



Roberts, Peter (2013). *Paulo Freire in the 21st century: Education, dialogue, and transformation*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.

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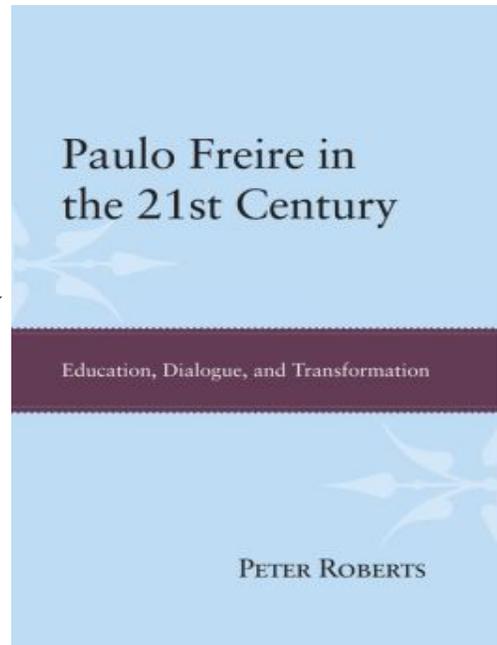
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Before going to graduate school, I swore by Paulo Freire's work. Like many others, I felt Freire was expressing my desire for a liberatory education, but in a more articulate way than I could express. However, when I came to graduate school I remember one of my philosophy professors telling me he thought Freire was not a good philosopher. At the time, this statement baffled me. Honestly, I thought my professor was crazy. As I grew as a scholar and developed a better understanding of "what is good philosophy," I came to appreciate my professor's point. I now view Paulo Freire as a practitioner in search for an educational philosophy of liberation, not, as many misinterpret him, a philosopher.

While strict distinctions between "philosophers" and "practitioners" can be problematic, analytically distinguishing between a philosopher and practitioner serves a couple of purposes. First, it highlights the fact that Freire's work lacked the philosophical rigor and clarity of arguments required of a philosopher. Second, such a distinction allows us to clarify how I am going to interpret the secondary literature on Paulo Freire. To oversimplify things, we can separate the secondary literature on Freire into two camps: the *classical Freireans* and *constructive*



critics. Classical Freireans, generally speaking, overlook the lack of philosophical clarity within Freire and generally accept his core arguments as true. *Constructive critics*, on the other hand, criticize Freire's work for not being philosophically rigorous, but are interested in the kernels of rationality within his arguments (See Dussel, 2012; Liston, 1988; Strike, 1989). I fit into the camp of constructive critics.

Paulo Freire in the 21st Century: Education, Dialogue, Transformation by Peter Roberts fits within the classical Freirean camp. Although Roberts "...never regarded [himself] as a follower of Freire but rather a fellow traveler" (p. 9), this book fits within the classical Freirean camp in two respects. First, Roberts does not systematically challenge the philosophical inconsistencies and vague arguments within Freire's work. Second, in many ways, Roberts accepts Freire's arguments as true without philosophically explaining why his arguments are valid. As a result, Roberts travels far too close to Freire. In addition, most of the book lacked the philosophical depth and clarity needed to move the debate over Freire's work forward. For example, many of the chapters take the format of "what would Freire say about X" or "comparing Freire to Y person". While these two approaches have their merits, proceeding in such a manner requires philosophically reconstructing underdeveloped ideas and concepts within Freire's work—a task Roberts does not accomplish.

The chapter "Freire and Political Correctness" is a good example of how Roberts travels too close to Freire. In this chapter, Roberts focuses on what Freire might say about the political correctness debate of the 1990's. Roberts argues that being a "politically correct Freirean" would be a contradiction in terms because political correctness relates to the promotion of one position as the only acceptable, legitimate, or possible one (p. 66). Roberts's argues that from a Freirean perspective this would be a contradiction because Freire allows all issues to be challenged, debated, or contested. The reason this argument travels too close to Freire is that Roberts presupposes a Freirean position is legitimate in the first place; consequently, he provides no reasons why we ought to agree with Freire. Imagine, for example, a follower of John Stuart Mill taking a different stand and saying "to be a classic Millian requires *being* politically correct" (See Mill, 2002). In this situation, how would Roberts justify a Freirean position over a Millian

position? I am not saying a Freirean position is unjustified; rather my point is Roberts cannot just appeal to Freire's authority to validate his argument, he must show why a Freirean position is actually a reasonable position.

The problem of appealing to Freire's authority also appears in the chapter "Critical Literacy, Breadth of Perspective, and the University Curriculum: A Freirean Perspective". This chapter uses Freire to think about the problem of finding a correct balance between reading for breadth and depth: between helping students transcend a surface level understanding versus covering a diversity of thinkers (p. 88-90). Once again, nothing is wrong with taking a Freirean perspective on these issues. However, when doing so, it is essential to explain: What is unique about a Freirean perspective when it comes to balancing breadth and depth? Roberts does not explain how a Freirean perspective provides new or unique insight on these issues. In fact, this chapter reads more like personal reflections than a sustained philosophical argument. Moreover, Roberts could have written this chapter without ever referring to Freire, while still making the same point. And quite frankly, Roberts's use of Freire is more of a distraction than an enhancement of the point he is trying to make.

I realize the intent of this book is to bring Paulo Freire in the 21st century, which means an appeal to Freire, to some degree, should center each chapter. The issue I have with this book is how Roberts uses Freire. If the point of this book, as Roberts argues, is to put "...Freire into conversation with other thinkers, while also drawing attention to the limitation of his work..." (p. 8), then each chapter should push the limits of Freire. However, most chapters lacked the depth needed to achieve this task. For instance, the chapter "Freire and Dostoyevsky" aims to compare how these two thinkers conceptualize "uncertainty, dialogue, and the interplay of different voices" (p. 106) and how individuals undergo a transformative process through learning. However, Roberts only provides a surface level discussion on Freire and Dostoyevsky. There is no discussion, for instance, on the difference between Dostoyevsky's existentialist understanding of a transformative education and Freire's Marxist Humanist understanding of a transformative education. Such a discussion would be useful for pushing the limits of Freire because these two thinkers focus on different dimensions of a transformative education: Freire

on an education for *political transformation* and Dostoyevsky on an education for *personal transformation*. Noting these differences would highlight major problems Freire faces by viewing education primarily as a means of political transformation. Instead of addressing this issue, or some other issue that requires a more nuanced focus, Roberts leaves the discussion at such a general level that Freire and Dostoyevsky are interpreted as having the same conception of a transformative education.

There are two chapters where Roberts does make some interesting points about Freire; however, these chapters also suffer from a lack of depth. In “Defining the Problem of Literacy,” Roberts places Freire in dialogue with Israel Scheffler, and challenges both Freire and Scheffler’s definitions of literacy. And, in “Reason and Emotion in Freire’s work” Roberts, rightfully, challenges the assertion that Freire undervalued the role of emotions in a transformative education. While these chapters are interesting, I wish they were more philosophically grounded. Take the chapter Reason and Emotion, for instance. Roberts explains that Freire acknowledges the role of emotions within a transformative education, but he never explains why emotions *are* important within a transformative education. Just because Freire considers emotions does not mean having a theory of emotions is necessary for a conception of a transformative education. To be clear, I am not saying emotions are unimportant—actually, I think emotions are essential to a transformative education. Rather, my point is that this chapter could have been stronger if Roberts philosophically explained why emotions matter, and then explained if Freire gives emotions a proper role in his philosophy of education, rather than just explaining that Freire valued emotions (see Nussbaum, 1998, 2000, 2013). In the end, while these chapters made interesting points, they lacked the philosophical rigor needed to make a convincing argument.

Finally, and probably the most disappointing part of this book, is Roberts’s tendency to de-politicize Freire. Despite my criticisms of Freire, he is an educational icon, and not so much because of the questions he answered *per se*, but because of the questions he asked. Freire was one of the few philosophers who bluntly asked: *What do we teach the oppressed?* In this sense, Freire was an essential educational thinker because he focused directly on an education for human emancipation; thus, any attempt to bring “Paulo Freire into the 21st Century” should center on

an education for human emancipation (See Mayo, 2004). Roberts, however, places the issue of human emancipation at the margins of the book—in fact, he really does not address this issue. For example, while Roberts acknowledges “the ontological core of Freire’s philosophy is the ideal of humanization, or being more fully human” (p. 4); he treats Freire’s idea of “becoming human” as an issue of personal transformation rather than a political transformation. To Roberts’s credit, Freire inadequately defines terms like “oppression” “liberation” or “humanization;” in addition, Freire does not differentiate between *an education for personal transformation* and *an education for political transformation*. However, despite Freire’s loose use of these terms, his focus is clearly on education for political transformation. Yet Roberts ends up treating Freire like a liberal humanist rather than a Marxist humanist.

Overall, this book was disappointing. Many of the arguments were unconvincing and underdeveloped. In addition, the book reads more like a loosely connected set of essays or well-written notes rather than a sustained and constructive engagement with Freire. Roberts takes the political edge away from Freire by treating him more like a liberal humanist rather than a Marxist humanist. Furthermore, Roberts’s failure to philosophically push the limits of Freire’s thoughts places this book firmly within the classical Freirean camp. Even when taking into account the two aforementioned chapters, this book fails to bring Freire into the 21st century.

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