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Paulo Freire

A Critical Encounter

Edited by

Peter Leonard, and Peter McLaren

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pate in the construction of new social formations dependent upon divergent cultural and gendered practices, discourses, and identities.

One of the main messages of this book is that we must not lose sight of the need to recognize multiple constructions of power and authority in a society riven by inequalities of power and exclusionary divisions of privilege and how these are implicated in the constitution of subjectivity differentiated by race, class, and sexual preference. We produce history in our thinking, and in our dialogue and actions with others and as this book makes clear, there are many paths which we may take in our own development as historical actors and in the propagation of communities and societies in which we can struggle toward a better local and global future.

Another important position stressed in this volume is that as many new groups—both reformist and revolutionary—enter the field of action for liberation, there must be a growing recognition of new forms of subjectivity and new strategies of emancipatory praxis which are derived from non-Western settings or beyond the borders of so-called developed nations. Narratives of refusal and struggle which will lead to new forms of political culture and structures of radical democracy are not only emerging from Eastern Europe but from struggles in Latin America. Narratives of liberation must not ignore the cultural particularism of their roots, yet at the same time they must not abandon the opportunity to co-ordinate themselves on a global basis. The chapters in this volume also suggest that the hope which sustains struggles for liberation arise with the experiences and the suffering of the oppressed, a hope which refuses at all costs to exercise a totalizing closure on their future.

It is clear from the messages contained in this book that the struggle for democracy is the centerpiece for the struggle for liberation. Yet it is also clear that democracy has different meanings for different peoples throughout the world. For some, it is synonymous with capitalism, the propagation of acquisitiveness and greed, the barbaric practices of colonialism, and conceptually opposed to socialism. For others, it is a process of achieving equality of social justice for all peoples through popular sovereignty. This book confronts the reader with the overarching question: What accounts for the passionate struggles which the idea of democracy has created in countries across the globe? But more significantly, what accounts for the fact that some countries have greater opportunities for realizing the dream of democracy while others cling only to its shadow which has been cast from the more industrialized and postindustrial nations? And why is it that when democracy is claimed to be victorious, such a victory can almost invariably be traced to the exploitation of the colonized other, to those who inhabit the vortex of imperialism and oppression—to those who live at the periphery of the global state known as the Third World? These are questions with which the authors in the McLaren and Leonard volume attempt to grapple.

The chapters in this volume offer no smooth consensus as to what, in effect, the consequences of democracy might be for the future. Yet they do



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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Absent discourses: Paulo Freire and the dangerous memories of liberation

This volume of chapters on the work of Paulo Freire is an intellectual contribution to the central political project of our time: how to struggle for the social transformation of our postmodern and postcolonial world in the interests of the liberation of subordinate populations and cultures from the structures and ideologies which dominate them. It is a domination which is in part traditional and in part the degrading consequence of the process of modernization, of the development of new forces and relations of production which negates for most of the world the potential for human freedom and physical well-being which the Western Enlightenment project has made its goal.

This is a book which centers on the work of Paulo Freire not primarily to celebrate him, but as its sub-title suggests, to engage in a critical encounter with a philosopher and revolutionary educator of pivotal significance to the project of liberation and social transformation. To participate in a productive dialogue with Freire is to become involved in a cultural politics which is committed to a belief in the transformative possibilities of willed human action, both individual and collective. The authors of this book, whatever the sources of their critiques or the varying interests they express, stand on the same side of the political struggle as that occupied by Paulo Freire. Even disagreement with Freire on any particular issue shows us that, in the words of Carlos Alberto Torres, 'we can stay with Freire or against Freire, but not without Freire.'

Many authors in this book refer to the biographical details of Freire's life and work. This is because he is a revolutionary activist whose concrete practice is the basis of his educational philosophy: his critical praxis demands attention. Over the last two decades in fact, few individuals have made such an innovative and far-reaching impact on educational practice throughout the world. As a Professor at the University of Recife in the early 1960s, Freire worked with peasants in the Brazilian Northeast during the country's national literacy campaign. At this time, he evolved a theory of literacy based on conviction that every human being is capable of critically engaging the world in a dialogical encounter with others. In 1964 Freire was arrested



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the Adult Functional Competency model as being narrowly instrumental and utilitarian and thus essentially reproducing oppressive relationships. He suggests that a humanizing model of functional literacy is possible, one which furthers the ontological historical vocation of humans to become more human, rather than reinforcing their subordinancy.

Whilst Freire's pedagogy originated in Third World countries, its connection to First World countries and to different historical circumstances raises significant issues in this volume. In a chapter on the Latin American and African political backgrounds to Freire's educational programs, Carlos Alberto Torres in 'From the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to *A Luta Continua*: the political pedagogy of Paulo Freire' raises important political questions about Freire's work. This neo-Marxist and specifically Gramscian interrogation about the kinds of struggles within which Freire's pedagogy has a place centers on whether it is a pre- or post-revolutionary pedagogy, and whether the development of critical consciousness might be thought of as the process of building a counterhegemony. Questions about the political purposes to which 'progressive' pedagogy is put are especially important when a wealthy First World country develops programs to assist Third World countries to achieve certain social goals. How are we to judge such programs?

Described by bell hooks (Gloria Watkins) as a 'playful dialogue with myself,' 'bell hooks speaking about Paulo Freire—the man, his work' evokes the poignant memory of her first meeting with Freire and describes the ongoing dialogue she has had with his writings throughout the course of her own development as a radical intellectual and political activist. Defending her indebtedness to Freire's work in the face of challenges from (predominantly) white feminists, she places the sexism of Freire's language and his phallogocentric concept of liberation within an historical perspective while at the same time stresses the importance of his ideas and his work for people of color and other peripheralized and oppressed groups in the United States.

This may be seen as a challenge to the revolutionary political commitment of the Western authors contributing to this book. Are we seeking transformation or reform? The possibilities, problems, and challenges of using Freirean philosophy and pedagogy in Western countries other than the United States are illustrated in Peter Leonard's chapter. Leonard's account of attempts to develop a critical social work education and practice in Britain is outlined in his chapter 'Critical pedagogy and state welfare: intellectual encounters with Freire and Gramsci, 1974–86', Leonard argues the critical importance of Freirean perspectives in social work education and shares with readers his personal struggle with the problems involved in recreating these perspectives in different cultural and historical conditions.

In an interview with Freire by Donaldo Macedo entitled 'A dialogue with Paulo Freire', Freire attempts to answer some of the issues raised by various authors in this volume, choosing to concentrate on the concept of gender and oppression. Macedo poses several challenging questions to Freire in this



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offer a system in which the locus of the learning process is shifted from the teacher to the student. And this shift overtly signifies an altered *power* relationship, not only in the classroom but in the broader social canvas as well.

This type of extrapolation is fairly typical of the US reception of European philosophy and cultural criticism. For example, after more than a decade during which many in the humanities, especially literature, made a career out of working with the concept 'Reconstruction' as formulated by Jacques Derrida, treating the French philosopher as a methodologist of literary criticism, one or two books finally appeared that reminded the American audience that Derrida is, after all, a philosopher and that his categories constituted an alternative to the collective systems of Western thought.² Some writers have even begun to grasp that Derrida may be considered as an ethicist. Similarly, another philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, has been taken up by sociology as well as a small fraction of younger philosophers and literary theorists and read in terms of their respective disciplines. What escapes many who have appropriated Habermas's categories is his project: to reconstruct historical materialism in a manner that takes into account the problem of communication and especially the non-revolutionary prospect of the contemporary world (Habermas 1979). Whether one agrees or disagrees with this judgement, the *political* configuration of his theoretical intervention ought to be inescapable, except for those bound by professional contexts.

None of these appropriations should be especially surprising. We are prone to metonymic readings, carving out our subjects to suit our own needs. In all of these cases, including that of Freire, there are elective affinities that make plausible the ways in which these philosophers and critics are read. For example, with the progressive education tradition, Freire rejects the 'banking' approach to pedagogy according to which teachers, working within the limits imposed by their academic discipline and training, open students' heads to the treasures of civilized knowledge. He insists that no genuine learning can occur unless students are actively involved, through *praxis* in controlling their own education (here 'praxis' is understood in the sense employed by several strains of Marxism—political practices informed by reflection). He is firmly on the side of a pedagogy that begins with helping students achieve a grasp of the concrete conditions of their daily lives, of the limits imposed by their situation on their ability to acquire what is sometimes called 'literacy', of the meaning of the truism 'knowledge is power.' Freire emphasizes 'reflection,' in which the student assimilates knowledge in accordance with his/her own needs, rather than rote learning and is dedicated, like some elements of the progressive tradition to helping the learner become a subject of his/her own education rather than an object of the system's educational agenda. Like many progressives, Freire assails education that focuses on individual mobility chances while eschewing collective self-transformation.³

There are enough resemblances here to validate the reduction of Freire to



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'outside' society. They have always been 'inside'—inside the structure that made them 'beings for others'. The solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression but to transform the structure so they can become 'beings for themselves'.... They may discover through existential experience that their present way of life is irreconcilable with their vocation to become fully human.... If men are searchers and their ontological vocation is humanization, sooner or later they may perceive the contradiction in which banking education seeks to maintain them and then engage themselves in the struggle for their liberation.

(Freire 1990:61–2)

Echoes of Hegelianism here. Freire invokes the familiar humanistic Marxian project: the revolution's aim is to transform what Frantz Fanon terms 'the wretched of the earth' from 'beings for others' to 'beings for themselves,' a transformation that entails changing the conditions of material existence such as relations of ownership and control of labor and the lordship-bondage relation which is the psychosocial expression of the same thing.

Freire invokes the notion of the 'ontological vocation' to become human. In a brief dialogue with Lukács who, in his tribute to Lenin (Lukács 1970), endorses the role of the political vanguard to 'explain' the nature of the oppression to the masses, since their consciousness has been victimized by commodity fetishism Freire emphasizes the idea of self-liberation, proposing a pedagogy whose task is to unlock the intrinsic humanity of the oppressed. Here the notion of ontological vocation is identical with the universal, humanizing praxis of and by the most oppressed rather than 'for' them. For a genuine liberatory praxis does not cease even with the revolutionary act of self-liberation. The true vocation of humanization is to liberate humanity, including the oppressors and those, like teachers, who are frequently recruited from among the élite classes to work with the oppressed, but who unwittingly perpetuate domination through teaching.

Note here that Freire theorizes the class struggle, not as a zero sum game in which the victory of the oppressed constitutes a defeat for the oppressor, but as a praxis with universal significance and, more to the point, universal gain. For, as Freire argues, as oppressors of their fellow humans, the 'dominant elites' lose their humanity, are no longer capable of representing the general will to complete the project of humanization. *This* is the significance of working with the most oppressed, who in Brazil and the rest of Latin America, are poor agricultural laborers and the unemployed huddled in the city's *flavellas*, shanty towns, which in São Paulo, for instance, harbor a million and a half people. Many of these are migrants from forest and agricultural regions that are in the process of being leveled for wood processing, mining and 'modern' corporate farming.

As we can see in the citation above, Freire plays ambiguously with Marx's notion that the working class is in 'radical chains.' Where Marx sees the



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ily, repudiate the theoretical principle that the world and its divisions is constituted as a series of discursive formations within which subjects pour themselves. But, he is addressing himself not to the bourgeois subject to which the old humanism refers—an individual ‘consciousness’ seeking the truth through reason, including science—but to the possibility of working with a new problematic of the subject. Unlike twentieth-century Marxism, especially in Third World contexts, which accepts the ineluctability of domination based upon its position that underdevelopment breeds more or less permanent dependency (just as Lukács and the Frankfurt School essentially hold to reification as a permanent barrier to self-emancipation) in all of its aspects, Freire’s is a philosophy of *hope*.

Recall Freire’s statement, ‘problem posing education is revolutionary futurity.’ Its prophetic character crucially depends on specific interventions rather than declarations of faith. The teacher/intellectual becomes a vehicle for liberation only by advancing a pedagogy that decisively transfers control of the educational enterprise from *her/himself* as subject to the subaltern student. The mediation between the dependent present and the independent future is *dialogic* education:

Dialogue is the encounter between men [*sic*], mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming—between those who deny other men [*sic*] the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied to them. Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression.

(Freire 1990:76)

Thus, Freire’s deployment of psychoanalysis is not directed toward *personal* liberation but instead to new forms of social praxis. The basis of this praxis is, clearly, the overriding notion that humans are an unfinished project. This project, for Freire is grounded in his conception that to be fully human, in contrast to other species of animals, is to shed the image according to which only the ‘dominant elites,’ including leftist intellectuals, can be self-directed. His pedagogy, which posits the central category of *dialogue*, entails that recovering the voice of the oppressed is the fundamental condition for human emancipation.

FROM REVOLUTION TO RADICAL DEMOCRACY

I have deliberately abstracted Freire’s social, psychological, and political philosophy from the social context in which it emerged in order to reveal its intellectual content. However, one cannot leave matters here. Without com-



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be no science that provides certitude, either in its categories, its descriptions, much less its previsions.

Reporting on a conversation with workers' leaders in São Paulo, Freire *defines* class consciousness as the power and the will by workers and other oppressed and exploited strata to *share* in the formulation of the conditions of knowledge and futurity. This demand inevitably alters the situation of power: intellectuals must be consistent in the translation of their democratic visions to practice. In other words, they must share the power over knowledge, share the power to shape the future.

This exchange is a meditation on Latin American revolutionary history and current political reality, most especially the failure of Leninist versions of revolutionary Marxism and socialism. Explicitly, Freire warns against defining the goal of radical movements exclusively in terms of social justice and a more equitable society since these objectives can conceivably be partially achieved without shared decision-making, especially over knowledge and political futures. *The key move away from the old élitist conception in which the intellectuals play a dominant role is to challenge the identity of power with the state.* Faundez sets the stage for this shift:

I think that the power and the struggle for power have to be rediscovered on the basis of resistance which makes up the power of the people, the semiological, linguistic, emotional, political and cultural expressions which the people use to resist the power of domination. And it is beginning from the power which I would call primary power, that power and the struggle for power have to be rediscovered.

(Freire and Faundez 1989:64)

Freire's reply sets a new ground for that rediscovery. Having focused traditionally on workers' and peasant movements, he now enters significantly into the debates about the relationship between class and social movements. He names movements of the urban and rural poor who, with the assistance of priests from the liberationist wing of the Catholic Church, began in the 1970s to redefine power as the power of resistance. But he goes on to speak of movements of 'environmentalists, organized women and homosexuals,' as 'new' social movements whose effectivity must inexorably influence the strategies of the revolutionary parties:

It is my opinion today that either the revolutionary parties will work more closely with these movements and so prove their authenticity within them—and to do that they must rethink their own understanding of their party, which is tied up with their traditional practice—or they will be lost. Being lost would mean becoming more and more rigid and increasingly behav-



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political alienation in society. Rather, Freirean educators pose critical problems to students, treat them as complicated, substantial human beings, and encourage curiosity and activism about knowledge and the world.

PROBLEM-POSING: THE KEY TO CRITICAL DIALOGUE

A Freirean critical teacher is a problem-poser who asks thought-provoking questions and who encourages students to ask their own questions. Through problem-posing, students learn to question answers rather than merely to answer questions. In this pedagogy, students experience education as something they do, not as something done to them. They are not empty vessels to be filled with facts, or sponges to be saturated with official information, or vacant bank accounts to be filled with deposits from the required syllabus.

Freire's famous metaphor for traditional education, the 'banking' method, focused on the stifling of creative and critical thought in mass education. In 'banking'-style classrooms, Freire wrote that:

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat.... In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.... The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world.

(Freire 1970:58, 60)

Instead of banking education which domesticates students, problem-posing offers a search for knowledge. In this mutual search, the teacher and students develop 'co-intentionality,' that is, mutual intentions, which make the study collectively owned, not the teacher's sole property. This mutuality helps students and teacher overcome the alienation from each other developed year by year in traditional banking classrooms, where a one-way monologue of teacher-talk silences students. Co-intentionality begins when the teacher presents a problem for inquiry related to a key aspect of student experience, so that students see their thought and language (subjectivity) in the study.

Knowing, to Freire, means being an active subject who questions and transforms. To learn is to recreate the way we see ourselves, our education, and our society. 'We wanted a literacy program,' Freire wrote in *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973), 'which would be an introduction to the democratization of culture...a program which itself would be an act of cre-



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so absent in our upbringing and education' (Freire 1973:52). Freire referred impatiently to the 'instilled certainty' teachers learn, that to teach means to lecture, to maintain a one-way monologue in the classroom.

The banking method is the model from which teachers and students draw their instilled certainties about education. Not only does this method reduce the students' ability to question authority, but it is also posed as the high standards of a serious teacher. 'What I am concerned above all to do,' Freire said in *Learning to Question*, 'is to resist, theoretically and practically, two connections which are generally made.... The first is the connection between a democratic style and low academic standards; the second is that made between high academic standards and an authoritarian style.... Democracy and freedom are not a denial of high academic standards' (pp. 33, 34). His insistence on rigor and structure in liberating education preoccupied an entire chapter in *A Pedagogy for Liberation*.

Inside a rigorous dialogue, the teacher poses problems and asks questions, while encouraging students to do the same. But, the critical teacher who teaches for democracy and against inequality also has the right and the responsibility to put forward her or his ideas. The problem-posing teacher is not mute, value-free, or permissive. The democratic teacher in this pedagogy extends the critique of domination beyond teacher-student relations and the education system into a critique of the system at the root of social conditions. This critique of economics is not a teacherly lecture on good and evil. Dialogic teachers do not separate themselves from the dialogue. The teacher who relates economic power in society to the knowledge under inquiry in the classroom cannot impose her or his views on students but must present them inside a thematic discussion in language accessible to students, who have the freedom to question and disagree with the teacher's analysis. This delicate balance between teacher and students is a 'near mystery' of democratic practice, according to Freire, who suggests that teachers have to lead the class with a democratic learning process as well as with critical ideas. 'They must affirm themselves without thereby disaffirming their students,' he concludes in *Learning to Question* (p. 34).

MUTUAL AFFIRMATION: TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN LIBERATING EDUCATION

In addition to a critique of domination underlying his pedagogy, Freire also poses an 'anthropological' notion of culture. According to this idea, culture is the actions and results of humans in society, the way people interact in their communities, and the addition people make to the world they find. Culture is what ordinary people do every day, how they behave, speak, relate, and make things. Everyone has and makes culture, not only aesthetic specialists or members of the élite. Culture is the speech and behavior in everyday



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cializes teachers from the dull and domineering teacher-talk they are socialized into, transforming them into problem-posers and dialogue-leaders instead.

- 7 *Multicultural*. The class recognizes the various racial, ethnic, regional, age-based, and sexual cultures in society. It takes a critical attitude towards discrimination and inequality. It examines the cultures of dominant and non-dominant groups. The curriculum is balanced for gender, class, and race.
- 8 *Research-Oriented*. This critical pedagogy is based in classroom and community research by the teacher into the speech, behaviors, and conditions of the students, as well as into their levels of cognitive and affective development. It also expects students to be researchers inquiring into problems posed about daily experience, society, and academic material.
- 9 *Activist*. The classroom itself is active and interactive thanks to problem-posing, co-operative learning, and participatory formats. The critical dialogue also seeks action outcomes from the inquiry wherever feasible. Is knowledge power? How do people act on knowledge and from knowledge to gain power, to change things?
- 10 *Affective*. The critical, democratic classroom is interested in the broadest development of human feeling as well as the development of social inquiry and conceptual habits of mind. The problem-posing, dialogic method includes a range of emotions from humor to compassion to indignation.

This is one way to define some of the educational and political ideas which Freirean critical pedagogy offers to teachers and students. This educational terrain is still a frontier. There are many open spaces yet to be discovered. To be a critical, empowering educator is a choice to be what Henry Giroux has called a 'transformative intellectual.' Giroux's notions of 'civic courage' and a 'pedagogy of possibility' invite teachers to become change-agents in school and society, for critical thought and action, for democracy, equality, ecology, and peace, against domination, manipulation, and the waste of human and natural resources.

Inside the frontier of critical education, Freire has provided guidance and inspiration. But in making his contribution, he denies that his ideas or methods should be followed as rigid models. We have to reinvent liberating education for our own situations, according to Freire. One superb example of this local reinvention of Freirean ideas is the Adult Learning Project (ALP) in the Gorgie-Dalry district of Edinburgh, analyzed and chronicled by Gerri Kirkwood and Colin Kirkwood (1989) after a decade of development. Gool, northern Scotland is some distance from tropical Brazil, and the Kirkwoods report how their local conditions shaped the limits and possibilities for liberatory learning:



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adopted in educational programs around the world since then and have been very influential. Of course, this is the case also in his native Brazil. Following the coup (backed by US economic support and aid at the military and trade union level), the military government began a project of economic and social modernization, along with an intense political repression that included a suppression of civil liberties. In a wave of barbarism unprecedented in the country's history, thousands were arrested, tortured, or killed by both military and paramilitary assassination squads. Among the first to be targeted were priests, religious and lay persons active in movements for social change, and educators and university professors. In fact, education was one of the prime targets of the military government's crackdown.

The educational policy of the military government included the following:

- 1 A rationalization and modernization of the universities. The main lines of this project were drawn up through an agreement with USAID which came to be known as the MEC-USAID Accord (MEC means Ministry of Education).
- 2 A campaign of mass literacy which could presumably contribute to the integration of the great mass of illiterates into the global project of social modernization, which became known as MOBRAL (Movimento Brasileiro de Alfabetização).
- 3 A project of reform of elementary and secondary education in order to fit the outcome of education to the manpower needs of a modernizing economy.

These were the objectives of the educational project of the military dictatorship. Whether this was achieved as it was intended is another matter. It can even be debated whether the project was successful by its own criteria. What is certain, however, is that the educational debate in Brazil during the fifteen years or so that followed the coup was polarized between those government officials who planned and conducted the educational policy and those who opposed it.

The opposition came from many directions and also took many forms. Protests against the MEC-USAID Accord came primarily from social movements within the university—students and some professors. But it also came from rank-and-file teachers and researchers from disciplines such as sociology whose analysis of the educational policy of the military dictatorship revealed it to be a political instrument of its disastrous general social and economic policy. Research by [Cunha \(1975\)](#) and [Freitag \(1977\)](#) constituted exemplary and pioneering analyses which inaugurated a long and productive tradition of political and sociological critiques of governmental educational policy. Of course, Freire's thinking was very much present during these years. It served both as a theoretical framework to analyze some of the educa-



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should be submitted to criticism, challenged, and perhaps selectively appropriated by the dominated classes. This is why Saviani calls his perspective 'Pedagogia Histórico-Crítica' (historical-critical pedagogy) although it became known in Brazil simply as 'Pedagogia dos Conteúdos' (Pedagogy of Contents) which is a shorthand for 'Pedagogia Crítico-Social dos Conteúdos' (Social-Critical Pedagogy Based on Contents) a label created by one of Saviani's prominent followers, José Carlos Libâneo.

Before we discuss Saviani's ideas we should say something about their most immediate sources. Perhaps the thinker that has exerted the greatest influence on Saviani's pedagogical ideas is Antonio Gramsci, if we are to judge by the many quotations he makes of Gramsci's works.² Another important influence has been George Snyders, a professor affiliated with the French Communist Party who has also been active in attacking the pedagogies based on active methods (Snyders 1974 and 1976).

While the syllogistic thinking of Saviani is frequently brilliant (and we have not done justice to it here), it is also conceptually limited. At the same time as it was acquiring a wide acceptance in leftist educational circles, it was being submitted to intense and serious criticism. We are not going to summarize this criticism here (see, for example, Nosella 1986 and Freitas 1987); rather we are going to limit ourselves to sketching our own critique of Saviani's ideas.

First of all, by failing to make a sociological analysis of the connections between knowledge, education, and power, Saviani is unable to build a pedagogical alternative which is distinct from existing liberal statements about education. He makes prescriptive assertions about what the connections between education and politics *should be* without analyzing what the present connections *are* like. He also ignores what critics like Bourdieu, Althusser, and others have taught us about those links. The most that Saviani can do is to make idealist statements about the role of education in relation to politics. Saviani is depoliticizing education at the same moment he proclaims that education is all the more political when it performs its specific function of transmitting existing knowledge, albeit in a critical way. How is it possible to challenge existing knowledge without challenging the connection between knowledge and politics?

Another problem with Saviani's perspective is the separation he makes between politics and education. In his view one becomes political in and through education by learning the truth about reality and society in order to (albeit instrumentally) act politically afterwards and outside of education, presumably in the larger society. In school, one can *talk about politics*, but *not make politics*. Education becomes then *a preparation* for politics. Let us assume that Saviani is talking about children's education because it is immediately apparent that no adult education program can, in any strict sense, be separated from politics. Even so, to admit that one first learns to be political in school and then act politically in society, is equivalent to asserting a sepa-



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important struggle is still the one to guarantee access to and permanence in the public educational system for all. This is an objective around which there is full agreement. There is also agreement on the objective of the internal democratization of the educational structure. Instead of schools being directed by a distant and centralized bureaucracy, progressive educators are pressing for more voice and action for the people directly involved in the educational encounter—teachers, students, parents.

In conclusion, we can say that Paulo Freire's continued activism since his return to Brazil protects him against being reified and sanctified while still alive. If for nothing more, Saviani's objections to some of his ideas remain a useful and laudable contribution to radical pedagogical thinking and practice in Brazil.

NOTES

- [1] In one instance he builds an argument against the *Escola Nova* (as progressivism is known in Brazil) and Dewey's ideas. He argues that progressivist methods tend to be reactionary in that they are based on the assumption that learners should be engaged themselves in 'research'—that is, in the elaboration of knowledge. Children of the oppressed classes have been unable to get access to knowledge through such means, thus depriving them of possessing an important instrument of emancipation. This objection extends to Freire's pedagogy, which Saviani calls *Escola Nova Popular* (Saviani 1983). In contrast, he sees a pedagogy centered on the transmission of relevant content as essentially democratic.
- [2] Saviani's interpretation of Gramsci's educational ideas is similar to that of Entwistle in *Antonio Gramsci—Conservative Schooling for Radical Politics* (Entwistle 1979).

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pedagogy into the construction of a contestatory space where a radical and plural democracy might begin to take root.

We shall begin by addressing a concern that follows from a poststructuralist assumption: namely, that theory is a form of practice that involves the imbrication of experience, language, and power. In attempting to understand how knowledge is produced, one cannot simply give primacy to experience without taking into account how experience is structured and power is produced through language, whether this language refers to a tabloid editorial, local argot, or treatises on popular culture by critical theorists. In a similar fashion, one cannot simply privilege language because ideology is lived not only through language, but also through experience, that is, through discursive, non-discursive, and extratextual forms of knowing of the body (de Certeau 1984; McLaren 1988).

Experience takes into account the events we encounter, social practices we engage, choices we make, and accidents of history that befall us. For instance, reading about racism and oppression is not the same thing as living as its victim. A major consideration for the development of contextual, critical knowledge is affirming the experiences of students to the extent that their voices are acknowledged as an important part of the dialogue; but affirming students' voices does not necessarily mean that educators should take the meaning that students give to their experiences at face value, as if experience speaks romantically or even tragically for itself. The task of the critical educator is to provide the conditions for individuals to acquire a language that will enable them to reflect upon and shape their own experiences and in certain instances transform such experiences in the interest of a larger project of social responsibility (Giroux and McLaren 1989). This language is not the language of the metropolitan intellectual or the high-priests of the post-avant-garde, although it may borrow from their insights. It is a language that operates critically by promoting a deep affinity for the suffering of the oppressed and their struggle for liberation, by brushing commonsense experience against the grain, by interfering with the codes that bind cultural life shut and prevent its rehistoricization and politicization, by puncturing the authority of monumental culture and causing dominant representations to spill outside their prescribed and conventional limits. In the pages that follow, we will examine these issues in relation to Freire's perspective and his development of critical literacy.

Specifically with reference to the current literacy debate and the struggle with the academy over the canon, Freire's position eschews a tendency to see the world in Manichean terms, as gripped by a titanic struggle between forms of civilized high culture and the contaminating forces of the culture of the masses. Freire's approach to literacy opposes the position of critics such as Allan Bloom, whose *Closing of the American Mind* (1987) has served as a reactionary bludgeon in debates over the liberal arts curriculum. In the mawkish elegance of Bloom's highbrow paradise (which consists of Victorian



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necropolis of Baudrillard's *hyperbaton*, where resistance becomes a mere doubling of the same, where to contest conformity becomes an act of hyper-conformity (see [Hebdige 1988](#) 209). It is to the former, liberatory type of literacy that Freire's work is directed.

All language, according to Freire, works to reproduce dominant forms of power relationships, but it also carries with it the resources for immanent critique, for dismantling the oppressive power structures of the social order, and also for articulating a more transformative and liberating vision of the future. Freire has made it clear that an important correlation exists between advancing and deepening the democratic socialist project and our access to discourses that encourage self-reflexivity about the literalness and otherwise unrecognized and passively accepted meanings of our own reality and those of our fellow human beings. He argues that we need to understand the historical contexts, social practices, cultural forms, and ideologies that give these discourses shape and meaning. Freire teaches us that contradictions in the larger social order have parallels in individual experience and that educators for liberation must restore the political relation between pedagogy and the language of everyday life. Since all pedagogical practices are constituted within regimes of truth, privileging norms, and ruling social arrangements, the important questions for educators become: What pedagogical forms permit emancipation of human potentialities and what social and what institutional structures should be in place for such human capacities to develop politically unimpeded in both the classroom and the larger society (see [Simon 1987](#))?

Freirean-based literacy programs involve an examination of society's hidden economies of power and privilege and how these help to inform students' subjectivities. Too often words that are intimately connected to social relations and cultural power recapitulate the asymmetrical relations of power and privilege of the larger society. As social agents, we are geopolitically arranged by dominant literacies. For example, Enrique [Dussel \(1980\)](#) has tellingly pointed out in his discussion of analectics that the Cartesian *ego cogito*, which informs the subjective voice of First World subjects, enjoys an imperial legacy from 'I conquer' and 'I vanquish' to 'I enslave.' He maintains that the ontology that justifies the empires of the center (i.e. England, Germany, France and the United States), and the ideologies which give them a 'good conscience' are carried in the subjectivities of the colonizer, the oppressor who is unaware of his or her status with respect to the 'other.'

Refusing to fall prey to the modernist illusion of the self as self-cohering, self-situating, self-explaining, non-differential, self-identical, and monocentric, Freire assumes the position that the self is constituted dialectically within language and social action and is capable of exercising a critical consciousness. Even though human subjectivity is not an irreducible nexus of action, desire, belief, and intention, individuals can still assume the position of 'contrary antagonists' to the educational system and its role as a cultural



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strategies are employed to categorize and classify the way ‘we’ understand the social and cultural practices of ‘them.’ In other words, language is more than an arbitrary system of differences in which meaning is guaranteed by the linguistic system itself and the values given to signifying practices within particular linguistic communities. There is no Rosetta Stone—no privileged access to meaning in the sense of discovering the master code that explains how the elements of a social text function together—the unalterable linchpin that holds together the chain of signifiers that is said to constitute culture (which is not to claim that there exists no access to extratextual reality or that reality is an endless deferral or deformation of meaning or an abyssal plummet into infinite semiotic regression). Rather than granting codes a transcendental status that serve as privileged referents around which other meanings are positioned, Freire puts much more emphasis on meaning as a contested event, a terrain of struggle in which individuals take up often conflicting subject positions in relation to signifying practices.

Poststructuralist readings both complement and extend Freire’s position on language. As subjects, we are always constituted by language and cannot step outside of it in order to reflect upon how we are positioned in it. We are always already inscribed in the system of differences that constitute a language. While the structures of language are ontologically dependent on specific communities of speakers, there are no *a priori* rules of language and the relations between signifiers and signified are arbitrary *vis-à-vis* other languages. We effectively follow the rules of language *as if* they were necessary (Pheby 1988). As Keith Pheby notes, discourse is always finite, transitory, and historically situated. Signs are always inhabited or populated by other signs and meanings:

No discourse, not even that concerning the constitution of subjectivity is innocent of ‘ulterior motives’. All discourse is inextricably tied to the political conditions of a culture at any point in its history.

(Pheby 1988:63)

While taking some liberties in positioning Freire’s work within a poststructuralist perspective, it could be argued that meaning for Freire is not the function of the speaker because signs are only known in the context of other signs; meanings are always designated and cannot exist outside of the world of language. Meaning is lived within and through the materiality of discourse as linguistic ‘gestures’ that are constructed within and through bodies. Inscription through the flesh—‘enfleshment’ (in the sense that metaphor is a correlate of patterns of bodily action and interaction; see Jackson 1983 and McLaren 1989)—is the seat of discursive power and the founding act of culture. Freire foregrounds the fact that we can only know the real through regimes of signs, through systems of representation that are historically lived in suffering and celebrating bodies and are the result of class, race, and gen-



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ideologically with and are affectively invested in by the individual interpreting the event. The striking police baton is transformed into a signifier of state brutality; society writes its law into the flesh of the body—a process which McLaren (1988) terms ‘enfleshment’² and de Certeau (1984) calls ‘intextuation.’

At the same time as individual body/subjects are inscribed within the body politic, they are offered a number of dominant and subordinate subject positions to assume: innocent victim, casualty of state-inflicted barbarism, wounded protestor, martyr, freedom fighter. Or perhaps some new subject position is forged in the process. But these ‘choices’ are made largely on the basis of the affective and symbolic economy in which such an event is situated, the discourses available to subjects, their reading formations, and the selection process undertaken.

The point that we are accenting here is that the language of teaching too often serves as a coercive text by restricting or shaping the way in which both teachers and students make sensuous and linguistic sense of their experience. In order to escape an idealized liberalism that too often inflicts the incarnation of patriarchy upon feminine subjectivity, teachers especially need to recognize how much their own personal histories, ideological assumptions, and Eurocentric and patriarchal narrative forms (not to mention those of their students) are grounded in a discursive economics of liberal capitalism. We want to suggest that cultural workers need to recognize that the knowledge and understanding that students are *prevented* from bringing to their experiences is as important as the knowledge and understanding which students are *permitted* to narrate with respect to their lived experiences. It is important, too, to recognize that students may reject certain forms of ‘professional’ adult knowledge as catachrestically invasive of their own identity and meaning.

Krystyna Pomorska (1980) writes that the nature of the language we use determines, at least in part, *how we make sense of our experiences and the type of social action we choose to engage in as a result of interpreting our experiences*. It also determines the range of possibilities we have to organize our social world, to develop new forms of sociality and, as teachers, new forms of pedagogy. If experience is largely understood through language, and language shapes how we see and act *with and on the world*, then it follows that experience itself does not guarantee truth since it is always open to conflicting and contradictory interpretations. That is, our experience is not some fixed or fluid essence, or some concrete reality that exists prior to language, waiting to be reflected by language (Brown 1987). Rather, experience is largely constituted by language.

Experience—‘events and behaviors occurring in social formations’ (de Lauretis 1987:42)—is highly constitutive of subjectivity. Since language enables us to interpret our experience, it follows that language is also constitutive of subjectivity, that is, of an individual’s conscious and unconscious



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experience must not be used as a convenient means of silencing students, no matter how shaky experience has proven to be as a basis of epistemology' (p. 117).

However, Fuss needs to acknowledge to a greater extent how students in classroom settings are *always already* inscribed in institutional, cultural, and social systems of domination, oppression, and power/knowledge relations that reify and demonize the Other in essentialist ways. As bell hooks (1989) has noted, essentialism or identity politics is not something that is misused only or primarily by marginalized groups. Essentialism is abused most often by dominant groups whose subjectivities are constituted in cultural forms and practices that both silence difference and delegitimize and devalue the personalized experiences and voices of the marginalized Other.

Today feminists are often faced with the dilemma of either adhering to essentialist doctrines or fostering the dissolution of feminist struggles into localized, regional, specific struggles representing the interests of particular women (Grosz, 1989). The way out of this dilemma, argues Elizabeth Grosz (1989), comes in recognizing that feminists need not take on universalist and essentialist assumptions in the same way as patriarchs. We would add to this insight bell hooks's (1991) observation that marginalized groups should not be the only groups singled out for exclusionary practices attributed to essentialism; after all, dominant groups employ essentialist strategies that produce exclusionary behavior firmly buttressed by institutionalized structures of domination that do not criticize or check it. And while it is important to oppose essentialist practices that construct identities in exclusionary, monolithic ways, it is important not to relinquish the power of naming one's experience in ways that can help to formulate theories of experience. The complexity of experience—for instance, knowledge of suffering that is often inscribed in the bodies of marginalized peoples—needs to be engaged through what hooks calls 'multiple locations'—and what she terms 'the passion of remembrance.'

Gloria Anzaldúa speaks to the task ahead as one of trying to formulate marginal theories

that are partially outside and partially inside the Western frame of reference (if that is possible), theories that overlap many 'worlds.' We are articulating new positions in these 'in-between,' Borderland worlds of ethnic communities and academies, feminist and job worlds. In our literature, social issues such as race, class and sexual difference are intertwined with the narrative and poetic elements of a text, elements in which theory is embedded. In our *mestizaje* theories we create new categories for those of us left out or pushed out of the existing ones. We recover and examine non-Western aesthetics while critiquing Western aesthetics; recover and examine non-rational modes and 'blanked-out' realities while critiquing rational, consensual reality; recover and examine indigenous languages



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