ (Elise Freinet, 1977). After completing primary continuation classes in the town of Grasse, he enrolled in the Nice primary teachers’ training college. At the outbreak of the 1914 war, Freinet was called up, and in 1915, at the age of 19, he was severely wounded at the Chemin des Dames, and was decorated with the Croix de Guerre and the Légion d’honneur. His convalescence, in one hospital after another, lasted four years. Wounded in the lung, he never recovered completely, and suffered throughout his life from a shortage of breath which he himself would say was partly responsible for the nature of his educational innovations, in which pupil activities took the place of the habitual ‘chalk and talk’ of the teacher.

In 1920, Freinet was appointed assistant master at the two-class school of Bar-sur-Loup, a town of 1,000 inhabitants in the Alpes Maritimes, not far from Grasse and Vence, in that picturesque and, in many places, wild hinterland region of valleys, gorges, olive groves and barren mountains. This region, now much frequented by tourists, would be the setting for Freinet’s work as a teacher and militant. It was from this village school that the newly-qualified teacher would at one and the same time introduce school printing presses, lay the foundation for a national movement through his writings in professional and political journals, take part in the international meetings on *Education nouvelle*, make the acquaintance of the great educators of the time—Ferrière, Claparède, Bovet, Cousinet—and read the classics of contemporary educational theory, while at the same time studying for the primary school supervisor’s examination, which he did not in fact sit; all this before distancing himself definitively not only from traditional educational theory but also, despite the revelation which Ferrière’s work was for him, from the ‘new’ education (Elise Freinet, 1968).

He also found the time to involve himself in the development of his native village, where he founded a workers’ co-operative to bring electricity to the community. He became an active member of the communist trade union and the Communist Party, and in 1925 he visited the USSR as part of a union delegation. There he met Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife, who was Minister of Education. These union and political activities profoundly influenced his emerging conception of popular education, to which we shall return later.

By 1928, when Freinet was transferred with his wife Elise from Bar-sur-Loup to Saint Paul-de-Vence, the main lines of his work had been laid down: printing, inter-school correspondence, the school co-operative and, at the national level, the *Coopérative de*

*l'enseignement laïque* (Secular Education Co-operative). Freinet was by that time well known both nationally and internationally because of the congresses he attended or organized.

Between 1929 and 1933 the Freinets developed and enlarged the movement they had founded. But Saint Paul-de-Vence was not Bar-sur-Loup; the little town was already a flourishing tourist centre, and the arrival of a couple of communist teachers was all the less welcome in that their activities, both national and international, were developing apace.

A murky business involving blocked toilets that were left uncleaned gave the right-wing town council the pretext it needed to request and obtain the removal of the troublesome teachers: it was unthinkable that in their unprompted writings children should cast aspersions on important officials! The year 1933 would see the rise in France, as in Germany, Italy and Spain, of extreme right-wing movements. The Freinets were transferred back to Bar-sur-Loup but did not accept the post despite the warm welcome given to them by both parents and children. They resigned and from then on devoted their time to building up the Secular Education Co-operative movement, which became a veritable industry for the production of teaching materials and the publication of works on education.

Thus was born the idea of a free experimental school. In 1934 and 1935 Freinet succeeded, with the support of the movement, of political friends and of the left-wing press, in building his own school in Vence, himself lending a hand in the construction. The site was somewhat isolated, on a hillside overlooking a little valley and reached by a stony path. The school consisted of simply constructed single-storey buildings, surrounding a shady playground with a pond in the middle. The classrooms were spacious, painted mainly in green and white. The children were mostly boarders, and were drawn from underprivileged social groups or families in difficulty. 'Most of them are the children of Parisian labourers, social service referrals, children of school-teachers who most often came to these parts for reasons of health, plus four or five children of well-to-do families who had every faith in us' (Elise Freinet, 1968). There was sunshine and that southern country air with its fragrance characteristic of the hinterland of Nice.

The years 1939 and 1940 saw first the threat and then the outbreak of the Second World War. Freinet, as a known communist, was considered to be a danger because of possible subversive activity by his organization. When the USSR came to terms with the Nazis, Freinet was arrested and sent to a concentration camp, then released on probation. While the war lasted he was first a member and then the chief of the maquis in the Briançonnais. At the Liberation he became President of the Liberation Committee of the Hautes-Alpes and resumed his activities in Vence. In 1948 the Secular Education Co-operative became the *Institut de l'école moderne*. It set up its headquarters in Cannes and became an important centre for the production and distribution of teaching materials. In 1950 Freinet was expelled from the Communist Party, with whose policies he no longer agreed. This caused a stir within his movement, which had become important both nationally and internationally, and its congresses became lively pedagogical confrontations. Freinet died in Vence in 1966. The movement continued after his death and Elise Freinet kept alive the memory of her husband.

To get a better understanding of this exceptional personality, we may recall some of the determining factors in his life: a youth spent among the peasants of Haute-Provence, which greatly influenced his very intuitive, very concrete conception of education; Haute-Provence itself, which he never left, and which is characterized by a deep sense of life and of the art of living that survives there despite the urban and industrial development that has taken place along the coast; his devotion to the cause of the people and his sense of social justice that led him to conceive of his educational purpose as being the intellectual liberation of the working class and led him to join, and later to fall out with, the Communist Party; his organizational ability and his quiet tenacity, under the most difficult physical, psychological and often financial circumstances; his learning and his curiosity, always on the alert for anything that technical and

conceptual innovations had to offer; and his love for humanity and the cordiality which struck all who went to visit him, among whom I have the honour to be numbered.

The educational innovations that we shall discuss assume their full significance only in the light of this personality. Education was for him a concrete activity, to be experienced, in his words, as *techniques de vie*—‘techniques for living’—in the service of the liberation of humanity.

## **The originality of the ‘Freinet techniques’**

Elise Freinet has shown clearly how, in the aftermath of the First World War, the Bar-sur-Loup experience enabled Freinet to absorb and then transcend prevailing ideas in the new educational movement that he led (1968).

First of all there was the pressing need, physically and psychologically perceived, to get out of the classroom and go in search of life in the rich environment of the nearby countryside and among the rural crafts still practised there. The first innovation was therefore the class outing to observe the natural and human environment. The impressions brought back to the school were first discussed, then set down in writing. The resulting texts were corrected and improved, and provided a basis for the learning of the traditional basic skills, which thus became a practical tool for improving communication. Nothing in this goes beyond Decroly and his study of the environment, but Freinet does not follow Decroly right through.

The theory of psychological development by phases linked to the major functions of life that underlie the systematic organization of the study of the environment—food, shelter, safety, human solidarity—seemed to Freinet to impede the emergence of the real interests of the child. He believed that the study of the environment takes on its full meaning only in the effort to act upon it and transform it (Vuillet, 1962). It was therefore soon expanded and enriched in his thinking by two complementary dimensions: firstly, by means of individual projects brought into the class by pupils wishing to acquaint their school-fellows with events that had impressed them and in which they had participated—whence the ‘free text’; secondly, the ‘school newspaper’ circulated in the family; and above all ‘inter-school correspondence’, whereby other schools were informed of the substance of these individual reports, democratically selected in class and edited by the group before being sent off. Communication, equivalent to socialization, became the instrument *par excellence* for access to the written word. Thus the desire to communicate transformed the study of the environment into meticulous observation for the purpose of communication with others outside the immediate setting, and identified and created the technical means for such communication, i.e. the ‘school-printing press’ and the ‘linocut’. Study of the environment, printing, newspaper and school correspondence became the first tools of a pedagogical revolution, while the tape recorder, the cine camera and, most recently, the video camera were later to supplement the technical resources for this form of communication, which has become the concrete objective in learning to write and making page layouts.

A similarly radical transformation took place in the study of arithmetic. In Freinet’s view, arithmetic must be a tool for practical activities, justified no longer by access to abstract skills with numbers and numerical operations, but by the measuring of fields, the weighing of produce, the calculation of a cost price and of interest owing or due. School arithmetic must therefore be immersed in the life of the environment so as to become ‘living arithmetic’. The class itself, conceived as a ‘technique for living’ environment, must provide the basis for these mathematical activities. The printing press, the school newspaper, inter-school correspondence, excursions to distant places, all cost money and, in poor communities, the local authority cannot be relied on to provide funds. Another source of revenue must therefore be found. The school co-operative was thus a response to a two-fold need to motivate the study of arithmetic

and to provide work for the school workshops, and it developed naturally into a focal point for thinking things out, preparing projects, making decisions, keeping accounts and assessing possibilities. To work properly it needed elected officers and periodic meetings for discussions and to monitor progress. School communication techniques thus become an instrument of civic education through action rather than through lectures about remote institutions that can only be given concrete meaning through the daily working of the school itself.

## **The transformation of learning (1956)**

These main lines of emphasis define the framework within which activities take place, but they do not provide the key to specific, indispensable subjects of study: reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic.

### **READING**

The basic desire to communicate was to give rise to an original method of learning to read. The technique used in France between the wars was one of artificial progression from sounds to letters, from letters to syllables, from syllables to words, and from words to sentences. Under this system, which teaches pupils only to combine pre-determined elements, wall charts are used which the learners are asked to 'decode', chanting in unison C-A-T, CAT, etc. The words used are those which lend themselves to this artificial process: mat, hat, etc. The reading texts are contrived and infantile, at all events completely alien to the real experiences of life. The basic difficulty then is how to proceed from such formal gymnastics to the reading of real texts. The gap is sometimes so wide that learners have difficulty in moving from decipherment to reading proper, i.e. getting at the meaning. This brings to mind a story told by the French educator Alain: a man on a train is 'reading' the newspaper and when his neighbour asks him 'What's the news today?', he replies 'I don't know, I'm just reading!'. Freinet thought this a mind-deadening technique. Reading is a search for meaning, which is why he was so interested in the techniques and theories of Decroly: a text is not perceived synthetically, letter by letter; but globally, as Gestalt psychology shows. This natural property of perception should therefore be put to use in learning to read: this is the basis of the 'book-and-learn' method, in which the learning proceeds from words, perceived and recognized as wholes, to syllables, the products of the breakdown of words by recognition of similarities, and finally to sounds discovered in the same analytical way. This can be the starting-point for composing new words and for writing. These are the elements of the analytic-synthetic method that Freinet came upon and from which he drew inspiration, while stepping outside its original limits. The approach to a written text must first of all be a search for meaning. Thinking in this respect along Rousseauesque lines, Freinet considered that a text is first of all the product of a will to communicate. Seen thus, reading is inseparable from writing, but the writing of meaningful words and phrases and not of abstract sounds. He therefore used the look-and-learn method from his own perspective, in which free texts or, at a more basic level, free oral expression come into their own. The children tell a story which the teacher writes down in simple words. This story is 'read' from the blackboard and copied, and file-cards of words made from it are stored and used to compose new stories; another way of using these cards is to group them by similarity of sound, for example by collecting together the words with 'ra' or 'ly' in them. This breaking down is not artificially induced. It comes about in its own good time when the child, of his or her own accord, discovers and needs it. The printing of texts by the trained team and, very soon, by the authors themselves, rounds off the analytical aspect while at the same time helping to ensure communication through the school newspaper and its outside distribution. This process also brings out the fundamental distinction between systematically and abstractly

constructed learning and a spontaneous form of learning that involves feeling one's way by trial and error toward a specific goal. We shall return to this later.

## WORK-ORIENTED READING AND THE WORKING LIBRARY

Once reading has been acquired as a technique, in fact while it is being acquired, Freinet invests it with its full meaning. Reading, for him, does not mean the repetitive reading, under supervision, of passages selected by the textbook author or the teacher. Reading is going in search of the text that is needed, whether for amusement or, above all, for action. Reading, as a technique for living, is above all, in Freinet's words, *lecture travail*—'work-oriented reading'—as opposed to 'hashish' reading that detaches the reader from reality and immerses him in fantasy. For this reason the Secular Education Co-operative published booklets accessible to children of different ages where readers could find, after looking them up in a so-called 'working library' file, texts that enabled them to examine a subject in depth. This kind of reading fits in well with a more thorough approach to the study of the environment, can enrich the information received through inter-school correspondence, and may also help in the preparation of the 'pupil lecture'—an oral presentation, illustrated with pictures, slides, etc., given before an audience of classmates.

## WRITING AND WRITTEN EXPRESSION

The use of printing as a means of education through communication was without doubt the central innovative element as far as language was concerned. It was probably no accident that this technique was invented by Freinet, the working-class militant. Print shops and book-printing works were the most highly regarded places of employment in the early working-class movement. Printing is manual labour by means of which thought takes material form and is spread abroad, but the print shop is also the place where correctness of language is at a premium and is, as it were, held sacred. Printing is a discipline: print shops are today perhaps the last refuge of correct spelling and punctuation, and must have been even more so in the years when Freinet was introducing printing into the school. The desire to print is the desire to communicate writ large. Functionally speaking, printing means analysing language, letter by letter, and abiding by the rules of spelling. Starting with free texts, discussed and amended collectively, the pupil-printer is brought face to face with the need for readability: misprints are no longer just mistakes incurring the censure of the teacher alone but obstacles to public communication, which it therefore becomes a point of honour to avoid. The rules of spelling and grammar, to the extent that they enable mistakes to be identified, become practical necessities. The learning of the skills of typesetting and printing gives concrete shape to the concepts of division of labour and co-operation.

## SPELLING AND GRAMMAR

But how can one avoid mistakes without knowing the rules and the reasons for them? Freinet is not unmindful of the need to supply missing knowledge at the right time. As far as possible pupils remain independent, consulting dictionaries and grammar books, and making use of file cards for self-correction. When the need arises, however, the teacher does not hesitate to 'give a lesson', but this lesson will differ from traditional teaching in that it will not be the next step in an abstract, theoretical progression but will arise from observed needs: how do you spell such and such a word; do you write *-ay*, *-ey*, *-eigh* or what?

Any reinforcement exercises will be closely related to the concrete reality of the task and, above all, the memory will not be burdened with abstract rules: trial and error and words of encouragement will often be enough. When they are not enough, and only then, a lesson may be required. Freinet relies mainly on pupils absorbing correct usage through the practical experience acquired in the production of utterances. He even raised the provocative question as to whether grammar serves any useful purpose. Objective experimental studies have now shown that a large part of grammar as taught was in fact useless, resulting in persistent misapprehensions and non-retention of the subject-matter (Roller, 1948; Dottrens, 1953; Legrand, 1970).

## LIVING ARITHMETIC

I pointed out above how mathematics could ‘come to life’ if operations arose out of the real needs of the school. The traditional study of arithmetic in elementary school and, to an even greater extent, of mathematics at the secondary level, is a world apart, totally abstract and formal, which is why the majority of learners see it as an artificial, incomprehensible game. Freinet sought to immerse the study of mathematics in life. This is why measurements became its main tool and also why, to take root, it required the concrete activities of making and growing things, rearing animals and marketing produce—the measuring of length, volume, weight, problems arising in the feeding of rabbits and poultry, the purchase of seed, the sale of field and garden crops—all of them opportunities to perform ‘living arithmetic’. Of course, here, as in the acquisition of language skills, the rules and the reasoning behind them had to be learned, with the difference that, in these new conditions, such rules did not appear ‘out of the blue’ but were perceived as necessary to the solution of the practical problems posed by gardening and workshop activities, organizing a visit to correspondents or dispatching inter-school correspondence.

Freinet was not indifferent to the arrival on the scene of modern mathematics, and their formal, game-like character, even with the use of material such as that of Dienes or Papy, caused difficulties for him. Elise Freinet, for her part, was very well aware of the potentially stimulating nature of the free play of purely mathematical reasoning. Freinet was unsure of himself in this area, in which his writings are less rewarding than in those of language and communication.

## SCIENCE, HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

In the traditional syllabus, these fields of knowledge are treated as separate subjects, all bookish in nature (except for science, which appears more concrete to the extent that science teaching should preferably be grounded in experiment). Nature study or general science—the *leçon de choses*—was introduced in France in 1880 by Jules Ferry, following the American example. In practice, such lessons at their best do in fact begin with an object or an observed fact, but the choice of subject is arbitrary and imposed by the sequence followed by the textbook. Observations are carried out under supervision by the group as a whole. The observed facts—perceived appearance, measurements of movement or changes in volume or weight, etc.—are simply noted, but the teacher provides the explanation. A ready-made pattern soon takes the place of observing and handling things. A summary is provided and learned (Legrand, 1960).

On the same principle as with language and arithmetic, Freinet insists on starting with concrete observations made in the real world: the study of the environment is once more the point of departure. But for Freinet observation is not an end in itself: the need to understand and the need to act are paramount. For him, science is not a pre-existent body of theory to be

taught dogmatically, but a progression towards objective knowledge, requiring to be organized. The point of departure is wonderment, the need to share that feeling with others and, simultaneously, to look for an explanation; that effort to find explanations, conducted through discussion and the collective invention of methods of proof, constitutes the follow-up—in other words, the most important thing for him is to create question-provoking environments. The teaching of science must be rooted in technical activities, and so the workshops where useful objects are made, the school farmyard and garden are the principal environments. Skills, particularly craft skills, which are easier to acquire than industrial techniques, are also for Freinet the beginning and the core of ‘complexes of interests’ in which oral and written communications function as instruments of that collective investigation.

History and geography are taught on the same principles. Although the subject-matter of history is remote in time and geography deals with distant lands, the essential point is still to grasp the constants, of history in general and geography in general. Thus the starting-point, for these subjects as for the others, will be the environment, the exploration of traces of human activity and significant places.

Learners will try to reconstruct the history of their locality by identifying and studying a variety of monuments and remains, but also by collecting, with tape recorder or notebook in hand, the accounts of the older generation. In geography, the study of local farms, factories, lines of communication, types of housing, flora and fauna, etc., will be the starting-point of a more general investigation, answers for which will be found in the books of the ‘working library’, organized for that very purpose. For Freinet the principal goal in studying these subjects is to acquaint learners with the human adventure, the difficulties of the human condition and the progress of mankind towards a greater humanity.

## ART

Just as written expression is motivated by life and the environment, so artistic expression, linked to life, provides the basis for the teaching of art, and in particular of painting. Texts are illustrated and drawings are reproduced by linocut. Large pictures are painted, by one pupil or several. The works so produced do have their own particular style, as can be seen in *L’art enfantin*, a publication devoted to graphic art and poetry. It is characterized by the abundant use of colours and often involves flat patches of colour surrounded by dark outlines. It has been said that this very characteristic style is a sign of unconscious manipulation, detectable also in free oral and written expression. There is no doubt that Freinet’s methods do call forth a particular style of expression—as indeed do traditional teaching methods—but the goals of the two types of teaching are different, as are the human ideals underlying them. The child will therefore be different, and so perhaps will be the adult of the future; such at any rate is the hope that inspires the educational innovator.

## The transformation of the institutional framework

The application of these methods obviously requires radical changes in the institutional environment, beginning with the *physical surroundings*. Freinet built his school in Vence to suit his educational theories and specified how this should be done elsewhere, whether schools are to be purpose-built or existing structures adapted (Freinet, 1957). The design he suggests is simple and lends itself to creative interpretation by architects, also leaving room for creativity in cases where existing premises have to be adapted. The ideal school building comprises a central space comparable to the traditional classroom, but around it are arranged seven workshops to house specific group activities. Freinet described in detail how these

workshops should be equipped for manual activities (woodwork and metalwork), domestic science, the 'commercial' activities of the co-operative, documentation, experimentation, reproduction (printing, typing, etc.) and art. In addition to these indoor workshops, the school has its own garden and farmyard.

In these new premises, school work as such is organized in a different way to that in traditional schools, where time is allocated according to the syllabus and subjects taught in accordance with an official curriculum that imposes a monthly apportionment of time by subjects and a repetitive daily timetable. The importance of unscheduled activities arising from chance occurrences in the environment, and the concern to develop pupils' independence, led Freinet to envisage a more flexible timetable, composed of broad segments of time for work by the whole class and *individual* 'work plans'. These plans are drawn up by each pupil at the start of the week and are considered to be commitments, personal work contracts. Within this general framework, ad hoc groupings can be set up.

*Evaluation* remains a constant necessity but takes a different form. Collective tests, administered at regular intervals as the pupils work their way through the syllabus, are replaced by techniques of self-evaluation in the form of grids to be filled out each time new skills are acquired. The traditional compulsory syllabus for arithmetic, spelling and grammar is presented in the form of more specifically defined skills in which the pupil tests himself each time he/she completes a given 'unit'. For this purpose 'self-correction files' are created for use by the learner, either of his own accord or following the teacher's advice as difficulties arise.

By means of these radical new teaching methods Freinet sought to enable his pupils to acquire the skills needed to pass the French State school system's primary and elementary examinations. He claimed that their results in these examinations were as good as, or even better than, those of other schoolchildren, with the fundamental difference that they would also have acquired a self-sufficiency and a social understanding totally absent in the pupils of the traditional system. All of these activities and the life of his school itself have been depicted in a now famous film, *L'école buissonnière*, made in 1949 by Jean-Paul Le Chanois based on a script by Elise Freinet.

## THE FREINET MOVEMENT AND THE SECULAR EDUCATION CO-OPERATIVE

Freinet's genius also lay in his full understanding, gained from experience before he raised it to the status of a theory, of the need for pupil's activities to correspond closely in form to those of teachers. The 'Freinet movement' is a co-operative movement, involving the voluntary pooling of ideas and materials, and emerging from the battles that were waged around Freinet and that wove the very fabric of the movement. The Secular Education Co-operative, an instrument for the production and the distribution of documentation and teaching materials, was a practical offshoot of the movement. In this way Freinet showed what could be achieved by the power of common purpose on the part of teachers in a hierarchical system that tended to leave the individual isolated *vis-à-vis* the inspectorate. It could be said that what characterizes the co-operative school of the Freinet movement is the creation of an alternative power within the education system countervailing that of officialdom, just as within the classroom power is transferred as far as possible to the pupils themselves. Freinet also gave proof of the innovative capacity of his movement and its ability to create the conditions for progress in educational theory and practice. Whereas innovation cannot be promoted by official pronouncements, the Freinet movement provides concrete evidence that the free association of educational practitioners is a driving force capable of producing a multiplier effect.



## What philosophy?

As we have seen, Freinet is fundamentally a practitioner. His genius consisted in having brought innovations to the classroom and having been able to create both a movement and an instrument for producing the educational materials needed for the wider dissemination of his ideas and practices, thus demonstrating not only his sense of organization but also what might well be called the ‘messianic’ side to his character. Freinet believed that education was a way, if not *the* way, to change humanity. He believed that his way, provided it could be generally applied, must be a means of social regeneration and of transcending exploitative, war-mongering capitalism. This is where Freinet the educator becomes one with Freinet the politician. Specific to his thinking is his desire to bring historical materialism down to the level of the classroom. The renewal of education, an essential prerequisite for the liberation of mankind, cannot be brought about by official pronouncements but arises from practices and technical processes which in a certain sense force renewal upon the system. Printing, which gives material form to thought and written communication, is the technical process *par excellence*.

But we must not look for academic writings by Freinet setting out the philosophy underlying his praxis in formal, theoretical terms. Freinet did indeed read a lot and write a lot. He described his way of thinking and acting in books such as *L'éducation du travail* (1949), *Les dits de Mathieu* (1949), *Essai de psychologie sensible appliquée à l'éducation* (1950), *L'école moderne française* (1946 and 1957) and elsewhere. Towards the end of his life he sought to bring specialists in the theory of educational research, of whom I was one, into his movement, working together on a journal, *Techniques de vie*, which enjoyed only a brief existence. His work as a whole is concrete and colourful, and also appeals to the emotions, but it is all the more difficult to pin down his underlying philosophy in that he never stopped developing and growing, assimilating and above all transforming the main trends of thought of his time, whether it be reflexology (cf. Elise Freinet, 1977, p. 143), cybernetics, programmed learning or structuralism. The rich intellectual background acquired from his teacher college training and his study for the primary inspectors' examination was further enriched when he later rubbed shoulders at congresses with Ferrière, Decroly, Cousinet, Claparède, Dottrens, Wallon, Barbusse, Politzer and others; but it was a long journey from his probably Marxist beginnings to the last years of his life when he was inspired, it would seem, by Teilhard de Chardin!

Freinet's basic philosophy is that which underlies what he himself called ‘techniques for living’. This formula is a way of expressing a fundamental distrust of everything formal (as he would say, scholastic), everything forced and artificial, and a grateful trust in nature. There is a touch of Rousseau in this, but at the same time a countryman's wisdom, the wisdom that comes from permanent contact with nature, that believes in the virtues of work well done, is nourished by the human warmth of small communities and, above all else, loves freedom, freedom that takes a certain pride in honesty, devotion to duty and reliability. It is also an expression of love for children, concern for their development and their happiness. To appreciate the emotional roots of such a philosophy, one must have spent a few days at the school in Vence, in this sunny rural setting, surrounded by laughing children who run around half-naked splashing about in the clear waters of the ornamental pond; or have lived—out of the holiday season, of course—in the mountains of Haute-Provence. It is here that a deep sense of integrity and human fellowship are forged—a far cry from bare-walled city schools with their asphalt playgrounds where children, finally released from their fidgety immobility, fight like wild creatures.

The theory underlying Freinet's techniques is set out most clearly and fully in his *Essai de psychologie sensible appliquée à l'éducation* (1950): for him the essence of his techniques is

‘experimental trial and error’. Schools, of course, are there for learning, but the learning process is something that cannot be imposed from outside: ‘You can lead a horse to water [...]’. The essential input must come from the learner himself or herself. The urge to know is aroused by the obstacles encountered, by gaps in the evidence, by failure to understand and by searching for what will make understanding possible. To be effective, this search must be spontaneous, actuated by the internal need of the sector, and there will inevitably be mistakes along the way. It is by feeling their way, by trying first one approach then another, that the child and the adult achieve real learning. To the classical theory of trial and error learned from Pavlov, Freinet adds two essential points: firstly, the trial must be made in response to a need; secondly, success brings about spontaneous memorization of the successful procedure and its later repetition in similar situations—therein lies the essence of learning. In 1964 Freinet was to go even further:

We claim that none of our acts results from an objective and scientific choice, as is often believed, but that they are all the outcome of experimental trial and error. This trial-and-error process governs all the acts of our life. It is the single, universal process of all life, and Teilhard de Chardin considers it to be the principal law of the universe (1964).

Here we find, refined and stated in general form, insights that Freinet had earlier detected in Ferrière, who was explicitly influenced, in his turn, by Bergson’s ‘life force’. The presence of dialectical materialism is also to be felt in this idea of spontaneous and irresistible progress, implicit in the universal growth of life. Certainly nothing is further removed from the monistic vitalism of Freinet than the classical dualistic rationalism that underlies traditional educational theory such as that of Alain.

## **What has Freinet to offer us today?**

Freinet died in 1966. The national and international movement he founded did not die with him, a fact exceptional in itself and therefore worthy of examination, but his ideas, even those that have become part of official French educational policy, are still disputed. A clearer evaluation of the Freinet legacy requires, in my opinion, a consideration both of the possible effects of his techniques on teaching and learning, and of the philosophy on which those techniques were based.

### **TECHNICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF CONTINUING VALUE**

As far as reading is concerned, present day conceptions take up where Freinet’s original ideas left off, adding some further refinements. The importance of functional reading is no longer in doubt. It is true that speed reading techniques and the inputs from psycho-linguistics, emphasizing as they do the importance of eye movements in the anticipation of meaning, have enabled Decroly’s insights to be expanded, but the idea of situating reading, even while it is being learned, back within the flow of communication, as well as the idea of making the reading of documents a part of every act of school life, derives directly from Freinet. The proof is that the ‘working libraries’, as he imagined them, are still a prominent feature of French documentation centres—where such centres exist.

Present trends in mother-tongue or foreign language teaching also derive directly from Freinet’s ideas. Contemporary theories of language teaching have developed in several directions, but they all enlarge, each in its own way, on Freinet’s educational insights. The objective description of teacher/pupil relations in verbal exchanges, begun in the United States by Flanders and then continued in Europe by Landsheere, Bayer and Postic, show that the

formal organization and regimentation that Freinet condemned still prevail in the classroom. It is still very rare for pupils to speak out of their own accord, and the possibility of linguistic creativity is virtually non-existent. Only classes on the Freinet model manage to avoid such practices, a fact all the more disturbing in that socio-linguistic studies have clearly demonstrated their divisive nature.

The lack of genuine communication effectively condemns working-class pupils to intellectual banishment from a universe of language that is totally alien to them. This results in under-achievement and dropping out, and in particular accounts for the anti-democratic manner in which schools operate. Here too Freinet was a pioneer, to the extent that his ideas on language teaching called for genuine communication, i.e. for personal expression and a sympathetic ear.

Psycho-linguistic studies also lay increasingly strong emphasis on ‘speech acts’ and contexts of utterance. Real language learning cannot be achieved simply by the formal imitation of the language of the written text, but must come from the functioning, in given situations, of authentic communication. Modern foreign-language programmes concentrate on precise description of such situations and of the modes of language appropriate to them, and mother-tongue learning should also be based thereon. With this in mind, effective teaching practice must create a variety of communication situations in the school environment and must attune and adapt the means of communication to these various situations. This is just what Freinet was saying, and the technical studies carried out today do no more than build upon his prophetic intuitions.

The ideas now prevalent in science teaching also follow from those of Freinet. Genetic epistemology has studied the origin of scientific concepts and has shown the groping progress of thought at grips with reality. Bachelard’s notion of the epistemological obstacle, linked to Piaget’s and Wallon’s ideas of genetics, bears out Freinet’s view of the role of experimental trial and error in the development of scientific thought, which cannot be transmitted in finished, self-contained form but has to be built up by means of repeated readjustments of spontaneous insights. All progress comes about through experimentation and discussion. Science teaching cannot be limited to proving theorems on the basis of teacher-imposed observation; it must necessarily involve the element of surprise (I should at this point acknowledge how much my book *Pédagogie de l’étonnement* owes to Freinet).

## THE PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TECHNIQUES

Some people are sure to argue that an overall educational approach of this kind, bearing the strong imprint of its rural origins, does not have much to say to us today. Vitalism seems well and truly dead when one looks at the triumph of technology and the inroads made by rationalism, yet to judge by the rise of ecological movements in various countries and the call for a renewal of ethics to counter fanaticism and individualism, I think that Freinet has, on the contrary, a lot to say to us even today.

In the light of the demographic and technological revolutions taking place in industrial societies, what indeed are the basic needs of pupils and teachers today? What conditions must be met for the education system to continue to operate?

One of the main purposes traditionally assigned to schools is to instruct, that is to say to give children the knowledge and skills they need to understand their culture. Genetic psychology shows that abstract thought is dialectically constructed by working out operational schemata elaborated in concrete thought, which in turn depends on the conditions in which it is employed—the action of the body and the hand working to produce. Likewise, scientific psychology has enlarged upon the insights of ‘active school’ practitioners. Piaget’s thinking drew upon Montessori and Kerschensteiner as, in different ways, did that of Claparède. The

theory and practice of functional education precede, accompany and follow the psychology of functional learning. Contemporary ideas that distinguish between teaching (the role of the teacher), and learning (the role of the pupil), merely systematize the insights of those practising active methods, and Freinet's 'experimental trial and error' is the most complete intuitive form of an idea arising therefrom. 'Experimental trial and error' is an expression in simple words of what modern educational theories say in greater detail and in a more fully developed form. It is true that scientific theory does not proceed from philosophical preconceptions, or at least not explicitly, but the objective value of a theory does not depend on the specific conditions under which it came into being: falling bodies obey a law that has absolute validity, even though the Pythagorean view of the world underlying it is a disputable and unproven preconception.

What, though, is the present situation of the learner *vis-à-vis* this view of learning? Children today spend more time in front of the television than at school. The abstract urban universe they inhabit alienates and isolates them from the primal experiences of the country child of yesteryear. The growing of crops and the rearing of animals, the harnessing of the elemental forces of wind and water, the basic mechanical experience of machines worked by animal or human power, concrete measurements of length, capacity, volume and weight, the everyday relations and rituals of trade, all these and the way of life that went with them have been swept away by technological civilization. Television has turned contact with nature and with one's fellow beings into a form of entertainment. Electronic devices have endowed productive work with the character of magic: powerful effects are achieved instantaneously at the touch of a button. Children today, 'consume concepts' without noticing it. The effects of these changes have yet to be fully weighed, but there is a presentiment abroad that this kind of civilization is making human existence more and more fragile, and a suspicion that only a very few specialists are now able to understand this universe of passive, almost magic, consumption.

There is a case for saying that henceforward the role of schools will increasingly be to provide children with those basic, concrete experiences that the natural environment used to provide: growing things, keeping animals, building simple machines, all of them activities indispensable to the laying down of concrete operational schemata from which abstract conceptual thinking develops. Here we come up against a paradox. Freinet wanted to bring life into schools at a time when they were those 'bare-walled' temples that Alain speaks of. Knowledge could then build itself up in a seemingly abstract way, because it was naturally rooted in concrete experience gained outside the school. Sure enough, the transition from the practical context of the fields or the workshop to the intellectual context of the school was not automatic, but it was possible because it entailed the reprocessing of that spontaneous practical experience. Today the movement is in the opposite direction: if the school is to be a life environment, it must provide a foundation course in those basic experiences that the child can no longer obtain outside. Freinet's techniques are more valid than ever, indeed they have become almost obligatory.

Similar demands are placed on schools in the area of socialization. In today's society, channels of communication proliferate, space and time are abolished by the telephone, television and air travel, and yet urban life places individuals in such proximity to each other that people, including children, have never been so isolated. There is thus an increased need for genuine communication and for meeting places that are centres of community life. Here too Freinet shows the way: the co-operative classroom is a place for living, and children are happy there because they carry out common projects.

Humanity today is more and more acutely aware of its limits and of the danger of unreasonable exploitation of the world's natural and human capital for the sake of instant gratification and to assuage the thirst for property and power. The idea of a return to, and a revitalization of, the basic values of love for others and love of nature, as against love of property and power, is beyond doubt the only philosophical route that can now lead to

universal awareness of our finiteness and our fragility. Whether or not such a return is based on a mystique of human destiny is of little importance for lines of day-to-day conduct in political and educational matters, given that ‘techniques for living’ education is the only kind that can lead to such an awareness and such a return to fundamental values. To seek individual self-realization in the child’s own activities and through the child’s experience of living in a community, to develop respect for humanity and nature, to advance knowledge in and through co-operation—all these objectives are in stark contrast, today as in the past, to the selective, teacher-centred education that is characteristic of a civilization geared to productivity and to the frenzied exploitation of nature, and whose only goals are the possession of worldly goods and power over people; but what might have seemed an idealistic dream fifty years ago is today the only possible road to survival for vulnerable, precious humanity—the choice between them, formerly a matter of aesthetics, has now become a vital necessity. Now more than ever Freinet opens up to us, in education, the path of reason and feeling.

## Notes

1. Louis Legrand (France) Emeritus professor of the Educational Sciences at Louis Pasteur University, Strasbourg. Former professor at the Universities of Besançon and Prais V and former inspector of schools. Former director of research at the Institut National de la Recherche Pédagogique (Paris). Author of many articles and books, including: *Pour une pédagogie de l'étonnement* [Teaching by surprise] (1960); *Pour une politique démocratique de l'éducation* [A Democratic educational policy] (1977); *L'école unique: à quelles conditions?* [A single school: under what circumstances?] (1981). Co-author of: *Pour un collège démocratique Rapport au ministre de l'éducation nationale* [For a democratic high school: report to the minister of national education] (1983) and *Enseigner la morale aujourd'hui* [Teaching morality today] (1991). The title of the author’s original article was: ‘Célestin Freinet: a creator committed to the service of the popular school’.

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The complete bibliographical list of Freinet’s writings has been published by Georges Piaton at the end of his thesis entitled: *La pensée pédagogique de Célestin Freinet*. Toulouse, Privat, 1974. It runs to fifty-one pages and lists about 1,700 titles, mostly articles. Here we list only Freinet’s major works:

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