

On Paulo Freire's Philosophy of Praxis and the Foundations of Liberation Education

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This essay examines the ontological and epistemological foundations of Paulo Freire's philosophy of praxis and critiques the structure of his argument. It outlines a more consistent historicist interpretation of liberation education that retains the liberatory power of modernism and its critique of dehumanization, recognizes the malleability and contradictions of identity, embraces epistemic uncertainties and the varieties of reason in knowledge, and respects the plural conceptions of the good which can shape moral and political life. Finally, the essay argues that this understanding of liberation education requires an ethics grounded in militant nonviolence.

Nearly four years after his death, a world still mourns Paulo Freire. Freire's theory about the relationship between liberation and education has inspired and informed countless efforts to make life more humane for those oppressed by economic and ideological structures that denied them their dignity, rights, and self-determination. The ideas in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) have been applied on every continent, in projects ranging from grassroots basic literacy programs to national educational policies. Many people engaged in progressive struggles for justice—teachers, students, community organizers, workers, movement activists, and citizens from every walk of life—who read Freire found reflections of their own thinking; many who heard Freire speak found shape for their own words; many who studied his work discovered practices worth translating into their own contexts. Freire's legacy is unprecedented for an educator: None other has influenced practice in such a wide array of contexts and cultures, or helped to enable so many of the world's disempowered turn education toward their own dreams. Lives and institutional spaces are still being transformed by his contributions, the struggles of the oppressed still draw from his insights, and democracies are enriched by the voices of the poor and working class amplified through Freirean projects. Freire's ideas have entered educational discourse from the most cosmopolitan centers to the most remote corners of the earth, and not since John Dewey have the thoughts of a philosopher of education impacted such a broad sphere of public life in the U.S.

The 20th anniversary of the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a global best-seller with more than half a million copies in print in English alone, prompted a number of scholars to undertake fresh analyses of Freire's work and to situate it historically as the progenitor of a new domain of educational inquiry and practice (Giroux & Macedo, 1994; McLaren & Lankshear,

1994; McLaren & Leonard, 1993), just as it prompted Freire himself to reflect critically on the strengths and limits of his theory (Freire, 1994b). Freire's death in May 1997 stilled his own voice and halted his personal contributions to critical pedagogy, leaving it to us, the survivors, to sustain his legacy, translate his vision, and complete the tasks remaining to build just, democratic societies.

A pedagogy of the oppressed is as needed today as when Freire first articulated it. Global economic forces and domestic politics press U.S. public education toward ever more narrow and conservative agendas, thus reinscribing and justifying poverty and powerlessness through their association with particular (il)literatecies and failure on standardized tests (Shannon, 1998). Low-income Americans face an increasing education gap as the testing stakes get raised and as public school resources are more broadly privatized. Vouchers and school choice plans reinforce and extend educational, economic, and social inequality (Carnoy, 2000). At the same time, voter initiative campaigns marginalize the voices of non-English speakers in schools and reinvigorate an exclusionary linguistic colonialism (Macedo, 2000). All these effects, coupled with the growing income gap between the rich and poor (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2000), promise predictable negative consequences for historically disadvantaged populations, and even more so when there is a downturn in the overall economy.

The dominant (neo)conservative discourse blames the victims of these policies for their own suffering, suggesting that a moral poverty prefigures their social and economic predicaments (Bennett, 1996), and the ideological attack on public schools and teachers threatens deeply grounded democratic possibilities in the culture (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Meanwhile, the reformism of the (neo)liberals produces little change in either urban schools or their larger context (Anyon, 1997), and thus little change in the daily lives of the poor who are concentrated there. Most multicultural education approaches fail to address injustice and the challenges of transforming inequitable power relations (McCarthy, 1990; Nieto, 2000), and even antiracist pedagogies can succumb to accommodation to the status quo (Flecha, 1999). Without a clear focus on the politics of schooling and the need for community organizing to build and sustain meaningful reform, little has been accomplished even in urban districts where people of color occupy educational and civic leadership positions (Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux, 1999).

Freire's critical "pedagogy of possibility" offers theoretical and practical alternatives to both the (neo)conservative and (neo)liberal discourses and practices (McLaren, 1999). At the classroom

level, curricula aimed at empowering young children and developing their capacities to resist interpersonal bias and promote equality have been finding wider audiences (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Schniedewind & Davidson, 1998), and more teacher educators are encouraging critical pedagogical practices among their students, generating even wider effects (Wink, 2000).¹ The organic literacies of the working class are being harnessed to contest the deforming messages of the dominant school culture (Cushman, 1998; Finn, 1999), and workers are finding critical literacy skills useful in workplace struggles (Hull, 1997). Social movements and activists have translated Freire's ideas into organizing programs with broad applicability (Arnold, Burke, James, Martin, & Thomas, 1991; Findlay, 1994).² Although systemic school reform efforts based on Freire's theory have been limited largely to the Brazilian context (Freire, 1993; O'Cadiz, Wong, & Torres, 1998), at least one major project is underway in the U.S.³ Beyond all this, Freire continues to be mustered to service in a wide range of theoretical battles, from the politics of difference, to cultural studies, to feminism and race matters (Steiner, Krank, McLaren, & Bahruth, 2000). Interest in Freire's fundamental ideas is strong enough to prompt the *Harvard Educational Review* to reprint his 1970 seminal essays on cultural action for freedom (Freire, 1998b, 1998c), and for academic presses such as Bergin and Garvey, Routledge, Falmer, and SUNY to devote book series to critical pedagogy. Freire's life and theory inspire continuing revolutionary dreams (McLaren, 2000) and a wide array of transformative programs (see the special issue of *Convergence* guest edited by Allman, Cavanagh, Hang, Haddad, & Mayo, 1998, for a sampling).

Despite the vast panoply of activities and theoretical formulations that claim allegiance to or derivation from Freire's theory, important questions have been raised about its soundness. It seems that often a blind eye is turned toward these theoretical difficulties, and instead an adoring gaze treats Freire more as icon and myth than as a radical philosopher subject to the limits of history and a necessarily situated perspective (Weiler, 1996). It is true that Freire took to heart one of Marx's critiques of Feuerbach—"The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 145; emphasis in original)—and accomplished this point on a scale honoring Marx himself. However, while Marx's and Freire's legacies are assured in the thickness of life, the durability of their arguments is far less certain. Freire acknowledged the limits of his theoretical statements, but steadfastly defended the core of his theory and juxtaposed inconsistencies in his theory against his more congruent radical practice and his right to evolve more nuanced articulations of his view (Freire, 1994b; Freire & Faundez, 1992). Given the Marxian philosophy of praxis at the center of his theory, Freire's claim for his practice to be the most telling basis for judgment has its merits, but this defense does not abrogate our obligation to examine closely Freire's analysis. Radicals do not have the luxury of cursory or idolatrous study of Freire's theory since any improvements to it offer possibilities for more effective struggle, and many theoretical and practical challenges must be faced in order to realize Freire's vision and hope.

The remainder of this article sketches the philosophical foundations of Freire's view of liberation and education, and presents

some of the critiques that undermine the argumentative structure of the theory. It outlines a more consistent undergirding for education as a practice of freedom as "a kind of historico-cultural political psychoanalysis"⁴ and a more defensible "progressive postmodernism" (Freire, 1994b, p. 55, p. 10) that preserves the ethical and political thrust at the core of Freire's ideas. The challenge is to construct a view that retains the liberatory power of modernism and its critique of dehumanization, but that recognizes the malleability and contradictions of identity (at both the level of the individual and of classes, races, and genders), embraces the ineliminable epistemic uncertainties and varieties of reason in our knowing, and respects the plurality of compelling conceptions of the good which can shape moral and political life. Insofar as this challenge can be met, Freire's philosophic legacy will endure.

Education as a Practice of Freedom: Freire's Argument

Freire developed his conception of education as a practice of freedom from a critical reflection on various adult education projects he undertook in Brazil in the late 1950s and early 1960s (see Gadotti, 1994, for a review of this emergence). That is, the theory was part of a praxis, "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970, p. 36). At the same time, Freire's theory was based on an ontological argument that posited praxis as a central defining feature of human life and a necessary condition of freedom. Freire contended that human nature is expressed through intentional, reflective, meaningful activity situated within dynamic historical and cultural contexts that shape and set limits on that activity. The praxis that defines human existence is marked by this historicity, this dialectical interplay between the way in which history and culture make people even while people are making that very history and culture. Human historicity enables the realization of freedom, opening up choices among various ways of being within any given situation. At the level of our being human, freedom can never be eliminated from existence, while at the level of our concrete practices, freedom is not a given but is always precarious and must be achieved. In the everyday world, opportunities to embody freedom are realized through commitments to struggle for one way of life or another.

Freire argued that the struggle to be free, to be human and make history and culture from the given situation, is an inherent possibility in the human condition. The struggle is necessary because the situation contains not only this possibility for humanization, but also for dehumanization. Dehumanization makes people objects of history and culture, and denies their capacity to also be self-defining subjects creating history and culture. These dehumanizing forces reside in both the material and psychic conditions of persons and situations, so freedom requires people to engage in a kind of historico-cultural political psychoanalysis. Freire argues that overcoming the limits of situations is ultimately an educational enterprise that he calls a practice of freedom, a permanent form of cultural re-creation that enables the fullest possible expression of human existence. Further, Freire holds that democratic socialism provides the necessary conditions for each person to achieve his or her freedom, to become fully human.

Before examining this summary argument in more detail, it is useful to note its overall structure. Freire follows a long tradition in philosophy when he links a particular understanding of human nature with a conception of the proper formation of both self and society.⁵ Within this tradition, some type of education and moral life mediates the cultivation of human nature into ideal forms of individual and social existence. In other words, human nature alone cannot produce the good life, but must be shaped and nurtured into specific forms that enable the realization of what is best and most fruitful for a community. Education draws out these possibilities from human nature, and at the same time instills a moral order capable of resisting impulses that threaten the attainment of what is good for each person and the community. Education thus is essential because without it, human life would not rise to the level of existence but would rather remain at the level of instinct and basic survival needs. As Freire put it

I cannot understand human beings as simply *living*. I can understand them only as historically, culturally, and socially *existing*. . . I can understand them only as beings who are makers of their "way," in the making of which they lay themselves open to or commit themselves to the "way" that they make and that therefore re-makes them as well. (Freire, 1994b, p. 97; emphasis in original)

Language, culture, history, and community are dependent on education, on freedom and the capacity to create forms ("ways") of life. Practical reason and knowledge are central in the work of ethical and political formation, not so much as deliberative tools but as integral to the actions creating culture and history.

Freire's view parallels John Dewey's pragmatism, and a brief comparison will help clarify Freire's argument. Dewey had a biological-organic conception of human existence and he held that education was a lifelong process of growth and development intrinsic to individual and social self-realization (Dewey, 1916/1966). He maintained that human beings are creatures capable of social and critically reflective adaptation to the environment to enable their successful coping (satisfaction of basic needs), and that this ability differs little from what other creatures do in order to survive. Human beings simply have particular capacities for intelligence and social organization that enable the formation of culture, and the maximal development of those capacities insure the survival of civilization (itself merely a successful adaptation). For Dewey, the most successful adaptations require knowledge formed and warranted in particular ways (Dewey, 1922/1930). Mostly, people act habitually in patterns transmitted via imitated practice, requiring little use of intelligence. But new situations in which habits prove inadequate or problems emerge make conduct become more deliberate. Now, knowledge gets constructed by forming and testing hypotheses intended to reestablish smooth functioning or enlarge effective coping habits. This intelligent adaptation to the environment is subject in turn to further cycles of modification and development.

Dewey argued that the same conditions that maximize this evolutionary adaptive potential are precisely those linked to the formation of the ideal society: full participation, open communication with minimal barriers, critical experimental practice aimed at overcoming problems, and close attention to the consequences of actions. These conditions explain both the power of science, which refines them to produce soundly warranted

knowledge, and the strength of democracy, which emphasizes their implementation in politics. That is, Dewey's naturalized philosophy postulated a biological substrate to explain the pre-eminent value of scientific and democratic practices (Dewey, 1920/1957).

Freire would agree with most points in this summary of Dewey's conception of human existence. But, in contrast, he built his theory not so much on the continuities between human beings and the rest of the animal world, but on the discontinuities. Dewey's *naturalistic* focus on continuities perhaps explains his relative emphasis on deliberative processes and behaviors (shared with other animals and thus more closely tied to biology) and the comparatively less attention he devotes to communicative action. Freire's *humanistic* view reverses the emphasis and attempts to integrate deliberative and communicative actions in their particular and distinctive role in producing culture and history. For Freire, what is crucially important is that humans are animals that operate not only from reflex, habit, or even intelligent creative response; they are animals that exist meaningfully in and with the world of history and culture that humans themselves have produced. Freire thinks that if we fail to grasp how the capacity for historical, cultural, linguistic praxis makes us different from the rest of the organic and inorganic world,⁶ we will fail to be able to transform society toward a vision of justice and democracy, the goal he and Dewey shared. Freire and Dewey grounded their arguments in ontological interpretations of human existence and assumed this as necessary to orient any successful educational practice intended to enable human flourishing, though they had somewhat different interpretations through which to frame their theories. Dewey opted for a naturalism that relied on a scientific, evolutionary, developmental approach, while Freire elected a humanist view that relied on a cultural and historicist conception of freedom that insists that humans should not be the mere animals that oppressors and oppressive systems try to turn them into.

For Freire, the essentially defining ontological feature of being human is that people produce history and culture, even as history and culture produce them, and thus both the theory and application of education as a practice of freedom "take the people's historicity as their starting point" (Freire, 1994a, p. 65). The dialectical interplay between existence and context reveals that any given situation, including one's identity and self-understanding, is not a necessity. Situations and identities congeal in the course of time under the press of history and culture, but most importantly also under the influence of human action, and they are thus susceptible to human intervention, to the power of freedom. The ontological truth of historicity thus not only defines human nature for Freire, but grounds his theory of liberation and provides the opening for concrete efforts to transform oppressive realities.

A practical grasp of historicity by the oppressed means they understand their situation and themselves not fatalistically as an unchangeable state of affairs (as if their suffering was justified by divine will or natural law, or was the just desserts of individual failures), but rather they understand their daily lives as presenting concrete problems along with opportunities for transformation. They see that life (including themselves) could be different, and the more clearly they discern *why* things (and themselves) are as they are and *how* they could be otherwise, the more effective

their interventions can be to enable greater self- and community-realization. The oppressed are challenged to see beyond individualistic experiences and particular situations to discern the force of systems and ideologies that permeate their daily lives, structure oppression (dehumanization), and bind people together in larger, and sometimes global, contexts. The connections between everyday experience and these larger forces highlight the features of problematic “limit-situations” that must be changed by collective “limit-acts” that both contest those systems and ideologies and aim at “untested feasibilities” or possible futures with more space for self-determination (see Freire, 1994a, 1994b).

The historical, cultural, and social background shapes the present context, from the privacy of family life to the public spheres of the state and mass media. It establishes the field within which free action can move, and even outlines possible psychological states and the most intimate aspects of a self, from identity to feelings and desires. The situational constraints that prevent freedom are thus also always internal and not only external to individuals. Human beings inhabit, and are inhabited by, the structures, institutions, social relations, and self-understandings that comprise a people’s culture. The practice of freedom, as a critical *reflexive* praxis, must grasp the outward direction, meaning, and consequences of action, and also its inward meaning as the realization and articulation of a self. Therefore, education as a practice of freedom must include a kind of historico-cultural, political psychoanalysis that reveals the *formation* of the *self* and its *situation* in all their dynamic and dialectical relations. People then become critically conscious of themselves as the very sorts of creatures that produce (and are produced by) their culture and history, and to realize their freedom they become engaged in liberatory acts that challenge the limits (internal and external) of particular situations that maintain oppression or injustice. Human freedom is not outside particular situations but is geared to them. While the context “programs” people to see and experience their situation in a particular way, it does not “determine” how people are or can be (Freire, 1994b, p. 98). People are not free to choose the time, place, meanings, standards, and so on, into which they have been thrown by their birth, yet they are able to take up specific stances within that context and make of it what they may. Free action strives to go beyond the given reality to posit and create a new future through effort and struggle, a future that cannot be simply declared into existence but must be achieved.

Freire argued that liberation, oppression, and their interrelation are contingent facts, while from an ontological point of view, human historicity marks precisely the possibility to choose one way of life or another. “Just so, *human nature*, as it generates itself in history, does not contain, as part and parcel of itself, *being more*, does not contain *humanization*, except as the *vocation* whose contrary is *distortion* in history” (Freire, 1994b, p. 99; emphasis in original). Freire deploys the theological notion of vocation to build a link between particular contingent choices, for humanization, and universal human ontological capacities. He wants to invoke a type of authenticity that distinguishes a way of living that expresses the deepest, most primordial aspects of human existence. This vocation embodies freedom, and through humanizing action people understand and become critically intentional about their creation of culture and history. Inauthentic ways of being distort this ontological essence of being human,

and deny some people the possibility and right of being self-defining, self-realizing, and self-determining. This denial defines dehumanization or oppression.

[W]e are this being—a being of ongoing, curious, search, which “steps back” from itself and *from the life it leads*. . . . [W]e live the life of a vocation, a calling, to *humanization*, and . . . in *dehumanization* . . . we live the life of a *distortion of the call*—never another calling. (Freire, 1994b, p. 98; emphasis in original)

Here Freire is extending his argument about liberation, for by conjoining the theological notions of calling and vocation, he emphasizes the particularity of each individual response to the universal demands of the human condition. He maintained that humanization is about concrete choices in history, and only those certain choices are true to our most fundamental nature: “Humanization [is the] ontological vocation of human being” (Freire, 1994b, p. 98).

Freire used this ontological anchor to orient his further arguments to establish ethical and political claims for a privileged position for the oppressed in the struggle for liberation. Personal freedom as expressed in particular choices represents only one pole in a dialectic that embraces the social aspect of all elements of the situation, including the self. “It would be impossible to dehumanize without being dehumanized—so deep are the social roots of the *calling*” (Freire, 1994b, p. 99; emphasis in original). Both liberation and oppression are historical, collective actions of classes. Freire’s theological ontology shades into the Marxist politics that reinterpreted Hegel’s analysis of the Master-Slave relationship (Torres, 1994). The inescapable essence of the oppressor class is that it embodies a way of life that distorts what is most fundamentally human.⁷ Caught in an illusion of its own independence and freedom, the oppressor class cannot make the required critique of and breach with the concrete economic, political, social, and ideological orders. These orders actually prevent both the oppressor and oppressed classes from achieving the deepest possibilities of humanization and freedom. On the other hand, the oppressed class faces daily the impositions of the dehumanizing systems of an unjust society. By refusing to accede to its subordinated position and working to understand the *raison d’être* of its structural formation, the oppressed class has an advantage in intervening strategically to overcome the limits in the context. Given the ontological capacity for intentionally directing cultural re-formation toward humanizing ends, liberation struggle is always a possible prerogative of the oppressed.

For the oppressed, as individuals and as a class, to discern the truth of their nature, identities, and situation requires the achievement of a kind of knowledge that reaches behind the way things are to grasp the way things came to be. Here we see the connection between Freire’s ontological and epistemological arguments. Epistemically, the oppressed are faced with the challenge of knowing systematically and determinately what is already known experientially and uncritically; that is, the oppressed must make *good sense* out of *common sense*.⁸ The knowledge that enables such a critique of the situation, ideology, and the self, must include an understanding of the dialectical, permanent tension between consciousness and the world, between subjectivity and objectivity. For Freire, this interplay does not undermine knowledge or certainty, but only makes the demand for methods

of critical analysis more emphatic and makes the pragmatic tests of knowing more telling. Through focused questioning and analysis, the “rigorous, logical, coherent structure” (Freire & Faundez, 1992, p. 39) needed to warrant the knowledge to guide action can be achieved, subject in turn to further questioning. Critical consciousness is mindful of the relationships among *consciousness*, *action*, and *world*, and grasps the *why* of the world in the constructive nature of knowing. Freire argued that knowledge was not a state of mind nor a type of warranted proposition that could be settled in the manner of a mathematical equation, but rather it was a *way of being* that reflected the deepest human capacities for producing culture and history. Critical knowledge enfolds the knower and the known in a dialectical unity embodied through the creative powers of existence. It is not something that is strictly the possession or achievement of an individual, nor can it be tested outside the context of action situated within specific cultural and historical horizons (see Freire, 1994b, pp. 100–105).

Freire’s epistemology did not deny the scientific form of truth or the strength of its logic for understanding and changing reality, but at the same time it did not give science the last word. He argued that neither the everyday knowledge of experience (the common sense of the masses) nor the systematic knowledge of science (the trained sense of intellectuals) provides a guarantee of truth. Freire warned against privileging either form of knowledge, which would lead to a kind of “basism” or “elitism” and would obstruct their unity as required in liberatory action (Freire, 1994b, pp. 84–85; Freire & Faundez, 1992, pp. 47–48).

Further coupling his ontological and epistemological positions, Freire argued that the conditions that promote freedom also produce the human capacity for critical knowledge. He translated these conditions into communicative and linguistic metaphors that prescribed certain methods for the educational dimensions of his theory of liberation. Central to these metaphors is his notion of *dialogue*. Knowledge becomes founded on dialogue characterized by participatory, open communication focused around critical inquiry and analysis, linked to intentional action seeking to reconstruct the situation (including the self) and to evaluate consequences. The dialogue that distinguishes critical knowledge and cultural action for freedom is not some kind of conversation, it is a social praxis. To be liberatory, it must respect the everyday language, understanding, and way of life of the knowers, and it must seek to create situations in which they can more deeply express their own hopes and intentions. Dialogue enables the oppressed to “speak a true word” and overcome their “silencing” (Freire, 1970, 1994a) not simply at the communicative or linguistic levels, but also in regard to their forming culture, history, and their own identities. This cultural action for liberation reveals the profound importance of language for a people’s being, knowing, and capacity to produce reality. Deliberative and communicative action are integrated to achieve the authentic, uniquely human existence that liberation entails. The oppressed must *read* and *know* the world and themselves in a critical way that reveals the processes of historical formation in order to *write* their future, transcending the present limits and expressing their primordial power of humanization. Without the struggle to transform reality, there can be neither genuine critical knowledge nor authentic modes of being.

Conscientization is the term Freire used to capture the complex ontological, epistemological, and ethical-political features of education as a practice of freedom. His analysis placed cultural formation, knowledge creation, and linguistic practices as central to situations and identity and thus also as necessarily central to revolutionary (or any other) social change. Since situations are permeated with defining axes of power and authority that establish standards and norms in favor of some rather than others, liberation entails a people’s struggle to be, to feel, to know, and to speak for themselves. “The more the people become themselves, the better the democracy” (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 145).

As people take hold of the indeterminateness of history and the openness of the future, their hopes and dreams of a more just life become realized as the fulfillment of an “ontological need” (Freire, 1994b, p. 8). Striving to meet these primordial human needs, and wielding “truth as an ethical quality of the struggle” (Freire, 1994b, p.8), the politics of liberation harnesses the ontological and epistemological foundations of existence to overcome the limits of oppression and build a democratic socialism that sustains diverse communities. “[W]e, as *existent*, outfit ourselves to engage in the struggle in quest of and in defense of equality of opportunity, by the very fact that, as living beings, we are radically different from one another” (Freire, 1994b, p. 97). Freire understood how fragile and contingent this struggle had to be, and accepted that no guarantees could warrant the humanistic reinvention of citizenship. Conscientization is thus a mode of life always in the process of becoming, one that enacts ongoing cultural action for liberation that accepts an ethic of the “fineness of the striving” as “a job to do in history” (Freire, 1994b, p. 50). This ethic indicates precisely the importance of education as a practice of freedom for a successful revolution because it enables the ongoing reinvention and recreation of democratic culture.

This overview of Freire’s argumentative structure for his theory of liberation and education identified the foundational interrelationships among his ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political analyses. Freire argued that education as a practice of freedom is actually a necessary aspect of being fully human. Without this kind of praxis, human beings cease to be the “makers of their way” and they become simply what history makes of them. For Freire, to be human means to make and remake one’s self through making history and culture, to struggle against the limiting conditions that prevent such creative action, and to dream into existence a world where every person has this opportunity and responsibility.

Critical Problems in Freire’s Theory of Liberation Education

From the outset and continuing today, a wide range of criticism echoes the broad chorus of praise for Freire’s theory of liberation and education. These contrasting commentaries came from the political Left as well as the Right, from both revolutionary and reactionary activists and academics. In this section of this essay I will outline some of the critical problems in the foundations of Freire’s view, and suggest ways in which some of his conclusions can be preserved or better supported even if the specifics of his arguments fail.

On the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, one libertarian reviewer dismissed it as a “truly bad book” and claimed that

it was seriously deficient in recognizing the strengths of traditional education, profoundly inadequate as a revolutionary theory, and not as good as many other sources for educational change in North America (Friedenberg, 1971). However this sort of shrill and pedantic criticism was neither the norm nor accurate and fair. Other early reviewers, particularly those working in the field of adult education, found more merit in building on the insights that Freire offered (see Grabowski, 1973). Educators at every level molded Freire's theory to their own needs, and their desire to make their practice more consistent with their moral and political ideals led them to try to apply the theory even within institutions structurally resistant to a liberatory practice (see, for example, Livingston, 1986; Shor, 1980, 1987).

Freire's analytic framework that created an opposition between banking and dialogical forms of education got widely interpreted as a "method" that could transform classroom practices. However, this amounts to a kind of domestication of Freire's overall theory and intent. As Aronowitz (1993) correctly argued in his analysis of this depoliticization of Freire,

the task of this revolutionary pedagogy is not to foster critical consciousness in order to improve cognitive learning, the student's self-esteem, or even to assist in his aspiration to fulfill his human "potential". . . . It is to the liberation of the oppressed as historical subjects within the framework of revolutionary objectives that Freire's pedagogy is directed. (pp. 11–12)

While the liberal methodological appropriation of Freire's radical pedagogy predominated in the U.S., at the same time a new domain of educational research and theory emerged that was explicitly articulated to various elements of Freire's view. This emerging tradition of critical pedagogy investigated the practices and curricula of schools for their relationship to dominant ideologies (Apple, 1979, 1982) and for their possibilities for opposition and the assertion of democratic values (Giroux, 1983, 1988; Giroux & McLaren, 1989). In addition, the critical pedagogy tradition became entwined with some strands of feminist theory (hooks, 1994; Luke & Gore, 1992), though feminists raised serious questions about the compatibility of this linkage (Ellsworth, 1989; Weiler, 1991).

Ironically, despite its embrace in educational circles, Freire's theory appeared just at the moment when a profound rupture with its underlying humanist and Marxist assumptions moved from the periphery to the core of intellectual debates in the academy and within oppositional political formations. Questions were being directed at the foundations of philosophy and of the human sciences (see, for example, Foucault, 1972, 1973; Geertz, 1973; Habermas, 1971; Taylor, 1971) that undermine the argumentative structure of Freire's philosophy of praxis. In light of these problematics, Freire's theory appears to be insufficiently historicized, even though he places a historical and cultural praxis at its core. As we will see, this leads to a connected group of ontological and epistemological quandaries that require substantially different responses than Freire provides. In addition, because of the structure of his arguments, these problems impact Freire's ethical and political positions since he supports them by ontological appeals to human nature and by epistemic claims about situations (including self-understandings). In the remainder of this section of this essay, these problems will be outlined

from a philosophic point of view, and preliminary arguments will be suggested to preserve some measure of Freire's theoretical apparatus and aims even if some of his specific arguments fail.

First, the logic of Freire's ontological historicism cannot reach his humanist conclusions. While a sound argument can conclude that historicity (the human capacity to produce culture and history even as culture and history produce human existence) is a defining feature of human life, Freire's further claim that humanization is an ontological vocation and calling has to be questioned. Though it may be metaphysically comforting to suppose that only humanization is true to our primordial nature and that dehumanization is only a historical accident, this account founders. Logic entails that *all* human action must be consistent with ontological features of existence. (De)humanization thus concerns human actions that can only be consistent with or in contradiction to *particular* conceptions of how one *should* be but not how humans *are*. Freire thus has to accept that his critique of domination emanates from a specific historical and cultural location and must be made on the basis of contingent ethical and political argument rather than universal ontological appeals (McLaren & Leonard, 1994; Weiler, 1991).

From the point of view of the logic of ontology and historicity, persons who dominate or oppress others are nonetheless still human and expressing some primordial aspects of existence. This possibility was at the core of Nietzsche's arguments about the Super Man as unsurpassed creator of history and culture (Nietzsche, 1990). In that view, morality was for the weak, and appeals to a vision of humanization or to equal opportunity would merely be for those who lacked the will and the capacity for exerting their power. While this nihilistic pill is a bitter one, the arguments against having to swallow it are ethical and political. Ontologically, human beings are purely possibility, circumscribed by their embodiment in specific situations and backgrounds of culture, history, and meaning. In some moments, Freire equivocated as the force of this logic pushed against his general argument as summarized in the previous section of this essay. For example, he noted that humanization is "something constituted in history" and not "apriori in history" (Freire, 1994b, p. 99). But Freire's assertion of an ontological privilege for humanization as the only possibility for an authentic existence reduces to just the sort of apriori historical claim he recognizes as fundamentalist, conservative, and contradictory to the position he seeks.

In the same vein, the logic of the thoroughly historicized existence that is most consistent with the core of Freire's theory is incompatible with the notion of authenticity implied with such concepts as ontological vocation and calling. If human existence cannot completely escape from particular historical and cultural horizons then any claims of authenticity cannot be universal (Adorno, 1973). Ideals of personhood will shift with time and place and there can be no ultimate "true core" of what a person is that is the end product of consciousness-raising. Moreover, the relationship between personhood and citizenship is not neatly solvable but instead endures as an existential dilemma to be lived through with uncertainty (Margonis, 1993). If human existence cannot transcend its rootedness in particular situations to be a universal pure subject of history, the loss of certainty extends to the emancipatory guarantees Freire hoped for from actions

aimed at overcoming situational limits. Freire's argument that human nature achieves its only authentic completion in an ontological telos that ends in humanization rests on a Hegelian dialectic that synthesizes universal and particular aspects of existence (Torres, 1994), but this contradicts his more fundamental claims about historicity. In dialogue with his critics (McLaren & Leonard, 1994), Freire acknowledged the dangers in his universalistic narrative about humanization. But the predicament of a more fully historicized ontology preserves and actually adds emphasis to the need Freire recognized for liberation education to enable a relentlessly critical analysis that demonstrates concretely how specific situations (and self-understandings) limit the freedom of some to be self-defining and determining.

This demand for continuous critique extends to the identity of the oppressed, which is distorted by Freire's universalistic binary formulations that too often assume a unity of experience of oppression despite differences (Ellsworth, 1989; McLaren & Leonard, 1994; Weiler, 1991). The theory does not adequately recognize that race, class, and gender oppressions are geared to specific concrete conditions that can be contradictory, such that simultaneous positions of oppression and dominance can be occupied by particular individuals (for example, someone privileged by racial and class location but oppressed by the gender order, as with a White middle-class woman). These broad categories of identity are themselves constantly undergoing contested historical revision. In addition, Freire's theory, despite imputing a certain psychoanalytic intent for conscientization (Freire, 1970, 1994b; Freire & Faundez, 1992), fails to account for the ways in which identity has no direct or necessary relationship either to external contexts or to inward representations and knowledge (Taylor, 1989). Since these complexities about identity are ubiquitous to liberation struggle, claims for an authentic subject position from which to challenge domination or oppression are suspect. Liberation becomes a far more intricate and intimate matter, and requires theoretical approaches either missing from Freire's perspective or needing substantive development.

The problems with the philosophic logic in Freire's ontological interpretation are reflected in his epistemological view, which does not resolve the difficulties of historicized knowledge. When arguing for "methodological rigor" and "right thinking" that yields knowledge in a "higher stage" than "common sense," Freire did not acknowledge the depth of the problems thus posed for the constructivist, pragmatic approach to knowledge formation that he insisted upon (Freire, 1998a). Without differentiating the psychology of knowing, the sociology of knowledge, and philosophic questions about the warrants for knowledge claims (see Phillips, 1992), Freire's epistemological position lacked clarity. He equivocated between accepting the radical indeterminateness of knowledge and arguing for a natural science kind of certainty in parsing the *raison d'être* of the situation of the oppressed. He at times uncritically assumed a correspondence theory of truth, and posited the possibility of getting it right just as he posited the possibility of being an authentic self (Roberts, 2000). He seemed to think that a unitary form of reason could adjudicate among the variety of ways of knowing, and this falls far short of integrating other modes of grasping reality (Harding & Hintikka, 1983). Moreover, if knowledge is tied to human interests (Habermas, 1971) and relations of power (Foucault, 1972, 1973) that embed

ideological commitments, and if culture itself is permeated with ideology and structured by unanalyzable and prereflective patterns of action (Geertz, 1973), then explanations of oppression continually beg the question of their validity. Similarly, the epistemic status both of self-knowledge and of knowledge of the self by others presents profound difficulties, even for psychoanalytic theory and practice (Grünbaum, 1984), but these remain unacknowledged by Freire. In other words, knowledge of the self and the social world and their causal relations is significantly less certain and has far less reliable mechanisms for testing than knowledge claims about the natural world, which are themselves notoriously underwarranted (Taylor, 1971), and the consequences of the related epistemic problems are severe for Freire's theory.

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Since oppression and freedom are features of self-knowledge and the human world of meanings, history, and culture, then the knowledge we can have of them is much more contingent and provides much weaker justification for actions. Since for Freire the critical knowledge of oppression was linked to liberation struggle that might include violent means and the taking of human life (Freire, 1970, 1994b; see also McLaren, 2000), the concern for its warrant is not merely a matter of abstract philosophic interest. Just what sorts of constraints on liberatory actions are imposed by the ontological opaqueness of identity and by epistemic limits and uncertainties? This query is left begging by Freire, though it reinforces the importance he recognized for an ongoing critical questioning that refuses to be seduced into certainties that eliminate all traces of doubt. But the question demands some resolution because Freire's theory suffers insofar as it provides no guidance for evaluating knowledge claims about self and the world. A thoroughly historicized philosophy of praxis must be committed to an understanding of science that recognizes the historical nature of method, the contingency of facts and arguments, the evolutionary nature of criteria and modes of justification, and the function of critical dialogue and vigorous testing of claims and evidence. Such a nonfoundational view avoids ahistoric universalistic claims, and instead maintains that

any particular analysis of reality, self, or identity cannot escape perspectival blind spots and historical horizons. This is not quite the “unitary understanding of the world” (Friere & Faundez, 1992, p. 47) alleged by Freire, although the test of truth is not far from his proposals. The test or the warrant for ontological or epistemic claims becomes not solely a matter of logic, theory, or method (although these do not become meaningless) but also becomes pragmatic. This conclusion elevates the demand for an ethics and politics consistent with a fully historicized philosophy of praxis in order to provide grounds for adequate justification for liberatory action.

As summarized earlier, Freire derived his politics from another claimed ontological telos for human nature, in this case a commitment to equality of opportunity based on human differences, that he then extrapolated to a preference for democratic socialism. But this claim must face other possible interpretations. Hobbes (1968), for example, argued that humans in a state of nature, in the full glory of their differences, were prompted to a war of all against all, which was resolved only by the emergence of a dominant force able to subdue competitors and extract a commitment to fealty. Freire makes another ontological argument for his politics when he suggests a set of questions that propel the formation of society (Freire, 1994b, p. 98). He may be right that humans seek to know the “why” and the “whither” of existence, since all human societies seem to offer explanations for such questions. But no such anthropological evidence (let alone apriori ontological reasoning) extends to his further claim that they seek to answer “in favor of what, against what, for whom, against whom” the culture and society are organized. Although human nature alone provides only very thin support for particular ethical and political positions, those who struggle for liberation and justice need not settle for might making right, nor succumb to either a Machiavellian amorality or a paralyzing postmodern relativism (on this latter point, see McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2000). Freire’s position simply requires different argumentation.

There are possible directions such an argument could go that would be consistent with a historicist, nonfoundational perspective. For example, Hampshire (1983) argued that possible moral ways of life are akin to the diversity of natural languages, which means that competing sound and valid conceptions of the good would be endemic to human existence even in an ideal world. Yet even accepting diversity as fundamental to human nature, and a context of competing valid conceptions of the good, Hampshire maintained that sufficient minimal conditions exist for general agreement to a thin conception of procedural justice. The attributes of this conception are akin to Freire’s notion of dialogue (e.g., every voice must be included) and bring moral and political judgments themselves onto the terrain of historically contested action right along with understandings of the self and the world. Through an argument of this type, the conditions that Freire adduced that favor the possibility of self-realization and self-determination through the creation of culture and history can be loosely linked to an ontological origin, though much more is needed to warrant specific ethical or political positions. Freire may be well justified in his political and ethical preferential option for the poor (McLaren, 1999), but there nonetheless can be no ontological priority for this or for democratic socialism.

Reconstructing Freire’s Theory: Concluding Reflections

The foregoing critique of Freire’s theory focused on the philosophical arguments comprising its ontological and epistemological foundations. Problems were identified in the logic of Freire’s historicist approach because he did not go far enough in reframing some of the universalist and ahistoric elements that remained in his position, and he thus expected justifications from those foundations that they could not provide. In addition, these problems undercut his ethical and political conceptions. However, the line of Freire’s reasoning established worthwhile directions for a theory of liberation education and set up certain conclusions capable of being supported and developed by other arguments. This concluding section of the essay follows some of those lines and suggests an ethical and political position, militant nonviolence, that would need to be central to a more adequate theory of education as a practice of freedom. As noted in the introduction, the aim is to retain the liberatory power of the critique of dehumanization while recognizing the malleability and contradictions of identity, embracing the uncertainties and varieties of reason in knowledge, and respecting the plural compelling conceptions of the good that can shape a just, democratic society.

As Freire always maintained, the cultural and historical praxis that is at the heart of being human is unending. We cannot transcend our existence as “unconcluded, limited, conditioned, historical beings” and this limit actually provides the “opportunity of setting ourselves free” insofar as we join the “political struggle for transformation of the world” (Freire, 1994b, p. 100). Historicity bequeaths this struggle, and it is the core of freedom. Culture is a contested domain that provides no escape from the challenge to identify its “negativities” and “positivities” (Freire, 1994b, p. 107) in order to construct bulwarks of resistance to dehumanization as well as construct the grounds for self-determination. While there are no guarantees of true insight into self or the world to guide liberatory action, and no guarantees that the desired transformations can be achieved, what is certain is that the odds are against those without the traditional means of power. Thus,

one of the tasks of a progressive popular education, yesterday as today, is to seek, by means of a critical understanding of the mechanisms of social conflict, to further the process in which the weakness of the oppressed turns into a strength capable of converting the oppressor’s strength into weakness. (Freire, 1994b, p. 125)

Although Freire did not acknowledge this, these objectives are exactly the strategy of militant nonviolence (Gandhi, 1961; King, 1963; Sharp, 1973). Though he personally abhorred violence (see McLaren, 2000), Freire seemed to regard nonviolence only in tactical and not strategic terms. He readily asserted that revolution might entail violent means, and deferred questions about violence by the oppressed to the prior question of the unrelenting violence of the oppressor (Elias, 1994; Freire, 1970; McLaren, 2000). Yet, Freire noted that the “ethical and political awareness of the fighters is of paramount importance” for the success of liberation struggles even when they are military ones (Freire, 1994b, p. 172). Nonetheless, Freire clearly failed to see the possibility that the theory and strategy of militant nonviolence offered a way to con-

struct an integrated historicist theory of liberation education that combined consistent ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political positions.

Ontological groundlessness and epistemic uncertainty reside within cultural horizons embracing a diversity of moral and political goods, and together generate constraints that substantially weaken the justifications for violence, even for seemingly just causes. Ethical theory and the tradition of common law alike recognize that very stringent tests must be met to warrant killing, even in self-defense. Similarly, the current outcry about the prevalence of errors in death penalty cases reflects the moral revulsion experienced by people across the political spectrum when those tests are not satisfied. Advocates of just wars (the sort we can assume liberation struggles to be) face moral hurdles that are exceptionally difficult to surmount in both the decision to wage war and in its conduct (Teichman, 1986; Walzer, 1977). The certitude of death demands that those who take life possess a level of certitude about the situation and the self that is perhaps beyond reach, especially in the case of death on the scale of war. Yet, if Freire is right that the struggle for freedom is the fate of human existence, then ways to fight for one way of life rather than another must be found that honor epistemic, moral, and ontological uncertainty of a radical sort. Militant nonviolence preserves Freire's aim to achieve human freedom in a just, democratic society without abandoning the conditional, historicist foundations that his theory requires.

Cultural action for liberation wedded to militant nonviolence furnishes an ethical and political framework consistent with a historicized and always partially opaque ontology and a historicized, perspectival epistemology (Glass, 1996). This is a method of radical action unconstrained by meanings and knowledge claims that are historically situated and culturally constructed, and that is suited to a polyvocal discourse giving expression to identities marked by contradictory, multiple, and shifting boundaries. It gives shape and transformative force to struggles within intensively contested contexts without reinscribing violence or reinstating discourses and relations of domination. Such an interpretation of cultural action for liberation fortifies the basic principles of a pluralistic democracy, and is also capable of combating armed force, defending territory, and facing up to the real politics of an armed and aggressive world (Boserup & Mack, 1975; Sharp, 1985). The reconstruction of Freire's theory suggested here is consistent with the dialogical practices that he argued were central to education as a practice of freedom, and with the importance he placed on ideological struggle as a leading element in overcoming oppression (Coben, 1998; Mayo, 1999). It provides a political strategy that makes more credible the demand for a permanent struggle for liberation since it preserves to all equally the power to seek self-determined hopes and dreams.

The critiques and questions that challenge Freire's articulation of a philosophy of praxis cannot diminish the impact Freire's work will continue to have. As science has long demonstrated, imperfect theories do not render action impossible. Freire's insights will endure, and both orient critical pedagogical theory and liberatory educational practice. Freire indeed captured some of the most telling qualities of what it is to be human, and so education as a practice of freedom will remain pivotal for the real-

ization of whatever ideal of the person or of society one imagines. The legacy of Freire's theory, just as its origins, is first and foremost to be found as a lived praxis of liberation in the global, variegated efforts to translate it into every conceivable context. For the contributions of his theory and his life toward the creation of more justice and democracy, a world will continue to mourn the death of Paulo Freire.

NOTES

This paper was initially drafted immediately after Freire's death for a special collection that never came to fruition. Subsequent drafts benefited enormously from the comments and criticisms of Pia Wong, Frank Margonis, Eduardo Duarte, and the *Educational Researcher* anonymous reviewers and editors. Responsibility for all remaining obscurities, problems, and errors rests solely with me.

¹ Wink (2000), and Schneidewind and Davidson (1998), are in second editions, and Derman-Sparks's (1989) is in its 11th printing.

² *Educating for Change* by Arnold et al. (1991) had its fifth printing in 1996.

³ The author and Phoenix (AZ) Union High School District, with 12 schools and more than 22,000 students, half of whom qualify for free- or reduced-price lunches and an equal number of whom have home languages other than English, are currently developing such a project.

⁴ Freire (1994b, p. 55) reports that Erich Fromm was "dead right" to use this phrase to describe Freire's educational practice.

⁵ From Plato and Aristotle forward in the Western philosophic tradition, and from Meng Tzu and Chuang Tzu forward in the Chinese tradition, these links have been central to many ethical and political theories, just as they are in a wide variety of religious doctrines.

⁶ Freire's effort to distance humans from other animals has been challenged as species-ist and reflective of the European modes of thought that pervade his view. Bowers (1983) raised these concerns in a trenchant critique of Freire's assumptions, charging that they mask the cultural invasion of his theory when it supports interventions in non-Western contexts.

⁷ Freire nonetheless recognized that *individuals* from the oppressor class could commit a kind of class suicide to be reborn and in solidarity with the oppressed (see, for example, Freire, 1973, p. 18). Elias (1994) discussed the religious language and symbolism that Freire frequently employed in referring to this process as an Easter.

⁸ Freire follows Gramsci (1971) in this analysis (see especially Freire & Faundez, 1992, and Friere, 1998a). For extended discussions of the theoretical connections between Freire and Gramsci, see Coben (1998) and Mayo (1999).

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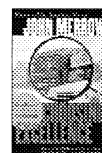
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