



education review // reseñas educativas

editors: david j. blacker / gustavo e. fischman / melissa cast-brede / gene v glass

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

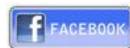
February 8, 2013

Volume 16 Number 2

ISSN 1094-5296

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the
College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware
the National Education Policy Center, and the
Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

Follow *Education Review*



on Facebook and on Twitter: #EducReview

Freire in Theory and Practice: An Essay Review of *Paulo Freire: The Man from Recife*

Rebecca Tarlau
University of California, Berkeley

Kirylo, James D. (2011) *Paulo Freire: The Man from Recife*. NY: Peter Lang Publishing.

Pp. xxi + 359

ISBN 978-1-4331-0878-5

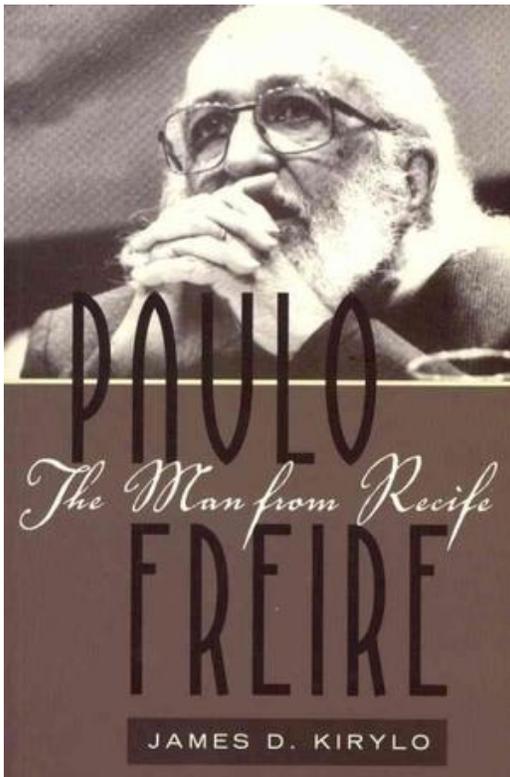
Citation: Tarlau, Rebecca. (2013 February 8) Freire in theory and practice: An essay review of *Paulo Freire: The Man from Recife*. *Education Review*, 16(2). Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/essays/v16n2.pdf>

Finding Freire: My Story

I read Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2002) while I was in college, for a course I no longer remember. I found the book to be uninspiring, despite my passion for social justice and my personal history growing up in a labor family. I was already

engaged in concrete struggles on campus I found to be important: living wage campaigns for university janitors, anti-sweatshop organizing, supporting the graduate student union. An abstract discussion about oppression was less

exciting than reading about the concrete effects of neoliberal economic policies on Mexican farmers. I was ready to denounce my U.S. citizenship and join the revolutionary struggle in Latin America! Unclear on how to do this, I went to Brazil for a year in an alternative study abroad program. I stayed true to my goal, seeking out activist organizations that could offer me



some sort of insight into how to address the inequalities in the world. Moving to Recife, a city I would return to frequently over the next decade of my life, I began to work for a small women's organization in the periphery of the city—*Grupo Mulher Maravilha* (Group Wonder Women). The organization's mission statement said they were fighting for a radical transformation of their community, an eradication of poverty, sexism, racism and all forms of class domination. I asked the founder of the

organization—Lourdes Luna—how they could possibly do all of those things. She pointed to a picture of a man with a long white beard, “Paulo Freire,” she told me, “We use Freire.” That certainly got my attention.

Paulo Freire: The Man From Recife

Paulo Freire, is perhaps, the most important educational theorist of the 20th century, making an impact on a range of educational practitioners, critical teachers, social movement activists, and university professors alike. Writing a comprehensive biography of this man—his intellectual thought, his influence, and his legacy—is not a walk in the park, especially with the hundreds of books, articles and dissertations (published in dozens of languages) that have already attempted to take on this task. Despite these challenges, James D. Kirylo, a man who I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting, engaged in this process, honestly discussing his own shortcomings and the “personal, idiosyncratic way” (Kirylo 2011, xiii)¹ he would approach this mammoth undertaking. It is an honor to review this book. Both Paulo Freire (or more accurately, the activists who use Freire in their daily practice), and the city of Recife, transformed my life trajectory, and are the sole reasons I am currently pursuing a doctoral degree in education. One book, however, cannot do everything, and with an abundance of Freirean texts available a curious reader

¹ For the rest of the review, page numbers without a reference all refer to Kirylo (2011).

would have been greatly assisted by a few sentences that clearly state what the author believes to be the book's unique impact. In this light, I want to use this review to highlight the contributions this book does (and does not) make to contemporary Freirean thought. I weave this analysis through summaries of each component of the book, outlining Kirylo's major arguments, and ending with my own personal reflections about Freire's legacy and our role as scholars (and activists) dedicated to pushing forward a Freirean perspective on social change.



I see the book as having two parts, which I divide up differently from the author. The first four chapters are a biographical sketch of Freire's life, drawing primarily on Freire's own writings and Kirylo's brief visit to Recife in 2009. The next seven chapters are more analytical, assessing Freire's contributions, the dominant themes

in his work, the theories he draws on, and the people he has influenced. In this second part of book there is also significant discussion of liberation theology (one of the most insightful parts of Kirylo's work), as well as critical pedagogy (less impressive). Two of these chapters include lengthy, transcribed interviews with Freire's second wife, Nita Friere, and James H. Cone, the "father" of black theology.

As a whole, this book accomplishes three important tasks. First, it successfully brings together dozens of diverse writings by and about Freire into one text, allowing readers (new and old to Freire) to get a sense for the breadth of his work. For those students, activists and scholars who have only read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, this book will certainly open their eyes to the numerous texts available, and the social and political contexts in which they were written. Second, the reader also gets a good sense for the rhythm of Freire's life, how much he travelled both before and after the dictatorship. From his trips to basically every state in Brazil prior to exile, to his time in Chile, Cambridge, Geneva, and Africa while abroad, it is clear that Freire's educational approach did not develop in a geographical vacuum—and Kirylo helps us understand the different contexts in which this approach did develop. Third, this book, more than any other I have read, really gives readers a sense for how important religion and theology were to Freire's thought and life trajectory. While most secular readers might easily forget this fact—choosing to focus instead on Freire's (Marxist) class analysis—the Catholic Church, liberation

theology, and the World Council of Churches were critical to Freire's daily life and philosophical development. Fourth and finally, as Kirylo himself states, this book is another successful tribute to Freire, a "celebratory chronology of Freire's life and work" (xxv). Kirylo places Freire on a pedestal the entire book, "leaving those critical discussions for others." As I will argue, devoted Freirean scholars—such as Kirylo and myself—need to reflect on whether this high praise and uncritical celebration of Freire is actually the best strategy for pushing forward his work.

The Brazilian Context

In a Freirean attempt to always contextualize, Kirylo weaves Brazilian social and political history throughout the book. For readers who are new to Latin American history, this basic introduction to the Brazilian context is critical. In elaborating on this history, Kirylo wants to make (and does make) the following basic point: the colonial legacy in Brazil continues to linger, creating the current "tyrannical economic, social and religious system" (133) that represents the "vestiges of a patrimonial order" (134). This historical assessment allows Kirylo to then make the argument that it "was into the shadow of Brazil's colonial legacy that Paulo Freire aimed to shed a healing light" and it was "from this shadow that the prophetic voice of Paulo Freire emerged" (xxx-xxi). In highly religious undertones, Kirylo constructs Brazil (through Freire's own writings) as a place of darkness, from which Freire emerged to help the oppressed and

disrupt the status quo. Particularly in the northeast, "the notion of a democratic climate and the encouragement of voice and thought were simply non-existent" (136).

I have no qualms with unveiling the inequalities that currently exist in Latin America, especially when emphasizing the colonial legacies of slavery, concentrated land ownership, and mass murder of indigenous populations. However, this is certainly only part of the story. Brazil has a rich history of resistance. Even during the period of slavery thousands of Africans were able to escape and build their own autonomous black communities—*quilombolos*. In fact, the National Day of Black Consciousness in Brazil celebrates the life of Zumbi, an African leader of a *quilombolo* that grew to a size of 20,000 people, resisting capture for over 70 years. The state of Pernambuco, where Freire grew up and implemented his first "cultural circles," is known nationally for its history of resistance, especially peasant resistance. As Pereira (1997) argues, "popular movements that sought to change the inegalitarian structures that perpetuate poverty in the northeast have dotted the region's history" (16). The peasant leagues and labor movements that arose in Pernambuco in the late 1950s and early 1960s were among the most important resistance movements in the country. Why did a military coup occur in 1964? It was precisely because the countryside was mobilized—peasants were revolting, rural unions were gaining force, and agrarian reform was on the national agenda—frightening the political elite. Before his

exile, Freire might have been working in a region where “masses of landless workers were treated as faceless two-legged animals” (135), but resistance to this degradation was abundant. Needless to say, these movements—organized by social classes that Freire can never claim to be part of, despite his few years of hunger—would have been incredibly influential. While I applaud Kirylo’s dedication to historical context, I would have liked to see more of an analysis of this dialectic between Freire’s personal dedication to social justice, as an individual, and his relationship to the collective struggles in which he grew up.

Freire’s Life

One of the strongest contributions of this book is the detailed history Kirylo offers of Freire’s life, which Donaldo Macedo calls in the preface, “a great complement to Paulo Freire’s *Letters to Cristina* and Ana Maria Araújo Freire’s *Paulo Freire: Uma História de Vida*” (ix). This history is based entirely on Freire’s own reflections and those of his second wife, Nita, as well as a splattering of second-hand sources from a few Freirean scholars. Although there is not necessarily any “new” information in this biography, Kirylo systematically brings together all of the information that currently exists (in English) about Freire’s personal life into one all-inclusive story which is easy to read and full of interesting facts. For example, I might have never known the importance of the dining room clock Freire’s parents were forced to sell when the depression hit, or the exact classical music Freire would whistle on his way to work. Kirylo throws in all of

the different tidbits he came across in this research, reflecting on Freire’s sense of human, culinary taste, favorite soccer teams, daily routines, and relationship with his second wife. For those already-Freire-inspired readers, these bits and pieces of information greatly help us to imagine Freire’s whole personality.

More substantially, Kirylo constructs an argument throughout these biographical chapters about the importance of Freire’s life experiences in the development of his pedagogical approach. Ranked number one in influence are his Catholic mother, his experience with hunger as a child, and his first teacher. Freire’s mother taught him about love, and the “impossibility of being a Christian and at the same time discriminating against another person for any reason” (6). Hunger taught Freire “that something was wrong in the world that needed to be corrected” (10). Eunice Vasconcelos, Freire’s first teacher, taught Freire a concept that he later becomes famous for promoting: “For her, Reading the Word meant Reading the Word-World” (7, quoted from Freire 1983, 8). Kirylo argues (drawing on Freire’s own reflections) that these lessons from childhood had a profound effect on the way he would approach teaching and learning. This argument, however, does raise a variety of question: why was Christianity, for Freire, an inspiration to fight for social justice, while being the reason to accept one’s oppression for others? With so many people hungry in the 1930s, why was Freire the one to see this hunger as tied to structural inequality? And in a climate of bank-deposit education,

which Kirylo describes so well, how did a Eunice Vasconcelos exist and why was Freire lucky enough to be her student? All of these questions are left unanswered, not just by Kirylo but by Freire's own accounts, leaving the reader to assume that Freire simply was different than those around him. For certain readers, this may be a difficult story to accept.

From this point on, Freire appears to be on a fairly privileged path, invited to study at an elite private high school where he began to tutor other students and eventually became a teacher at the age of 19. In this first teaching experience, Freire begins to use a constructivist and dialogical approach to learning based on his *intuition* rather than any theoretical foundation. The next decade of Freire's life he works in a government office for social services. In this position Freire has more experiences (elaborated in detail), where he learns about the relationship between freedom and authority, the negative effects of banking education, and that cognitive processes are never politically neutral. Although Freire is reading various theorists throughout this time period—including Piaget and scholars from the Higher Institute for Brazilian Studies (ISEB)—the emphasis in the biography is squarely put on Freire's personal experiences, through which he learns the “clear contradiction of class structures and the ideologies that dictated class” (37).

Freire developed a more concrete literacy approach in the 1960s, with the election of the progressive populist leader president,

João Goulart, and an invitation by the Pernambuco Governor Miguel Arraes to direct a literacy program for the entire city of Recife. As I mentioned earlier, this was a moment of unparalleled social mobilization across Brazil, Arraes himself becoming governor with the support of the militant sugar cane unions.² Although Kirylo does mention these, “peasant leagues, student groups, and other progressive movements,” this point could have had much more emphasis. Freire was not just a “rare person who emerges every so often in critical points of history,” he was a product of the exciting moment in which he was living. It was this historical conjuncture in the 1960s that gave Freire the opportunity to experiment with progressive literacy practices, in Recife, the rural regions of Pernambuco, and eventually at a national level (albeit, only briefly). These immense social mobilizations threw Freire onto the world stage, from which he never stepped down.

Finally, it is in this section of the biography—the description of the four years prior to Freire's exile—that Kirylo's includes the most detailed explanation of Freire's actual literacy approach, one I found useful in understanding how Freirean literacy processes take place in practice (410-417).

² These social mobilizations in the 1960s continue to affect Brazilian politics today, as the current governor of Pernambuco—Eduardo Campos—is the grandson of Miguel Arraes and most certainly elected partially because of his legacy.

Jumping forward, the next chapter goes into depth about Freire's exile, his experience adapting his literacy practices to the Chilean context, the process of writing *Pedagogy of Oppressed*, Freire's brief stay in Cambridge, his ten year job at the World Council of Churches in Geneva, and his literacy work in Africa and Nicaragua. Each of these events is described with meticulous detail, drawing on multiple sources. Kirylo makes the overall argument that exile forced Freire to adapt his pedagogy to distinct contexts, cementing Freire's belief that there is no "Freirean method," but rather, his ideas must be continually reinvented. The reader gets the sense that by the time Freire is exiled from Brazil in 1964, his educational philosophy is already highly developed, and the next three decades of his life are focused on refining these ideas.

When Freire returns to Brazil in the 1980s, he spends the next decade writing profusely. This is where other famous scholars and activists begin to enter the story—Myles Horton, Ira Shor, Ivan Illich. The breadth of Freire's writing after he returns to Brazil is immense, and even the careful reader gets easily lost in the long list of his individual and collaborative publications. In this section, a more explicit analysis of the major theoretical shifts in Freire's thinking would have been helpful. For example, although Kirylo quotes Freire's frustration with people who only read his most famous work, *Pedagogy of Oppressed*, the reader is left without a solid argument about what distinguishes this original book from his later writings. In the final part of this biography, Kirylo briefly describes Freire's

time as municipal Secretary of Education in the São Paulo, an endeavor that should interest any educational practitioner. In this section, Freire is once again constructed as the well-intentioned pedagogue, stepping into a corrupt school system "that revealed the abuse of an administration that not only took poor care of public property, but also intimidated and abused the conscience of educators, and, in fact, all school employees." While I would be the first to critique the dire state of the Brazilian public school system, I worry that framing Freire's intervention in this way (as good against bad) does not do justice the nuances of his approach and how it differed from previous administration's practices.³

In summary, the first four chapters of Kirylo's book are an important contribution to Freirean scholarship, representing the most comprehensive biography of Freire's life (in English) to date. This biography is at its best when threading together the different experiences, theories, and people that impacted Freire's life and thought. The biography, however, is at its worse when painting a picture of Freire as an individual saint, "shedding a healing light" on the "shadow" of an oppressed Brazilian society. The story, simply put, is much more complicated.

³ See, O'Cadiz et al. (1998), for more detailed analysis of Freire's work in São Paulo).

Influences on Freire, Major Themes, and Freire's Influence

The second part of *Paulo Freire: The Man from Recife* analyzes the theoretical influences on Freire, the major themes that can be taken from his work, and the individuals, literature, and bodies of philosophy Freire has influenced. As for the first task—outlining the theoretical influences on the development of Freire's ideas—Kirylo argues that Freire draws on a range of sources, refusing to settle on one theoretical perspective. Furthermore, Freire is not advocating for a fixed method; in fact, for something to be Freirean it must be continually transformed and locally situated. Kirylo goes on to describe in succinct and accessibly language, “mindfully written as a helpful aid for the novice” (125), the major concepts in Existentialism, Phenomenology, Personalism, Humanism, Liberalism, and Marxism. At the end of this section Kirylo lists a handful of other important influences—such as Lukács, Althusser, Fanon, Marcuse, Mao, Memmi, Cabral, Freyre, Azevada, Viera Pinto. (Dewey, I might mention, is conspicuously missing from this entire discussion.)

Therefore, what this chapter *does do* extremely well is offer the reader a quick, thoughtful summary of the many different, complicated bodies of philosophy that influenced Freire in some way. What this chapter *does not* do in any systematic way is analyze *where* these different influences appear in Freire's writing, *which* ideas he drew on at different points in his life, and *what* theories (other than Christianity)

should be considered most central to Freire's work. To be fair, there are places where Kirylo makes more analytical claims, such as the assertion that Freire's distinction between living and existing borrows from Marx's comparison of animals and humans (138). Similarly, Kirylo mentions the direct influence of Erich Fromm on Freire's understanding of the act of knowing (139). These claims, however, are almost always taken directly from Freire's own writings. In other words, in an exceptionally intellectually honest fashion, Kirylo draws on Freire (and other scholars) to inform the readers about Freire, but he does not make any analytical moves on his own.

Another contribution Kirylo makes is bringing alive the stories of people who have been personally affected by Freire. From Jonathan Kozol's last meeting with Freire at the airport, when Freire firmly told him, “A young man is going to have to die in certain ways in order to become the kind of man he needs to be,” (257) to James H. Cone's emotional reaction to Freire visiting him to applaud his book, Kirylo opens a window into the numerous personal and deep relationships Freire formed with scholars around the world. Kirylo does not attempt to evaluate the different theoretical directions each scholar takes Freirean thought, nor the subsequent interactions between the people Freire influences. This is simply an account of how individuals (almost all scholars of either critical pedagogy or liberation theology) “discovered” Freire, and in their own words, why this was meaningful. The interview chapters with James H. Cone and Nita Freire

are extensions of this general contribution, allowing these two important individuals to describe their relationship to Freire, offer insights into his personality, and reflect on how he affected their world vision. Again, Kirylo does not analyze or question these interviews or email excerpts; he is merely bringing together a multitude of voices and reflections about Freire into one text. Readers are on their own for interpretation.

In what might be the most useful stand-alone chapter of the book, “Freirean themes” (Chpt. 6, 143-163), Kirylo offers the readers what he believes to be the nine most important concepts in Freire’s work—Authenticity, Dialogue, *Conscientização*, Praxis, Banking Education/Problem-Posing Education, Authority/Authoritarianism, Love, Humility, and Hope. Kirylo analyzes what each of these concepts meant for Freire, while also making astute arguments about how these concepts found their way into Freire’s thinking. For example, Kirylo dispels the common myth that Freire created the word, “*conscientização*,” instead tracing its origins to a research group from the Higher Institute for Brazilian Studies in the mid-1960s. Similarly, Kirylo analyzes the Greek origin of the word “praxis,” while also examining the concepts’ different articulations by Kant, Hegel, Marx and Gramsci. While I might have personally added “unfinishedness” to this list of major Freirean themes (which Kirylo does discuss in other parts of the book), I think this chapter serves as a useful summary of Freirean’s philosophical approach to learning and knowledge. I could easily

imagine pairing this chapter with parts of *Pedagogy of Oppressed* in future syllabi.

Kirylo also begins this chapter with a brief discussion of Antonio Gramsci’s notion on “hegemony,” noting that Freire had the opportunity to read Gramsci’s work only *after* writing *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In my view, drawing out the connections between Gramsci and Freire’s ideas is particularly important, as Freirean pedagogies are too often disconnected from concrete political actions. Linking Freire’s ideas to Gramsci ensures that Freirean pedagogy does not become disconnected from an analysis of class power or revolutionary struggle. Furthermore, there are multiple complementarities between Gramsci and Freire’s work. As Michael Burawoy (2003) writes, contesting hegemony is not an easy process since civil society itself is an arm of capitalist hegemony. “This hegemony is so powerful that the transition to socialism requires an arduous, difficult, and perhaps even impossible War of Position” (230). However, Burawoy continues, Gramsci is never clear on the “exact mechanisms, leading to this new configuration of ditches, fortresses, and earthworks” (216). Gramsci does mention some important actors in this process, one of those being the “organic intellectual” who must elaborate the intellectual activity that exists in everyone, to develop the kernel of good sense that exists within common sense (Gramsci 1971, 5). Freire provides us with a concrete strategy for how this “critical elaboration of intellectual activity” might take place. Gramsci ensures that this elaboration of a

new stratum of intellectuals does not remain an educational exercise, but is a political strategy linked to a process of class struggle.

Liberation Theology and Freire's Catholicism

Christianity is a theme woven throughout this book, appearing as an important influence in Freire's childhood, his philosophical and moral development, his career opportunities, and his personal relationships. Kirylo offers insight into the direct ways Christianity shaped Freire, as a person and a philosopher. We learn that Freire's notion of "naming the word" comes from the Genesis story, which Freire read when he was very young and apparently never forgot: "God said to the human beings that they would *give a name to things* . . . Giving a name is something which generally comes after transformation. I transform, I create, I then give a name" (124, quoting Freire 1983, 35). Kirylo also makes the connection between Freire's philosophical belief in humility, the power of love, hope, and Christian morals. Furthermore, an entire chapter is dedicated to the history of liberation theology, which I found particularly valuable. Kirylo traces liberation theology's roots to the first ordained priest in the New World, Bartolome de Las Casas, a lone advocate for indigenous rights. The tensions between the Catholic Church—aligned with the military and repressive colonial governments—and priests who found in their Christianity inspiration to fight for the poor, recurs as a theme throughout the chapter.

Kirylo also highlights the personal relationships Freire cultivates with priests who were central to pushing forward liberation theology, in both theory and practice: Dom Hélder Câmara, the progressive Archbishop of Recife; Gustavo Gutiérrez, the "father" of liberation theology in Latin America; James H. Cone, the "father" of black theology in the United States. Freire spent his entire adult life with and among these progressive priests. Although Kirylo does not make this argument, it seems, once again, that Freire himself was a product of the moment he was living. Surrounded by these men and women—although, women are conspicuously missing from the chapter on liberation theology—who were dedicated to both the Catholic Church and struggles against oppression, Freire did not see a contradiction between Catholicism and the struggle for social justice. To the contrary, religious leaders such as Dom Hélder Câmara were "instrumental" (172) in the Basic Education Movement (MEB), where Freire's problem-posing approach to literacy was first put into practice. While Kirylo does not directly argue what aspects of Freire's thought were and were not incorporated into liberation theology, I think examples such as the Basic Education Movement implicitly make this connection: Freire gave progressive priests following liberation theology a concrete approach to working with the poor. As other scholars have shown (Berryman 1987, 34-38), the Ecclesial Basic Communities (CEBs) that formed throughout Latin America utilized Freirean methods, reading the bible, for example, but always relating these biblical

stories to people's lives and the structural inequities they faced. In my own dissertation research in Brazil, I have interviewed dozens of women who describe their first encounter with Freire as occurring through these informal religious study groups (CEBs).

The Freirean Foundations of Critical Pedagogy

In a brief overview of critical pedagogy, Kirylo, again, makes one main argument: there is no single definition of critical pedagogy, but rather, it is "informed by multiple discourses and [is] constantly evolving, dictated by historical circumstances, new theoretical insights and new challenges" (215). Kirylo goes on to quote nine (lengthy) definitions of critical pedagogy, from different prominent scholars in the field. The author then discusses the history of curriculum studies, the definition(s) of critical theory, and his own attempt to implement critical pedagogy in a university classroom. Unlike Kirylo's analysis of liberation theology, this section of the book leaves the reader a bit unfulfilled as to the exact connection Freire has to these primarily U.S.-based theorists. We can assume that critical theory and curriculum studies are both central to critical pedagogy, as their descriptions are placed in this chapter, but there is minimal analysis beyond an affirmation of this general relationship.

In an attempt to expand on this chapter, I would like to add some of my own analysis on the Freirean foundations of Critical Pedagogy. I understand critical pedagogy is

a field within education that is specifically dedicated to theorizing how schools, and education more broadly, can be a progressive force for social change. In the *Critical Pedagogy Reader*, Darder et al. (2003) write that, "critical pedagogy loosely evolved out of a yearning to give some shape and coherence to the theoretical landscape of radical principals, beliefs and practices that contributed to emancipatory ideal of democratic schooling in the United States during the twentieth century" (2). Although the field of critical pedagogy was primarily developed by academics in the United States over the past three decades, influences range from the Frankfurt School in Europe, to John Dewey's writing in the early 1900s, to the educational philosophies of both Myles Horton in Tennessee and Paulo Freire in Brazil. The first "textbook" use of the term critical pedagogy was in Henry Giroux's book *Theory and Resistance in Education*, published in 1983 (Darder et al. 2003). However, during an interview Giroux states that he first started using the term several years before, during informal conversations with Donaldo Macedo and Paulo Freire.⁴ Thus, Freire was a key actor in the "naming" of critical pedagogy. In addition, many of Freire's ideas, such as "ideology critique, an analysis of culture, attention to discourse and a recasting of the teacher as an intellectual or cultural worker" (Leonardo 2004, 12) still form the basic foundation of the field.

⁴ This interview can be found at <http://freire.education.mcgill.ca/node/241>

In sum, James D. Kirylo's *Paulo Freire: The Man from Recife* is a rigorously researched book, bringing together dozens of dispersed texts into one comprehensive summary of Freire's life and work. By way of conclusion, I offer two suggestions toward deepening Kirylo's analysis.

Can Celebration be Critical?

As one reviewer of *Paulo Freire: The Man from Recife* noted, "Celebration is both the book's strength and its weakness" (Gottesman 2011, 1). I agree with this perspective, and I think Freirean scholars need to reflect on whether celebration without critique is actually productive for pushing forward Freire's thinking. The critiques that have been laid against Freire's framework are not inconsequential, and our respect for Freire requires that we take these critiques seriously. Despite Kirylo's candor in declining to address any of these critiques, this decision lessens the book's overall effectiveness. Kirylo's celebration of Freire would have been much more convincing had these critiques also been articulated. To complement the book, I will mention a few of these criticisms and responses.

One of the major critiques of both critical pedagogy and Paulo Freire is the use of abstract language. After some race hate-crimes at the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus in the late 1980's, Elizabeth Ellsworth started a specials topics course that was called "Media and Anti-Racist Pedagogies." In this course Ellsworth attempted to use critical pedagogy as a means to work through and solve some of

the racial issues on campus. Once in the midst of the course she found that critical pedagogy was insufficient in helping her facilitate this discussion. She writes that although the class "worked through" and out of the literature's highly abstract language ("myths") of who we 'should' be and what 'should' be happening," the class eventually had to develop its own pedagogy that was "context specific and seemed to be much more responsive to our understanding of social identities and situations" (Ellsworth 1989, 299). In other words, what was supposed to occur via the mandates of critical pedagogy, such as inclusive group dialogue, ended up being oppressive to certain participants. Kathleen Weiler also critiques the use of abstract language, arguing that Freire's writing "allows him to make inspirational pronouncements without having to address the complexities of the local situations in which people find themselves" (Weiler 1996, 356).

Henry Giroux (2001), however, defends the necessity of this "abstract" theory. He argues that people should not begin an analysis with observation, but rather, they should start with a theoretical framework that can give those observations meaning (20). Giroux believes that the abstract nature of theory is not by itself a problem, it just demands that those implementing the theory reformulate it for each historically specific context. Giroux might argue that the process Ellsworth went through—having to re-define critical pedagogy in terms of her student's needs—actually epitomizes such a process.

Another critique that has been leveled against Freire is his lack of a sexual or racial framework for understanding difference. Freire is criticized for writing through an Oppressed/ Oppressor binary, without taking into account the different types of oppression that exist. The gender critique was particularly strong during Freire's lifetime, leading him "to rid [his] language of all those features that are demeaning to women" (Macedo 2006, 107). Before Freire died, Donaldo Macedo pushed him on this topic: "The criticism leveled against your work, raises the issues that you universalize oppression without appreciating the multiplicity of oppressive experiences that characterized the lived histories of individuals along race, gender, ethnic and religious lines" (Macedo 2006, p. 109). Freire's immediate response was, "I find it absurd to read a book like *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and criticize it because the author did not treat all of the potential oppressive themes equally. I believe that what one needs to do is appreciate the work within its historical context" (Macedo, 2006, 109).

bell hooks, as a black feminist who also considers herself Freirean, provides an interesting outlook on these racial and gender issues. hooks is aware of the sexism in Freire's writing, and she realizes that this bias goes beyond the simple use of pronouns. She writes that he "constructs a phallogocentric paradigm of liberation – wherein freedom and the experience of patriarchal manhood are always linked as though they are one and the same" (hooks 1994, 49). Although hooks invites a critical feminist interrogation of Freire's work, she

also writes that Freire's writings were still useful for her as a black woman living in the United States. "His writing gave me a way to place the politics of racism in the United States in a global context wherein I could see my fate linked with that of colonized black people everywhere struggling to decolonize, to transform society" (hooks 1994, 51). Despite Freire's lack of a racial or gender framework, hooks adapted his ideas to fit her black, feminist reality.

Finally, Freire is also often critiqued for his notion of consciousness-raising. Kirylo, quoting Freire, writes that, "when teaching adults to read, it must be conducted with respect to the awakening of their consciousness level, moving 'from a naïveté to a critical attitude'" (43, quoted from Freire 1994). Implicit in this statement is the assumption that someone can (and others cannot) determine what is a naïve thinking, and what is critical thinking. Ellsworth (1989) argues that Freire's theory of consciousness reflects rational thinking, because it is up to the teacher to "ensure that students are given the chance to arrive logically at the universally valid proposition underlying the discourse of critical pedagogy" (303-304). This critique, which is particularly prevalent in postmodern perspectives, is yet to be seriously addressed by Freirean scholars. The critique also speaks directly to the concerns scholars and activists may have about the fine line between indoctrination, false neutrality, and student agency (Lafore 2011). Although I personally believe that the concept of *becoming* as a process and not a linear trajectory might address some of these

concerns, there is still much theoretical work to be done.

Freire's Legacy: Beyond the Individuals

Though a much larger issue, one last question makes me comfortable: How should we understand Freire's legacy? As scholars in academia, there is a tendency for us to analyze legacy in terms of a person's contribution to intellectual bodies of thought. In this light, one of Freire's legacies in the United States is certainly the academic field of critical pedagogy. Yet claiming critical pedagogy as Freire's legacy, or even claiming the dozens of critical scholars who were inspired by Freire, does not do justice to the power of Freire's ideas. Freire's most important legacy is *not* in the area of academic scholarship. His primary legacy lies with the diverse and creative ways contemporary social movements, grassroots organizations, and activists have and continue to utilize his ideas in practice.

As I mentioned at the outset, I read *Pedagogy of Oppressed* as an activist in college, and it had absolutely no impact on my thinking. However, when I went to Brazil and began to work with *Grupo Mulher Maravilha*, the women's organization in the periphery of Recife, I was able to watch, learn, and participate in what I came to understand as a unique form of social justice work. I sat through dozens of "citizenship classes," where elder women in the community learned to read the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights, debating whether these rights existed in their community and how they could ensure that

they did. Hundreds of organizations similar to *Grupo Mulher Maravilha* exist across Latin America. The labor movement in the United States has also been highly influenced by Freire, and he continues to be an inspiration to hundreds labor activists involved in workers education. Before coming to graduate school, I worked for an Immigrant Rights Center in Maryland, where the education department was developing Freirean-inspired curriculum that connects preparation for the U.S. Citizenship Test to discussions of inequality and discrimination. My dissertation research is on the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST), a movement of more than a million peasants who have forced the government to give them land on which they work. Activists in this movement have been directly affected by Freire's theory and practice, and are actively attempting to incorporate his ideas into the schools in their communities. This is Freire's legacy: the labor activists, peasants, urban dwellers, immigrants, indigenous peoples, and other populations fighting for a more just society, and drawing on Freire to help them in these struggles. Although individuals are also important, and become the central foci of Kirylo's book, not placing Freire's legacy squarely within collective struggles does not do his legacy justice.

I would like to thank James D. Kirylo, one last time, for putting his heart and mind into the important book that has inspired these reflections.

References

- Apple, M. W. (2004). *Ideology and Curriculum*. Third Edition. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Berryman, P. (1987). *Liberation theology: The essential facts about the revolutionary movement in Latin America and Beyond*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Burawoy, Michael. 2003. "For a Sociological Marxism: The Complementary Convergence of Antonio Gramsci and Karl Polanyi," *Politics & Society*, 31.2, June 2003 193-261.
- Darder, A., M. Baltodano and R. D. Torres, eds. (2003). *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Freire, P. (1970). The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom. *Harvard Educational Review*. 40(2), 335-350.
- _____ (1983b). In M. Costigan, 'Youth Have the Third World inside you': Conversation by Paulo Freire. *Convergence*, XVI(4), 32-37.
- _____ (1994). *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- _____ (1998). *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- _____ (2002). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum International Publishing.
- Ellsworth, E. (1989). Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review* 59(3), 297-234.
- Gadotti, Freire. (1994). *Reading Paulo Freire: His Life and Work*. New York: State University of New York.
- Giroux, Henry. (2001). *Theory and Resistance in Education: Towards a Pedagogy for the Opposition*. Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey.
- Gottesman, I (2011). Review: Paulo Freire: The Man from Recife. *Teachers College Record*.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from Prison Notebooks*. Eds. Q. Hoare and G. Smith. New York: International Publishers.
- hooks, bell. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Kane, L. (2001). *Popular Education and Social Change in Latin America*. London: Latin America Bureau.
- Lafore, T (2011). "Teaching Power: Indoctrination, False Neutrality and Student Agency in Liberatory Adult Political Education," unpublished Masters Paper, University of California, Berkeley.
- Leonardo, Z. (2004). Critical social theory and transformative knowledge: The functions of criticism in quality education. *Educational Researcher*, 33:6, pp. 11-18.
- Macedo, D. (2006). *Literacies of Power: What Americans Are Not Allowed to Know*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- McLaren, Peter. (2003). *Life in Schools: An introduction to Critical Pedagogy In the Foundations of Education*. Boston: Pearson Education.
- O'Cadiz, M.P., P.L. Wong, C.A. Torres (1998). *Education and Democracy: Paulo Freire, social movements and educational reform in São Paulo*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Pereira, A. W. (1997). *The end of the peasantry: The rural labor movement in northeast Brazil, 1961-1988*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

Weiler, Kathleen. (1996). Myths of Paulo Freire. *Educational Theory* 46(3), 353-371.



About the Reviewer

Rebecca Tarlau is a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Berkeley, in the Graduate School of Education. Tarlau's dissertation examines the educational practices of the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST). Her broader research interests include international and comparative education, the educational practices of social movements, state-society dynamics, participatory governance and Freirean pedagogies.

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the
Education Review.

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the
College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware
The National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>, and the
Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University



Editors

David J. Blacker

blacker@edrev.info

Gustavo Fischman

fischman@edrev.info

Melissa Cast-Brede

cast-brede@edrev.info

Gene V Glass

glass@edrev.info

Follow *Education Review* on



Facebook and on Twitter:



#EducReview