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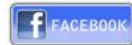
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Irwin, James. (2012) *Paulo Freire's Philosophy of Education: Origins, Developments, Impacts and Legacies*. London: Continuum.

Pp. 233

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Reviewed by Jon Reyhner
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Irwin critically examines Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and compares it to his publications before and after with the goal of showing the development of his ideas, quoting extensively from them. One problem with this is that the author relies on translated versions of Freire's work by others throughout his study and provides a very limited description of the cultural milieu in which his ideas developed. Irwin discusses briefly many of the well-known elements of Freire's work, including his being jailed for 75 days after the military coup in Brazil and his exile in Chile. There is not much attention given to his work in Africa and Nicaragua or to what effect that work

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may have had on his thinking. Irwin provides a lot of information on banking education but does not go into depth or give real world examples of the alternative “problem posing Education” promoted by Friere.

Anyone who has studied Freire much knows that that Freire began his educational efforts in northeastern Brazil, which Friere described as a “closed society.... backward, illiterate, anti-dialogical. Elitist” (p. 82) with “a lack of democratic experience” resulting from colonization where people had “a habit of submission” (p. 84). Of course this situation heavily influenced Freire’s thinking. Irwin writes, “The intimate connections between life and philosophy are nowhere more apparent than through an exploration of Paulo Freire’s work” (p. 1). However, Irwin does not shed much light on Freire’s life or the 20,000 cultural circles for two million illiterate people in Brazil developed by 1964 in Brazil partly as a result of Freire’s work. Freire is described in his early writings as replacing “the concept of school or class with the notion of *culture circle*” and subverted “the teacher’s role with the concept of coordinator” (p. 71) and the goal of education is to get students to “free themselves from today” (p. 76).

Irwin points to Freire’s “eclecticism” (p. 166) and how he “always remained a Catholic philosopher” (p. 2) but does not explain what this actually means. Irwin regards it as an “enigma” as to how Friere “succeeds in being both a Christian and a Marxist at the same time” (p. 2). Important elements of Freire’s thinking are discussed, including his penchant for “self-critique” (p. 8) and that “the teacher must first seek to understand his or her students if they wish to teach them anything. Moreover, *the students will often teach the teacher*” (p. 151, emphasis in original) and “the human being is a project” and work in progress (p. 40). Irwin describes Freire’s work as “*a defense of the individual against the system*” (p. 78, italics in original) in what Freire describes as a “‘massified’ society of adjusted and domesticated human beings” (p. 81) and a “Consumer civilization” (p. 29).

Irwin quotes from Friere extensively, but the result is pretty much a summary of well-known information about the philosopher and the positions he took. For example Friere wrote, “human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis. It is transformation of the world,

and, as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and practice, it is reflection and action” (p. 65) and “the teacher’s role is more to problematize than to in any way provide an answer.” (p. 71)

Freire’s thinking remains relevant today as the gap between the rich and the poor in many countries, including the United States, is increasing. In “Last Thoughts,” Irwin discusses the Freirian legacy in the British context and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies but not in regard to the United States. Freire’s ideas that curriculum should not be pre-established and literacy words should be drawn from the students being taught goes against much of the current educational efforts in the United States, especially the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and its Reading First provisions. This is probably part of the reason that the achievement gap, especially for American Indians, that NCLB was designed to close, remains gaping. Irwin does not discuss the criticism of Freire’s work, and overall, I found the book somewhat repetitious. I think Andrew J. Kirkendall’s (2010) *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy* is more illuminating in regard to Freire’s life and thinking; however, neither addresses the critique of Freire’s work by indigenous peoples found in Chet Bower’s *Rethinking Freire: Globalization and the Environmental Crisis*.

References

- Bowers, C. A. (Ed.). (2005). *Rethinking Freire: Globalization and the Environmental Crisis*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kirkendall , Andrew J. (2010). *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

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