Introduction

Amartya Sen famously articulates a theory of development that sees development as a process of expanding substantial human freedoms through proper instrumental freedoms. So unlike economists who prioritize income, GDP or lifespan in their accounts of development, Sen argues that any valid theory of development must place individual agency at its centre. But to what extent does Sen’s theory speak to oppressed communities? Such is the scope of my essay. Using my recent summer experience working on a coffee farm in rural Nicaragua as a reference point, I question whether Sen’s account is sufficiently sensitive to the complex problem of oppression that plagues communities such as the one I worked on. Moreover, while Sen is at pains to emphasize the importance of education and public discussion as instrumental freedoms in development, I argue that Sen’s theory risks becoming more-or-less irrelevant to oppressed communities if it fails to articulate the specific kind of education and discussion needed in their circumstances. I suggest that Sen can fill this lacuna by looking to the work of Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire, who pioneered a method of education - Conscientization - that is tailored specifically for oppressed communities. Like Sen, Freire places individual agency at the very centre of his theory. While Sen and Freire may at first seem to be unlikely bedfellows, I hope to show that fruitful dialogue between these two important thinkers is possible.
The community of La Garnacha was founded in the early 1980s by three members of the Congregation of the Little Brothers of the Gospel (hereafter the Congregation or the Brothers) soon after the 1980 Literacy Campaign. For the first few years, the Brothers and the families they invited to live in the community with them communally owned and worked on the land. The Brothers looked after the needs of the members, solicited outside aid, directed the community’s overall development and personally worked on the land for many years to support the community. People were generally given what they needed, e.g. a subsidized store, milk and school books for the children, and free rides to the health centre. In the early 1990s more people wanted to own land, motivated by land reforms. As such, the cooperative was dissolved in 1994, and land was parcelled off into lots and assigned to the families in the community. The size of each lot was determined according to the number of days each family worked.

The Congregation themselves received 60 acres, most of which they donated in 1994 to start a parish agricultural program, where the harvests from the land were used to support community projects. In 2002, the association broke off from the parish and became an independent NGO called the Asociación Programa Agrícola San Nicolás (ASOPASN). Today the community consists of some 20 families and has a population of around 130 people. The ASOPASN owns land on which organic coffee is grown, a vegetable garden, numerous goats, a truck, the community hall, a souvenir store, a cheese factory and tourist cabins. It also regularly receives aid from a variety of external sources: the Nicaraguan government, foreign NGOs (including the United Nations), foreign governments and individual donors, and a constant flow of eco-tourists from all over the world.
Soon after the parish association was founded in 1994, the original three Brothers went on to different assignments, and an Italian Priest of the congregation, Padre José, took over as head of the association. The current President of the association (as of August 2009) Juan arrived at the community as a young man and worked as José’s assistant for many years. He now has a house and family in the community. Martha, a woman from Estelí, became the Treasurer of the community.

Problems arose from the change in leadership. In contrast to the dedication of the original Brothers, the new directors monopolized decision-making in regards to community resources and became the sole beneficiaries of these resources. It is important to note that the cheese factory, the garden, the goats, the restaurant and other communal resources were initially left by the Brothers or financed through external aid for the sake of the community. Under new leadership, the proceeds from these resources no longer went to the people. Everyone I talked to in the community told me that the association, under the new leadership, provided absolutely zero benefits and aid. The directors never disclosed what funds the association received and how the money was being appropriated. Further, important decisions about how to use the resources, such as the decision to build the tourist cabins, were made behind closed doors, with the community being informed of the decisions only after they were made. Finally, the association created almost no jobs. Those who were lucky enough to get jobs with the association were paid extremely poorly, e.g., 60 Córdoba ($3 USD) a day. Juan, on the other hand, lived in a very well furnished house and was able to pay for his older son’s university tuition. Similarly, Martha was paid enough by the association to buy a house in Estelí and send her son to expensive English
tutors. I think it is quite clear that the directors personally benefited from the association’s resources and, in all likelihood, continue to benefit from them.

It was quite clear to me that the people in the community lived in dire poverty. Most of the families lacked such basic necessities as latrines, adequate food, medicine, and clothing, money for house repairs and books for kids – things they would have liked to see the association provide. The land that people in the community owned outside the association allowed for certain families to grow some corn or beans, but did not amount to enough for the community to be self-sustainable. The Association’s assets combined with the external aid should have, by all accounts, been enough to allow the community some degree of self-sufficiency. Nonetheless, most of the community lived, and in all likelihood continues to live, with desperate needs.

All the community’s official links with outsiders were through the agricultural association. The state allowed the association considerable autonomy to run its own affairs. On the occasions government officials arrived to inspect the community, they were shown around by the directors who minimized contact between the people and the officials. All incoming external aid to the community went directly to the association. Foreign volunteer placements (including those of my organization Intercordia Canada) were officially with the association. With regards to tourism in La Garnacha, only the directors and their allies served as tour guides. All tourist resources (the restaurant, the cabins, and the store) were run by the association. Understandably, almost all outsiders saw Juan, José and Martha as competent representatives of La Garnacha. Very few outsiders were aware that the resources they invested into the community probably never benefited the people they were supposed to.
Amartya Sen’s Account of Development

How would Amartya Sen analyze the problems of my host community? I will begin with a brief overview of Sen’s theory. Freedom is the starting point in Sen’s theory of development as articulated in his book *Development as Freedom*. In particular, the distinction between substantial freedoms and instrumental freedoms is fundamental to Sen’s account. *Substantial freedoms* include the freedom from premature death or serious illness, freedom from illiteracy and the freedom to participate politically. These substantive freedoms are constitutive of what it means to be a flourishing human being – that is, an agent who “acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives.” To possess these substantial freedoms is, fundamentally, to possess the capability to lead the life one values and has reason to value. Thus, the ultimate end of development is the expansion of these freedoms. Real poverty, conversely, is the lack of these freedoms as opposed to merely lowness of income.

What Sen calls *instrumental freedoms* play a key role in his account of development, in that these freedoms promote the expansion of the substantive freedoms. Sen lists five instrumental freedoms: political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security. Sen suggests that while possessing instrumental freedoms is strictly speaking not constitutive of what it properly means to be an agent, it would be very difficult for people to maintain their substantive freedom to live the lives they value and have reason to value without instrumental freedoms. For example, if a country does not provide the social opportunity to be educated (e.g. by not building schools), it would be very difficult for citizens to participate...
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politically. People in such a society would in turn lack an important substantive freedom (or perhaps several substantial freedoms).

For Sen, the key to expanding individual freedoms is primarily through fostering political-economic policies and structures that are oriented towards development, i.e., policies and structures that provide the instrumental freedoms listed above, especially social opportunities. Sen confidently asserts that, “with adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other.” In another passage, he writes that, “…the capabilities that a person does actually have (and not merely theoretically enjoys) depend on the nature of social arrangements, which can be crucial for individual arrangements.” In particular, Sen attaches overwhelming importance to policies and structures that promote education and protect free discussion. For example, he writes,

It is clear that we have good reason to pay special attention to creating conditions for more informed understanding and enlightened public discussion. This has some strong policy implications … There is also a big role for freedom of the press and the media...

Thus, it seems that for Sen, social policies and structures are the best guarantors of instrumental freedoms. In fact, there is little in Development as Freedom to suggest that once the proper policies and arrangements are in place, most people will not take advantage of the opportunities that are opened up.

In light of this, how might Sen interpret the case of La Garnacha? A prima facie examination of the problems facing the community of La Garnacha might lead him to conclude that the community lacked certain instrumental freedoms, a deficit which then leads to the deprivation of substantial freedoms. That is, Sen may say that the community lacked economic facilities because the community members had no access to the resources
that were supposed to be available to them, namely the association’s resources and money from external sources. Similarly, he may say that the community lacked transparency because the directors were not very open about how much money the association received and how they spent this money. Sen would likely conclude that this absence of instrumental freedoms came from a combination of deficiency in the community’s social arrangement (e.g. insufficient transparency guarantees) and personal corruption, which generally arises out of structural deficiency (I will examine Sen’s account of corruption in greater detail later on).

**The Challenge of La Garnacha to Sen’s Account**

The case of La Garnacha, however, poses a challenge to this rather straightforward analysis. On one hand, there are things that were undeniably true about the directors: they were not transparent, they blocked economic resources from reaching the people, and they did little to encourage participation in decision-making. But does this automatically mean the community lacked instrumental freedoms? Someone may reasonably argue that these instrumental freedoms were always accessible to the community members; the directors never used coercion, where they lived was public knowledge, and none of the rules (to my knowledge) stipulated that the people could not complain and petition for the removal of the leaders. There were no barriers to instrumental freedoms that Sen commonly lists, such as press censorship and government suppression of political gatherings. The people could have organized themselves and confronted the directors with their demands. So in one clear sense, the people had everything they needed to change their situation.
Following Sen’s analysis one can plausibly conclude that the community’s inaction signified a choice to accept things as they were. After all, Sen emphasizes that people must take personal responsibility, which presumably means accepting the consequences of one’s decisions. He writes that, “responsible adults must be in charge of their own well-being; it is for them to decide how to use their capabilities.”¹³ Thus, must Sen conclude that there was no real barrier to their freedom? If Sen wants to follow through to the conclusion of his account, he may be stuck with this answer. But it seems quite odd (perhaps even implausible) to claim that the community really chose to forfeit the resources earmarked specifically for them – that they faced no real barriers in accessing their resources. After all, many members of the community expressed to me a desire to have their voices heard in decision making and a desire to see everyone benefit from the community’s resources. Yet there remains a real difficulty in articulating exactly the barrier between the people and their instrumental freedoms within the framework of Sen’s account.

**Internalized Barriers to Freedom**

I would argue that we need a more nuanced account of what constitutes a barrier to instrumental freedom, which may require going beyond what Amartya Sen has to offer. Sen devotes little attention to the issue of how barriers to freedom can be deeply internalized, and become part of the psyche of an entire community or culture. My experience at La Garnacha is relevant here. Why have the people not confronted their leaders? The fact that people respected José as a priest is to some extent an explanation, since much of the community was deeply religious (or was at some point in the past). That being said, I see a deeper reason. The members of La Garnacha, like virtually all
Campesinos in Nicaragua, have known nothing but deprivation, exploitation and oppression. They lived through 40 years of a dictator dynasty under the Somoza family, a bloody revolution in 1979, and then economic stagnation and mercenary attacks that lasted for almost a decade after the revolution. It is fair to say that the campesinos have become more than accustomed to suffering and possessing little control over their lives. They thus have developed a mentality specific to oppressed people, a mentality that governs how they see themselves and others.

Taking into account this mentality of suffering and dependence – cultivated and developed over many generations – one is left with a more complex picture of how these people view reality and, thus, a more complex picture of how they exercise agency. This has deep consequences for any account of development to disadvantaged communities. I am not trying to say that Sen rejects or neglects this dimension of human choice; I am simply questioning whether Sen has sufficiently explored this dimension and, importantly, whether he has considered what consequences it has for his freedom-based account of development.

Sen can reply that his account of agency is already nuanced enough to handle my criticism. He does recognize that people’s preferences and choices are affected by social values. Accordingly, Sen argues that a community needs to form values based on open discussion and consensus, and suggests that “what is needed is a working agreement on some basic matters of identifiably intense injustice or unfairness.” But this response would not get him very far; even the activity of collectively seeking a working agreement takes place, in all communities but especially in oppressed ones, within a web of power relations and internalized ideology. In ideal situations where both parties are in more or
less equal positions of power and knowledge, agreements can be quite straightforward notwithstanding external barriers. However, in oppressed communities when one group has a ‘psychological’ advantage over the other, we are confronted with the serious question of whether such a working agreement can really be meaningful. This is keeping in mind how people in such communities have long detached themselves from responsibility and taken a fatalistic view of reality and history.

In Sen’s most recent book *The Idea of Justice*[^18], he explicitly responds to criticisms that bear resemblance to mine. In particular, he responds to critics who accuse him of “methodological individualism.” These critics accuse Sen’s approach of ignoring social relations and influences in human choice. Sen’s reply is that his approach has always taken into account social influences that operate on individual actions while, at the same time, respecting the need to distinguish the two from each other.[^19] He acknowledges that, for example, in sexist societies individual women would likely see themselves as inferior to men – a view that is inseparable from the social conditions that cultivate this kind of thinking. The appropriate solution, Sen writes, is to demand “more public engagement on such a subject”[^20], echoing his solution in *Development and Freedom*.

I think Sen is certainly correct in, first, distinguishing between the individual choice and the conditions under which that choice is made and, second, calling his critics on their uncharitable reading of his rich account. Sen does appreciate that human beings are partially value-driven, that values are highly influenced by societal conditions, and that sometimes societies cultivate bad values. With that said, there is still some bite to Sen’s critics. Sen’s solution that we need more public engagement – while undeniable – sidesteps certain important questions. For one, under what conditions can a community achieve
effective discussion, that is, discussion that respects its participants as independent agents? Importantly, are there barriers to obtaining such conditions that run deeper than deficiencies in social arrangement, for example, groups opposed to expanding public engagement or the existence of internalized ideology? The fact that Sen does not fully tackle these issues does not, of course, discount his theory. A theory’s failure to specify certain points hardly entails that the theory is based on wrong assumptions or that it is heading in the wrong direction. That being said, the example of La Garnacha should at least challenge Sen to sharpen his account.

**Education and Barriers to Freedom**

Sen may claim that his theory can account for La Garnacha because while the resources, decision making power and opportunities were within walking distance (so to speak) from the community, their lack of education was a barrier to those opportunities being a part of their capability set. If they only had more knowledge, the people would be able to seek or create other opportunities. Sen writes that, “Individual freedoms are… also influenced by substantive public support in the provision of facilities (such as basic health care or essential education) that are crucial for the formation and use of human capabilities.”

In another passage, where Sen is drawing a close relationship between human capital and human capability, he writes that, “…through education, learning, and skill formation, people can become much more productive over time, and this contributes greatly to the process of economic growth…” So the problem may in the end boil down to an issue of education, which falls under the instrumental freedom of social
opportunities. Indeed, he continually stresses the importance of education to development, especially education of traditionally oppressed groups such as women.

Whether such a response works depends on whatever view of education Sen is assuming. In *Development and Freedom*, Sen seems to equate education closely with literacy and numeracy and, less often, with productive skill. It is true that literacy and numeracy is a safeguard against many types of exploitation and generally allows one to make more informed choices, such as those regarding career choice, and exercising political rights. It is also true that if more people had productive skills in the community, they may be able to achieve more financial independence. That being said, one cannot just assume that learning a skill in and of itself will entail greater participation and agency. A peasant who acquires an education (e.g. learns how to read, learns a skill) may simply become a more useful accessory to his oppressors or even become an oppressor himself.

Education, if it is to make a positive contribution to the development of communities like La Garnacha, must be delivered in the context of some political and social program. That is to say, education that is oriented towards development should aim at some positive social/political values; education should not support oppression explicitly or implicitly. If education is to be a real force for development, it follows that education must be a tool against oppression and deprivation wherever it exists. After all, it seems clear that any sustainable development in oppressed communities depends, first, on the achievement of some sort of liberation. Thus, the kind of education that would really drive the development of oppressive communities must contribute to the community’s liberation from its oppressive conditions, especially internalized mentalities. It goes without saying that such an education must be highly responsive to the psychological and ideological
elements that encourage and sustain oppression. Here Sen’s account could benefit from a more substantive view of education such as, I argue, the view held by Paulo Freire.

**Paulo Freire’s Contribution**

Paulo Freire’s account, as expressed in his famous *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*\(^{27}\), is based on a philosophical anthropology that bears substantial resemblance to Sen’s own anthropology. To Freire, human beings are subjects, who are self-reflexive and possessing agency. As subjects, human beings have a fundamental vocation to act in the world and transform it—*to open up opportunities that enrich their lives individually and collectively*.\(^{28}\) To be human, then, is to intervene freely in history with the view of enriching one’s own existence. Freire thus rejects fatalism, the view that history is determined and so human beings’ historical conditions are also determined. Fatalism is always ideology—a false representation of reality.

An issue that Freire focuses on, and which Sen’s account gives only a cursory treatment, is that of oppression. For Freire, oppression is one of the greatest threats to a human being’s fundamental vocation as subject. Oppression, in his account, is not limited to acts of creating or maintaining external barriers to freedom such as enforcing censorship or imprisoning political dissenters (though such acts would most certainly count as oppression). Freire defines oppression broadly as: “Any situation in which “A” objectively exploits ‘B’ or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression.”\(^{29}\)

I think Freire’s concept of oppression can play a key explanatory role in analyzing the problems of La Garnacha. Freire might look at the situation as something like this: The
members of the community needed the resources to pursue (as much as reasonably possible) lives that they genuinely wished to pursue; one can say that the resources are the material conditions for the community’s proper exercise of their agency. To separate such resources from the people is to act as a barrier to them pursuing their vocations as agents. And as we have seen, the directors did not have to exercise any physical coercion to separate people from the community’s resources; all it took was for the directors to assert control, make decisions without soliciting input, and isolate themselves from the people. The directors certainly knew, and took advantage of the fact, that the community with its collective mentality of resignation, would sooner or later sink into docility.

Freire, I think, would emphasize that the actions of the directors form only one side of the oppression equation. Certainly the people’s collective mentality of resignation was equally, if not more, important in sustaining the leaders’ corruption. The issue was not one of ignorance. Freire recognizes that awareness of one’s oppression does not entail any actual motivation to take action. In my host community, the community members were well aware of the directors’ corruption but, from what I can tell, did not see it as their place to change this; they did not see themselves as agents, capable of transforming this balance of power. For example, I asked one person in La Garnacha why the community has never confronted the directors. His response was that people remained silent “for the sake of avoiding problems… the people prefer to tolerate more than accuse them (the directors) in order not to be disliked by them” (para evitar las problemas… mejor prefieren aguantar de denunciar esos para no caer mal). This person, like many others I spoke to, saw himself as helpless in the face of oppression, having adopted an attitude of resignation or fatalism. For
such people, exploitation is their destiny since, after all, it has accompanied them through the generations. They thus believe that the only response is cheerful acceptance.

Development for such people means being liberated from this way of thinking. Where does education come in? Let us first look at the kind of education Freire is against - the ‘banking’ model of education. Here, the student’s mind is seen as a ‘bank’ or a receptacle into which the teacher deposits all of her (the teacher’s) knowledge. Memorization, repetition and regurgitation are the key features of ‘learning’ in the banking model. The banking model of education might not do too much harm in non-oppressive societies (though even that is questionable) but in an oppressed community where the oppressors thrive on the people’s ignorance and resignation, the banking model does nothing to liberate the people but, in fact, subtly sustains the oppression. Such an education – whether it be literacy education or education in a trade – does not encourage the student to develop a sense of him or herself as a responsible agent, “as someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms or his or her own values and objectives.”

In oppressed communities, what people need most but lack is precisely to cultivate this strong sense of themselves as agents who are the protagonist of their own lives and communities. Here I am not concerned with whether Nicaragua’s educational system follows the banking model or not. Rather I am attempting to draw out the more general points of how there are opposing ways of conceptualizing education, and that what conceptualization we adopt (or merely assume) has deep consequences when it comes to the development of communities such as La Garnacha.

Freire argues that the liberating potential of education is realized only in Conscientization. Roughly, Conscientization is an educational concept that emphasizes
critical reflection on one’s political and social reality. The goal of Conscientization is praxis, a technical term which refers to “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it.” The means of Conscientization is a critical engagement with the world, going beyond and even challenging what one might receive in a classroom. Specifically, this engagement is done through dialogue – the essence of education for Freire. Dialogue is an encounter between subjects capable of critical thought as opposed to a mechanical relationship between depositor and receptacle. The object of cognition, the world (especially present political and social structures), unites the subjects in their mutual examination of the object and challenges the subjects to seek resolutions to the contradictions that are revealed along the way such as oppression. In dialogue, the participants also become conscious of their own perceptions of reality (for example, they become conscious of whether their own perceptions stem from ideology) and learn to deal critically with these perceptions. In Conscientization, education, dialogue, and the struggle against oppression are all inseparable from each other.

One of the primary goals of Conscientization is social transformation. Through Conscientization the people in an oppressed community, having become conscious of their oppression, are now in a position to identify explicitly the sources of their oppression by looking at what aspect of the system is oppressive and who are the oppressors. Conscientization provides an educational atmosphere where the participants cannot but see themselves as the shapers of their reality. They are forced to see themselves as the sustainers, defenders and beneficiaries of their instrumental freedoms, as Amartya Sen so eloquently puts it. It is through Conscientizaton that the people critically seek responses to their oppression and, importantly, motivate each other to confront their situation. In short,
Conscientization, as the ‘pedagogy of the oppressed,’ offers a viable solution to the culture of fatalism so prevalent in La Garnacha and other such communities.

Does Sen’s theory consider the importance of critical reflection? In one sense, the answer is a clear yes. He attaches great importance to “the role of public discussion and interactions in the emergence of shared values and commitments.” On the other hand, he spends little time in discussing what forms of public discourse are most (and least) conducive to the exercise of instrumental freedoms. When Sen does mention specific examples of public dialogue, they are usually freedom of the press and opposition parties. Sen may say that it is sufficient to affirm the general importance of public dialogue; specific communities will decide on their mode of discourse, so all types of public discourse should be encouraged.

Sen’s suggestion may be very useful on a macro level—on the level of the state where there is often censorship and suppression of political gatherings. But is there a mode of dialogue that will specifically help the most oppressed and disadvantaged considering their specific circumstances? More specifically, is there a mode of dialogue through which the oppressed can help themselves? Sen’s solution is too general and vague to be deeply relevant to the development of oppressed communities such as La Garnacha. Freire’s contribution is to posit Conscientization as a method of dialogue suited especially for the circumstances of the oppressed, a contribution I think Sen can incorporate into his own theory without too much difficulty.

Conscientization as a Feature of the Community
Conscientization cannot be a one-time event but must be built into the structure and life of the oppressed communities. Without regular and continued Conscientization, it can be very easy for a community to fall back into the mentality of resignation. It may be helpful to see how Conscientization has been incorporated into communities in the past. The Base Ecclesial Communities (BECs), which actually apply Freire’s ideas of Conscientization in an ecclesiological context, immediately come to mind. In their Conscientization sessions, base community members engage in intense reflections and debates on the realities of the different forms of oppressions they face from the point of view of the Gospel. They usually do this every week on Sundays, sometimes during Mass. Base Ecclesial Communities in Brazil pushed heavily, and quite effectively, for social change in the 1970s in the face of extreme government oppression.  

Here I am not directly concerned with the ecclesiological or theological issues surrounding Conscientization. Nor do I think that BECs are necessarily the best models of structured Conscientization. What is important here is that Conscientization can be – and has been – made into a structural feature of oppressed communities. That is, in such communities Conscientization should take place on a regular basis with all members being obliged to participate. In the BECs, for example, the discussions became important pillars of community life – perhaps even defining features. La Garnacha’s underdevelopment can thus be seen as partly due to a lack of structured Conscientization from the very beginning. Drawing from Freire’s account and my own experience, I articulate two concrete advantages to having Conscientization built into communities such as La Garnacha, the first being an increase in leader accountability and the second being a decrease in
community dependency. I see these as two ways through which structured Conscientization protects and promotes individual agency.

**Conscientization and Accountability**

Structured Conscientization would increase the accountability of a community’s leaders. Here, I think it is important to contrast Sen’s solution to corruption with the idea of Conscientization. Sen defines corruption as involving “the violation of established rules for personal gain and profit.” He argues that effectively combating corruption means cultivating an attitude of respect for the rules among those who have power. He suggests that attitudes, more than financial incentive and external enforcement, will regulate behavior against acts of corruption. Sen is quite emphatic that this climate of rule following starts at the top, among those in positions of power and authority such as senior civil servants. In fact, he is partial to the view that if the leaders at the very top serve as examples of rule following, those under their leadership authority would be likely to follow suit.

In Conscientization it is the disadvantaged, the ones most negatively affected by corruption, who keep the leaders accountable. This might be a more dependable solution than Sen’s solution, in which the leaders keep themselves accountable. For one, Conscientization is sensitive to the problem of leader alienation. In communities where the leaders are alienated from the people under them it may be difficult to develop and maintain a culture of rule-following. Sen himself talks about how social and political alienation between governors and governed play a role in the non-prevention of famines. He thinks this alienation stems mainly from public policy, which is determined by political, social and cultural influences.
But alienation can easily develop on a smaller scale, even without these grand influences. In La Garnacha, the leaders all found ways of isolating themselves from the rest of the community: Juan spent his time either with his family or working in the cheese factory (which his family has effectively taken over). Martha lived two hours away in Estelí and when she came to La Garnacha she spent time with Juan and José only. In the more interesting case of Padre José, the priest found himself without the company of other Brothers (as the order was shrinking) and developed a close relationship with Juan early on, perhaps something like a father-son complex. From what I gathered through conversations with people in the community and personal observation, José spent almost all of his time working in his own garden or with Juan and Juan’s family. Many people I talked to resent the fact that Padre José, who was suppose to be their pastor, rarely visited them or showed much concern for their welfare. The important lesson here is that the more that leaders withdraw from the community (whatever their reason) the less they tend to identify with the interests of the community. And while it is true that people often act out of adherence to values and rules, one also has to take into account the extent to which human beings conjure up justifications for their actions, especially with leaders who have already isolated themselves from the people.

There is even less of an incentive for the leaders to resist the temptation to corruption if they know the people have a mentality of resignation and hopelessness. In oppressed communities, corruption or abuse of power seems to have a reinforcing effect. The more the leaders abuse their power, the more the people become accustomed to it and sheepishly accept it as their reality. Friere writes about how the oppressed person, having internalized the oppressor’s opinion of him or her, loses self-confidence. The oppressed
person then fabricates this image of his or her oppressor as some invincible entity. The physical alienation of the leaders almost always helps sustain this irrational belief in the oppressed. I recall how this one person in the community repeatedly referred to Juan-José -Martha as “poderosos,” or “the powerful.” While this person’s curious comment reflects his view of the three as control-hungry tyrants, the comment also reveals how powerless he felt towards the three. To this person the directors’ control and power of the community were unassailable by ‘little’ people like him. As much as he resented the directors, it seems he was also terrified of them.

A critical reflective forum would thus act as a guarantor of accountability in local development, addressing exactly the danger of alienation between leaders and the people. In a community where Conscientization is given a prominent place in community life, the leaders must periodically confront face-to-face the people they are responsible for. The leaders would thus have nowhere to hide, so to speak. The leaders would then be forced to listen to the people, explain their mistakes and failures. Conscientization has the effect of bringing the image of the leader down to a human level, dispelling any fear of the leaders or beliefs in their invulnerability.

**Conscientization and Dependency**

Structured Conscientization also lessens dependency. Critical reflection creates an atmosphere of responsibility that empowers the oppressed to take charge of their own communities. The Conscientization forum is, ideally speaking, a place where all members of the community participate on equal footing. In these dialogues the people build solidarity, realizing that their brother and sister campesinos face the same problems.
Importantly, they realize that their words and ideas are powerful. Their words have the power to influence others, and to shape and transform their reality. Also, once someone’s frustration, criticism or idea is presented for the entire community to hear, there will be both a social and psychological pressure to take responsibility for those words, e.g. by following through on the idea. This is in contrast to, for example, mere bickering and complaining among workers in the field where, even if the complaints are legitimate, there exists no similar pressure to take responsibilities for those words.

Moreover, while structured Conscientization demystifies the invulnerability of bad leaders, Conscientization also demystifies the belief that benevolent leaders are completely dependable. During my time in La Garnacha, for instance, I observed not only a tendency to project invincibility onto bad leaders, but also an equally strong tendency to become totally dependent on benevolent leaders like the original Brothers. The community members talk about them with profound nostalgia, emphasizing how the Brothers took care of all their needs. Admirable as the original Brothers may have been, they seem to have unintentionally encouraged and sustained the mentality of dependency in the community. The Brothers ran everything and the people were happy to let them do so. After all, on paper it seemed like a good set-up to have a Religious in charge, as they convey the image that they are above profit on account of their vows, have no family to show favoritism to, and possess the training to run the community effectively.

While things went well for years, this set-up proved to be unsustainable. The new property laws pushed a change in the structure of the agricultural association and the Brothers, under obedience to their superior, left for new assignments. José, living without the company of other Brothers, became especially susceptible to manipulation by Juan and
Martha. When the new leaders began hoarding all the resources, the people became paralyzed in organizing themselves to protest and/or seek other sources of aid. The point is that the community coasted on its favorable circumstances in the early years, doing little to cultivate a mentality of responsibility and direct engagement with their political and social realities. The community was thus caught off guard when the times changed.

The point of structured Conscientization is to create and maintain a culture of critical reflection through good times and bad. Only when this culture is present can people take responsibility and engage with the demands of their ever-changing circumstances. When such a feature is not constitutive of oppressed communities, such as La Garnacha, the members easily lose sight of themselves as subjects-in-history capable of transforming their world. Thus, they fall into economic dependence. When times are relatively good, the people gratefully accept and enjoy their conditions. They say to themselves and to each other: “We finally have benevolent and competent leaders after all these years of oppression and exploitation. We are thankful and cannot ask for more.” Their urgency to exercise agency in a transformative manner quickly falls into the background. Such a mentality, as we have seen, is detrimental in the long run. Just as an oppressed group easily accepts the good times, their passiveness leads them to easily surrender to their circumstances when they find themselves again being oppressed.

Conclusion

It is Amartya Sen’s great insight that poverty lies not only in material deprivations a person might suffer but, more deeply, in the lack of her substantial freedom to pursue the life she wants to pursue and has reason to pursue. While Sen is correct to emphasize the
need for education and public participation, I hope to have shown that Sen’s account is richer when supplemented by Paulo Freire’s analysis of oppression and Conscientization. This is keeping in mind, of course, that there is no easy solution to the problem of underdevelopment. For Freire, development is ultimately a process of continual liberation, where the community needs to be tirelessly engaged in dialogue. Conscientization is a long-term and difficult commitment with progress being very slow at times. I am convinced, however, that structured Conscientization is necessary for the development of oppressed people, considering the fragility of their position. In this way, the poor become the primary agents of their development, achieving the substantial freedoms proper to their humanity.40
Bibliography


Conscientization and Development as Freedom

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1. Amartya Sen (1933-) is currently the Thomas W. Lamont University Professor and Professor of Economics and Philosophy at Harvard University. He taught Economics at Cambridge University for many years and was master of Trinity College, Cambridge from 1998-2004. He won the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics in 1998. He has written extensively in the areas of development economics and political philosophy.

2. I spent 3 months in the summer of 2009 working on two coffee cooperatives near the northern town of Estelí, Nicaragua, Central America. I did my placement through a volunteer program called Intercordia Canada, which is partnered with the Christianity and Culture program at St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto. This article is an edited version of the re-integration paper I wrote for the academic portion of the program.

3. Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was a philosopher of education who occupied a variety of positions throughout his life, including educational advisor to the World Council of Churches, Director of Brazil’s literary campaign, and Visiting Professor of Education at Harvard University. He received the UNESCO Prize for Education for Peace in 1986. He wrote extensively on the issues of adult education and critical pedagogy.

4. Since there is no written history of the cooperative, my knowledge of the community’s history came through numerous conversations, as well as a few more formal video interviews, with various members of the community. I owe the greatest gratitude, however, to one of the original founders who gave me a detailed account of the cooperative’s formative years.

5. The Sandinista government (1979-1990) set up agrarian cooperatives after the revolution, with La Garnacha being among them. Under laws enacted during this time, land that was attached to the cooperative could be used but not sold. This was to prevent the concentration of rural property by rich agro-exporters. The administration of Violeta Chamorro, which enthusiastically introduced the “neo-liberal” model of economics in the early 1990s, deliberately engaged in the dismantling of these cooperatives; the administration enacted laws that now allowed peasants to sell their land as well as reduced loans to cooperatives, inducing many peasants to sell. See Thomas W. Walker, *Nicaragua: Living in the Shadow of the Eagle* 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003), 99-100.

6. Names have been changed.


13. ibid


15. In an interesting parallel, Civil Rights Advocate Malcolm X, who witnessed oppression from a completely different context, understood the oppressed mentality well. In particular, he was keenly aware of how history plays a huge role in the formation of a fatalistic/resigned attitude. For Malcolm X the black man has accumulated in his psyche 400 years of white oppression. Even though many political and social barriers blacks historically faced were removed in 1960s, Malcolm X saw that blacks continued to suffer from a deep internal oppression. That is, the average black person held onto a ‘slave mentality’ where she, without realizing it, assumed white superiority and black inferiority. See Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X as told to Alex Haley* (New York, NY, Ballentine Books, 1999).


20. ibid


22. SEN, *Development as Freedom*, 293.


26. Contemporary Tibet is a good example of this. After the Chinese communist government ‘liberated’ Tibet and replaced traditional Tibetan education system with its own education program, it succeeded in drastically decreasing illiteracy and increasing skill in agriculture, industry, defense and science and technology (the
four “great modernizations”). In one sense, the Tibetans have certain barriers to freedom removed owing to their Chinese education; for one, they can now compete for jobs that require technical skill. In another sense, it is clear that such a system of education subtly reinforces Chinese oppression. One of the (intended) effects of this new program was the mutilation of the Tibetan culture. Tibetan students are taught (explicitly and implicitly) to turn back on their traditions, language and religion and embrace the dominant Han culture. As a result of Chinese education, some Tibetan youths end up working for the government that is actively destroying their own culture. I use this example only to highlight the importance of adopting a critical view on what kind of education will lift the oppressed out of their situation. See Edward J. Kormondy, “Minority Education in Inner Mongolia and Tibet.” *International Review of Education / Internationale Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft / Revue Internationale de l’Education*, Vol. 48, No. 5 (Sep., 2002), pp. 377-401.


31 Interestingly enough, the 1980 Nicaragua literacy campaign attempted to employ Freire’s pedagogy in educating the thousands of illiterate campesinos. Ultimately, however, Freire’s pedagogy was very inconsistently used due to several factors such as a lack of resources and time to train the teachers, time constraints of the campaign itself, and violent opposition from the U.S.-funded Contras. Many teachers simply resorted to using traditional teaching methods. Also, there was a lack of effective follow-up efforts to the original campaign due to political tensions and military and economic opposition from the United States. As a result, much of the progress achieved by the original campaign was allowed to dissipate. See Robert F. Arnove and Anthony Dewees, *Education and Revolutionary Transformation in Nicaragua, 1979-1990*, Comparative Education Review, Vol. 35, No. 1, Special Issue on Education and Socialist (R)Evolution (Feb., 1991), pp. 92-109 and Dr. Ulrike Hanemann. *Nicaragua’s literacy campaign*. Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006, UNESCO Institute for Education (2005) pp. 1-15.

32 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 79


39 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 64.

40 I would like to thank Prof. Reid Locklin for helping me think through my experiences and ideas, both during my time in Nicaragua and after my return. I would also like to thank my editor at Saecculum, who helped save this paper from many embarrassing mistakes.