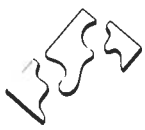

The Politics of Education: Culture Power and Liberation by Paulo Freire. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1985

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After Polemics, What? Conversing With the Converted

Paulo Freire' new book, *The Politics of Education*, tantalizes its reader with its demands for commitment, but fails to create a true dialogue with its reader. This is not to say that it lacks good consequences or significant effects, for it does resonate with spirit and sincerity and could serve as a mental spa for educators who intend better but are slumped into a daily grind of recalcitrant students, bureaucratic departments, or repressive and unsympathetic governments. I see two divergent types of educators who are the interlocutors Freire has imagined for this work, either the enervated teacher who needs a dose of spirit, a reminder of what they once knew, or a tyrannical imperialistic educator who needs to come to see the error of their ways. For in this volume of essays, a collection of writings previously unpublished or in limited circulation, Freire speaks as though he is attempting to awaken a dull, unreflecting teacher; that is, he speaks against the worst versions of pedagogy and rehashes what I imagine many committed educators would claim is the territory of valid but familiar insights. In short, where is the news? Conversing with the converted need not be an exercise in pure rhetoric, if the particularity of the speaker's reflections are used to deepen and restore faith in the project. But to accomplish this, Freire would need to acknowledge a readership of zealous peers who take commitment as their starting point.

Here we do need to grant Freire his due and tip our hats. It is, undoubtedly, partially because of his work preparing the ground for a radical new pedagogy in such a widely read work as the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that we can claim the insights in this volume are the reiteration of perennial maxims. And I can imagine one rebuttal to my charge that Freire would make is that, yes, but the problems of education are perennial problems themselves which are not addressed once and so vanquished. Indeed, Henry Giroux's introduction notes that the "conversative right" currently is crying for education to *more* stridently emulate the "demands of capitalist rationality and the imperatives of the market economy." But my desire here is to see if Freire himself is succeeding in being responsible toward us as readers of this volume, and thus is inspiring us to avoid what Giroux aptly describes as a collapse into either the "discourse

of domination" or the "discourse of despair."

Let us look at some of the things which Freire dislikes: banking, nutritionist, or transfusion concepts of education; readers who are mesmerized, invaded, or domesticated; ideas which assault; verbalist who are not practitioners; activists without reflection; typical narrow specialists; transplanted ideology; the mechanical understanding of literacy; students conceived of as empty vessels and so on *ad infinitum*. It is my sense that through the excessive rhetorical reliance upon such polemics the reader is lulled into a passive state of mesmerization and domestication, which is in fact one of the styles of teaching which Freire claims to abhor. Since little concrete development of these universalisms occurs, we are seduced into the complacency of a nomadic assent to and agreement with these pedagogical truisms. And while we are grazing in these generalities, some specific practices are touted with the same style which closes off the readers' criticality and disarms their resistance. An example here is Freire's continual invective against memorization, which we are invited to affirm as part of a package in the tirade against the mechanization of education. We must provoke ourselves to remember that there is an *argument* to be heard here. Memorization can serve *some* good and useful productive functions, and may even be necessary. (This example will be more fully developed later.)

Thus, when so seduced by generality we are given little substance, little concrete material through which our actual practice might be influenced. Again Freire's voice might be heard here saying "good, then, I have not *fed* my reader." But most readers will find that though basic sympathies might be in congruence with those of Freire, as soon as his generalities are tested vis-a-vis one's own experiences as an educator, one must confront just how much real problems with their substance, or "nutrition," have been glossed. This is cause for disappointing frustration since undoubtedly Freire *could* have engaged his reader with a more substantive and valuable knowledge given his own comprehensive experiences in education, from Harvard Graduate School to the asentamiento in Chile. But Freire's faith in his own readers in this volume fails to imagine them as desirous of a *dialogue* about practice, that is, of needing to engage *in* conversation, rather than needing either revitalization or chastisement. In telling us what concepts of education he would have us reject, he gives us as little as gossamer to grasp. No spirited educator I can imagine would reject his rejection of treating students as "empty vessels," or deny that knowing is a process. So, although Freire declares, " I am inviting my readers to act as subjects and thus to reject the idea of merely accepting my analysis," what we are presented with is a set of polemical and very general conclusions without much groundwork, other than the *claim* of the validity of experience as a ground for this work, that can allow us to see how Freire is the subject of his analysis.

An example of where I experience this frustration occurs in his discussion of his need to understand the alterity of the other in Chile as a condition of being able to offer *his* teachings: "I had learned that the very nature of my task called for learning about others' cultures so that I could teach them a little of what I think is valid" (p. 180). The ensuing discussion is lively and illustrates the radicality of different norms of body language. But it is still, to my mind, a tease. We are offered no work on how education can occur at all, given the radical and potentially estranging difference in contexts between subjects. How does Freire (or any educator) know, then, which of his lessons he can confidently declare are valid to the stranger? Freire's reader feels abandoned with a dismissive shrug and a complacent "therein lies a tale," as there is seldom, in this volume, real discussion of the means used to communicate across boundaries which are portrayed between teacher and learner. Freire *does* offer that he does not believe that this is a boundary which can be merely collapsed, as we can imagine the most unreflective sort of humanist might claim that one has to become child-like in order to study a child.

To the contrary, he claims that the inherent tension between the educator and the student can be a reminder to the self-conscious educator to maintain criticality:

> While we have to learn from our students (whether peasants, urban workers, or graduate students) this does not mean that teachers and students are the same, I don't think so . . . (There is) a general difference between the educator and the student. This is usually also a difference of generations . . . The difference between the educator and the student is a phenomenon involving a certain permanent tension, which is, after all, the same tension and this difference, they must be constantly alert to not letting these differences become antagonistic." (p. 177)

Yet, once again, readers are left feeling that their nodding assent has been elicited, but then they are abandoned without any development of this idea. Certainly, at first glance, it appears obvious that such contextual differences should not "become antagonistic" and make educator and student oppositional to one another by becoming antagonistic, but just what lies behind the interpretation of "antagonistic" is woefully glossed. (For Freire, it seems, this would include practices such as Socratic goading, teachers who insist on drills, rote learning, or the introduction of any level of abstraction which might make the student squirm a bit.) Never are we stimulated to ask *how* this inevitable tension can be made a pedagogical resource.

Similarly, as we are invited to scoff along at the "nutritionist concept" of education, we as readers may be startled to see that we have simultaneously rejected any place for memorization or drilling in pedagogical practice, accepting unwittingly that these are practices

which merely reflect the will to domination and erode the learner's unique needs and desires. My discomfort here is that the controversial is often disguised within the spirited invective against bad education. This is the consequence I surmise not of any deliberate intention on the part of Freire, but is the result of his always addressing an oppositional ideology of education. His sympathetic reader is thus left feeling that having accepted the basic intentions of Freire, no further substantive learning is necessary, or at least little will occur within these pages. The teacher here no longer finds the provocation to become a student through the testing of ideas which undoubtedly would contradict Freire's principles.

For instance, in Ontario the notion that good education precludes any rote learning is meeting some committed resistance, even from within the ranks of humanistic educators. Since a 1968 statement of provincial objectives recommends the abandonment of structured curriculum in favor of child-centered education stressing the individuality of each student, teachers have objected that they, then, are singled out as the source of reading problems rather than social structure or the peculiarities of this method. (And, eventually, the individual learners shoulder the blame for their inadequate literacy.) The preference for emphasizing individuality over common needs, some claim, has led to an anomic educational situation (Weir, 1986). Here I will invoke Hegel, (whom, incidentally, Freire dismisses as abstract):

> Individual souls are distinguished from one another by an infinite number of contingent modifications. Butcopy 2741 2751 to this infinity belongs to the spurious kind of infinite. One should not therefore rate the peculiarities of people too highly. On the contrary, the assertion that the teacher should carefully adjust himself to the individuality of each of his pupils, studying and developing it, must be treated as idle chatter . . . The peculiarities of children are tolerated within the family circle; but at school there begins a life subject to general regulation, to a rule which applies to all; it is a place where the mind must be brought to lay aside its idiosyncracies, to know and to desire the universal, to accept the existing general culture. this reshaping of the soul, this alone is what education means. The more educated the man is, the less is there apparent in his behaviour anything peculiar only to him, anything therefore that is nearly contingent. (1971, pp. 51-52)

Certainly I do not mean to sound like one who is nostagically longing for a return to the abstraction of standardization. But a major issue has been given a mechanical treatment by Freire in his volume, and I am certain that his varied experience from Harvard to the asentamiento would have enabled him to devote a more substantive and energetic conversation to it. How does an educator achieve a balance beween the mechanical and interactive aspects of teaching? Here that balance is ignored as discipline as a whole is collapsed into memorization. Part of this discipline, I would claim, involves the

learner's cultivation of an instinct for the right question to ask. This ability to query a situation or problem pointedly is an aim of education, not a starting point which it can be assumed the learner already owns.

In this volume Freire has good issues but glosses the good questions which ground them. That is, a weak notion of dialectic is exemplified when discussion of how his issues are born from questions of pedagogical commitment is muffled. Thus, the questions behind claims are disguised here, in spite of Freire's explicit belief that no action is neutral (and especially no pedagogy). For throughout Freire stresses the reminder that education is *always* both theoretical and political.

To collect what it is that Freire is *for* when he is not being polemical in this volume, his pedagogy is advocating the inculcation of a literacy that does not destroy oral culture. In oral cultures there is a tacit recognition that everyday life is more profound than any other influence, a recognition that Freire wants to see preserved by avoiding such practices as the use of abstract and decontextualized textbooks to impart literacy in the Third World. Reading from his samples of phrases used in massive literacy campaigns, we can imagine that one response on the part of a peasant to a phrase such as "The wing is of the bird" would be to desire to hang on to illiteracy as a means of resisting the domination of literacy. For it is only in the spontaneity of everyday life that one can be sure of preserving one's individuality within the hegemonic demands generated by the aggregate's power. Perhaps it is this recognition of the potentially alienating effects of literate culture which can help account for phenomena such as the almost 23% *rise* in illiteracy in a wealthy province like Ontario since 1931 (Weir, 1986). For while liberation is supposed to accompany the coming of literacy, its realization can also have hellish implications. We need only think of one potentially dangerous consequence of the achievement of cultural literacy—the computer revolution—and its effect on one group of "literates," the largely female labor force of office workers. Indeed bureaucracy owes the very possibility of its existence to literate culture, and it is certainly in opposition to most features of oral culture with its commitment to ignore the relevance of individuality, its suppression of physicality (Freire is made very nervous by teachers who cause students to have ill-at-ease hands), and its adherence to rule. In short, bureaucracy is one extreme of literate culture capable of transforming the individual into pure codes, which is certainly an abhorrent occurrence to Freire. Thus, in this regard, I would like to hear Freire question his own assumptions more and demonstrate how the pitfalls of literacy might be shunned.

But while he seems to enthusiastically embrace the *19th* and *20th* century goal of achieving maximal literacy, he is decidedly against what he considers the wrong motives for the achievement of literacy.

To illustrate why Freire holds abstract textuality in such contempt, I will quote from Plato, whom Freire spuriously dismisses as he does most seminal figures in the educational tradition. Note, however indirectly, the way in which Freire's reserve about the use of textuality has unwittingly taken a page out of Plato's book. Socrates tells Phaedrus:

> written words seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you the same thing forever . . . (and) anyone who leaves behind him a written manual and likewise anyone who takes it over from him, on the supposition that such writing will provide something reliable and permanent, must be exceedingly simple-minded. (275, 277)

In addition to the abstraction of texts from the context of the living world of the everyday, Freire objects to the falsely motivated drive for literacy. The instrumentalism of urbanity means that education becomes seen only as a means of mobility and as a commodity. Its use-value then becomes only a means of an unrelated end. On the other hand, the alternative should not be the abstract purity of education for education's sake, without regard to practical relevance. Freire desires to preserve the very personal and practical joy that literacy can bring to individuals.

It is on this score that Freire's advice shows his commitment. He reminds that good teaching cannot occur in the absence of spirit and love, and, referring to the example of Che Guevera, illustrates that the educator needs a reserve of strength and commitment that is not fueled only by student gratitude, as conditions may always preclude this. He provides valuable counsel here on the educator's need to avoid emulating the student's potential fatalism, as shown, say, by the student who denies a desire for literacy. In issues of spirit and commitment Freire is able to goad us with simple profundities such as "one cannot aim to preserve structure as one elicits to change it."

My regrets about this volume are that Freire does not treat his reader as an equally committed educator, perhaps with different foci and opinions, but with a shared commitment to the value of education for the particular learner rather than solely for the abstract standard of the academy. While the book's intended audience is "teacher" more than "academic," this does not mean that there is not a common resource within the tradition of education for that commitment. Thus he need not always begin the dialogue by critiquing the uncritical reader, be they tyrannically patriarchal, common-sensically functionalist, mechanically humanitarian—in short, always either mistaken or malintentioned. *The Politics of Education* begins its arguments with the assumption that it addresses a reader who needs to be chastised for treating the illiterate negatively—that is—either abstractly, disregarding the peasant's

point of view, or unsympathetically, by assuming the peasant is a mere tool of production or a diseased one in need of the social worker's medicine. In his refusal to address his readers as different and yet sincerely committed peers, and thus to actually *engage* them in conversation, Freire affirms that very stratified discourse from which he seeks to lead us away. His own principles, commitment, a respect for education, however, do appear even if they are inadequately practiced here; it is in this spirit that this volume can remind and reinvogorate his community of fellow educators.

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In the last analysis my action is the most important element for telling me about the efficiency of my epistemological position. Research and Action are together, in a dialectical relationship. To the extent that academics don't do this, the practice they organize, based on the knowledge they get in the process of research, will fail.

As I read and reread *The Politics of Education*, these words of Paulo Freire echoed from a recent and memorable past—summer 1979 in Ann Arbor. Then as now, I was profoundly influenced by his Pedagogy of Praxis; an influence that I trace back to my preexile days in South Africa where "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" was banned as a subversive revolutionary text in the early 70s. And rightly so, I have always regarded Freire's work as subversive of the status quo. To read Freire is to recreate one's history, to critically relive one's past and reinvent one's future—to engage in what he calls auto-critique. This book demands passion and engagement no less than his earlier texts. For, in the *Politics of Education*, we are presented with a collage of Freire's "thought-language"—a collection of 13 essays revised and rewritten for this publication. I will divide the