Beyond Buber: Dialogue, Education, and Politics

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As Gregor Smith (1961) notes in his introduction to *Between Man and Man*, Buber was a many-sided thinker, defying easy classification. Writing nearly four decades ago, Smith drew attention to the distinctive contribution Buber had to make in "the era of collectivism, of mass society and the loss of the human subject" (p. 10). In an insightful passage, Smith observed:

> It is as persons along with other persons that the essence of true humanity consists. This is not to be simply experienced, in the sense of being analysable as an inert object within our reach, nor simply understood, in the sense of being able to be established as part of a system of ideal ends; but it is to be grasped, in the sense of a mutual encounter in which each self in its wholeness meets another, and in the meeting decides to be for the other in a reciprocal movement which is at the same time the essence of community. True humanity is community. In elaborating these ideas Buber's thought may be said to move simultaneously inwards, in a deepening of self-knowledge, and outwards, in a new and vivid awareness of life in the world of others. But the one aspect of the movement is impossible without the other. (pp. 10-11)

While *I and Thou* remains Buber's classic text, it is, in some senses, less accessible than many of his later writings where he "turns to particulars, to human actions and ideals in such different realms as those of education, industrial relations, political action, philosophical enquiry, and conventional religious attitudes" (Smith, 1961, p. 10). Buber's central concern throughout, however, was to investigate "the close connection of the relation to God with the relation to one's fellow-man" (Buber, 1958, p. 155). Vincent Adkins provides a lucid discussion an important dimension of this work: Buber's conception of the dialectical relation between the teacher and the student. Buber's ideas have attracted less attention than they deserve among

educationists, and Adkin's article serves as a timely reminder of what this great thinker might have to offer pedagogical theory.

Adkin's succinct summary of the differences between "I-Thou" and "I-It" encounters is especially helpful in an age when educational processes are increasingly being reconceived as merely commercial transactions in a competitive marketplace. The commodification of education under the economic and social policies of the New Right – in Canada, the United States, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, among other countries – threatens to extinguish the notion of a pedagogical relation in favour of a contractual view of teaching and learning. Teachers are now often seen as providers or sellers of services, and students are reconstituted as rational, utility maximizing, perpetually choosing *consumers*. When the services "purchased" by students do not meet expectations, teachers can be held accountable for their failure to deliver and quickly removed from their positions, while students either pursue matters further via the legal system or take their educational dollars elsewhere.

Buber's theory of the teacher-student relation seems a world away from this crude neo-liberal model, and is worthy of renewed investigation. As Adkins notes, Buber's emphasis on genuine dialogue between teachers and students speaks to the deeply *human* (rather than "consumerist") nature of experience. Where the market model of education presupposes that humans are self-interested, self-contained, autonomous individuals, authentic dialogical experiences allow students to acquire a sense of the relatedness between *self* and *others*. In the spirit of this dialogue, I want to acknowledge my agreement with much of Adkin's account while offering some thoughts on how Buber's ideas might be extended and applied in other domains. The work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire – for whom Buber was an important influence – will serve as a key reference point for the discussion.

For Buber, dialogical relations are not confined to conversational communication: dialogue can occur without speech and even in the absence of sound and gesture. At its most basic level, dialogue is the experience of, and more particularly the acknowledgment of, an other: a being through which the self is defined. Genuine dialogue is captured in the notion of *inclusion*. Inclusion comprises three elements: first, a relation of some kind between two (or more) people; second, "an event experienced by them in common, in which

at least one of them actively participates" (Buber, 1961, p. 124); and third, "the fact that this one person, without forfeiting anything of the felt reality of his activity, at the same time lives through the common event from the standpoint of the other" (pp. 124-125). This is not to be confused with *empathy*. Buber notes that empathy implies a movement from one point to another: a transposing of oneself into something else. In an empathic relationship one "glides" with one's feelings into another formation, structure, or being, consciously striving to "trace" the object of contemplation from within. This excludes one's own concreteness: the actuality of objective life is displaced by "pure aestheticism." Inclusion, by contrast, extends the concreteness of being, and affirms the complete presence of the reality in which one participates (p. 124). Conversation, Buber argues, becomes genuine through consciousness of inclusion, and can be "real" and "effective" only when it derives from an *experience* of inclusion "of the other side" (p. 125). Buber notes:

> A dialogical relation will show itself ... in genuine conversation, but it is not composed of this. Not only is the shared silence of two such persons a dialogue, but also their dialogical life continues, even when they are separated in space, as the continual potential presence of the one to the other, as an unexpressed intercourse. (p. 125)

This notion is also discussed in *I and Thou*, where Buber makes it clear that I-Thou relationships can be established not just with other human beings, but also – albeit in a somewhat different way – with "beings and things which come to meet us in nature" (p. 156).

Paulo Freire shares Buber's commitment to dialogue as a fundamental dimension of a good human life. Dialogue is indispensable for humanization. Freire speaks of knowing and education as dialogical processes. As is well-known, he draws a distinction between "banking education" and "problem-posing education," the former being characterized by an authoritarian, anti-dialogical approach to the learning process, the latter emphasizing the posing of problems and asking of questions in a critical, dialogical environment (see Freire, 1972, chapter 2). Freire stresses the social nature of all existence, arguing that humans are only ever apparently alone. When facing an object of study, Freire tells us, learners who seem to be engaging in solitary investigations in fact establish "a mysterious, invisible dialogue with those who carried out

the same act of knowing before them" (Freire, 1976, p. 148). For Freire, it is even possible to enter into a form of dialogue with oneself. This involves questioning the assumptions one takes for granted, probing the existing boundaries of one's understanding, and making new experiences the subject of detailed critical reflection. Dialogue, on the Freirean view, is intimately related to the development of a curious, inquiring, questioning mode of being.

While Freire broadens the range of domains within which dialogical relations can occur, the criteria he specifies for *educational* dialogue are quite specific. Dialogue in Freirean educational programmes is not simply idle, casual, or spontaneous discussion; rather, it involves structured, rigorous communication between two or more thinking Subjects seeking to know, mediated by the object of study, within a given social context. Educational dialogue is always *purposeful* communication: the object of dialogue is to critically investigate a specific subject, problem, or theme, with a view to seeking the *raison d'être* which explains the object of study, and to "naming" the world (see Freire & Shor, 1987). Dialogue in Freirean education demands a certain directiveness on the part of teachers and coordinators. In this sense, pedagogical dialogue *presupposes* communication and inclusion, but goes beyond this to a deeper relationship between *knowing* Subjects.

Literacy learning provides another domain to which the Freirean notion of dialogue can be productively applied. Freire encourages readers to take an active stance in confronting written texts. We should, he says, be ever ready to be challenged by what we read, but we should also ask questions of the text, both "fighting" and "loving" it. The dialogue formed between text and reader is extended when links are established between the words on the page and the concerns of everyday life. Relating texts to *contexts* is crucial for Freire. A deeper understanding of a text becomes possible when the conditions under which it was produced are investigated: reading Gramsci thus demands an effort to learn something of Gramsci's life and times. In the adult literacy programmes with which Freire was involved in the 1950s and 1960s, dialogical relations were established on several levels. The words employed in the programmes were generated through purposeful conversations between coordinators and prospective participants; pictorial codifications of scenes from everyday Brazilian life became the object

of detailed discussion in providing a context for introducing letters, words, and sentences; and students were encouraged to relate texts – written and visual – to wider political, cultural, and economic concerns bearing on their existence as illiterate adults.

Freire provides an explicitly *political* reading of the "I-Thou" relationship, drawing attention to the phenomenon of the oppressor "within" the oppressed. He argues:

> The social "I" of the invaded person, like every social "I", is formed in the socio-cultural relations of the social structure, and therefore reflects the duality of the invaded culture. This duality ... explains why invaded and dominated individuals, at a certain moment of their existential experience, almost "adhere" to the oppressor "Thou." (Freire, 1972, p. 122)

Freire explains further:

> The antidialogical, dominating "I" transforms the dominated, conquered "thou" into a mere "it" in Martin Buber's phraseology. The dialogical "I", however, knows that it is precisely the "thou" ("not-I") which has called forth his own existence. He also knows that the "thou" which calls forth his own existence in turn constitutes an "I" which has in his "I" its "thou". The "I" and the "thou" thus become, in the dialectic of these relationships, two "thous" which become two "Is." (p. 135)

Overcoming, or struggling against, an oppressive relationship demands a break with the "near adhesion" of the oppressed "I" to the oppressor "Thou." While recognizing that we are never able to entirely separate ourselves from past experiences or present surroundings, Freire nonetheless believes the oppressed need to gain a certain degree of distance from their oppressors in order to see them more objectively. An educational programme can (in some situations) furnish the conditions necessary for this distancing process. Through coming to see the world in a different light – in beginning to ask different questions of it – participants become aware, often for the first time, of tensions and injustices that were hitherto invisible to them. As Mackie (1980) notes, Freire's approach to literacy education is based in large part on the insight that "the oppressed can only perceive how they have been conditioned when they are confronted with problems arising from their existential situation" (pp. 116-117). Critical educational dialogue allows (but does not compel) the oppressed to see themselves as existing in a

contradictory relationship with the oppressor. This process entails not just a reinterpretation of human relations, but an identification of the *structures* through which oppression operates (see Freire, 1972, pp. 122-123).

In elaborating in some detail on the ways in which dialogue might be developed through educational and textual relations, Freire extends ideas found in Buber's key works. Of the two theorists, Buber provides a deeper exploration of the complexities of human communication. Yet there is also merit in considering some of the limitations of Buber's thought. Freire's identification of the oppressor "Thou" *within* the oppressed "I" is one example of this. The form of teacher-student relation discussed (with admirable clarity) by Adkins is not dissimilar to the pedagogical ideal Freire advances. Freire's debt to Buber was considerable, and this response to Adkin's article is intended, in part, to be an acknowledgment of this. The similarities between Freire and Buber are far more important than their differences. We do well to keep their words about the importance of genuine dialogue in mind as we confront the spectre of a world dominated by profoundly *anti*dialogical neo-liberal ideas.

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