

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

Roberts, Peter. (2000). *Education, Literacy, and Humanization: Exploring the Works of Paulo Freire*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, (Hardcover), 173 pp.

Since his passing in 1997, Paulo Freire continues to have an immense influence in the fields of educational theory, political education, adult education, and literacy, to name a few. His work is passionately debated and analyzed around the world, a circumstance that is evinced by the innumerable books, articles, and other writings about his work. Whether in a seminar of graduate students, in a conference of adult education scholars, or in the planning of an adult literacy program, consensus on the meaning, value, and significance of his work is seldom reached. Freire's work is open to numerous interpretations and applications, a condition that has been reinforced by Freire's insistence on writing at a level of abstraction and generality that denies a facile implementation of his ideas. Instead, his intent was for readers to engage creatively and imaginatively with his work, a circumstance which led him to remark in frustration that "they don't understand what I have said, what I say, what I have written" (quoted in R.M. Torres, 1986). Nevertheless, Freire was persistently unwilling to write a programmatic book.

*Education, Literacy, and Humanization: Exploring the Works of Paulo Freire*, by Peter Roberts, is an overview of Freire's life, philosophy, and key concepts. The author is a senior lecturer in the School of Education of the University of Auckland, New Zealand, and has published broadly on topics in the philosophy of education. In this comprehensive book, he aims to correct misreadings of Freire's work by attempting to prevent "forgetting where Freire comes from in not only the physical, social, and cultural senses but the intellectual as well" (p. 15-16). To this end, Freire's major writings are examined critically, with an emphasis on his overlooked later works, and by responding to his most astute critics. Roberts explains that the book "does not claim to cover all dimensions of Freire's thought, nor does it deal comprehensively with a number of ongoing theoretical difficulties

and important new line of critique" (p. 3). It is unclear from the text, however, which criticisms have been left out, or if there was any criteria of inclusion. Furthermore, according to the bibliography, there are no citations of Portuguese language works, Freire's native language.

Chapter 1 outlines Freire's major works with an emphasis on the centrality of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to his thought and its relationship to later works. In Chapter 2, the primary philosophical concepts in Freire's work, such as the dialectical approach, views on humanization and liberation, and his moral principles, are examined comparatively with other philosophical positions. Starting with the contrasting of "banking education" and "problem-posing education," Chapter 3 develops Freire's ideas on liberating education. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss aspects of Freire's international work on adult literacy. Chapter 4 describes the literacy programs in Brazil and Chile in which Freire participated, while Chapter 5 examines his literacy concepts of "dialogue" and "the word" in more detail. Chapter 6 summarizes and examines a selection of critiques of Freire's work, particularly those of Bowers, Berger, Walker, and Ellsworth, and Freire's responses to them. Freire's views on modernism and postmodernism are also untangled and explained. Chapter 7 addresses in more detail criticisms raised by Bowers, especially assumptions about Western and non-Western cultures that underlie Freire's most basic educational concepts. Chapter 8 offers an interpretation of conscientization, Freire's most important and misused concept.

*Education, Literacy, and Humanization* fulfills two roles in the academic literature on Freire: it serves as an introductory textbook on Freire, and it offers a particular interpretation of aspects of his philosophy. I find, however, that there are both considerable strengths and weaknesses of each function. As a textbook, it is an effective pedagogical tool, which combines sound scholarship with clear organization and thought-provoking analysis. In my opinion, however, it falls short on some noteworthy matters. The author insufficiently explains Freire's terminology for the beginning reader, which is an important issue for any introductory work of philosophy. Although terms such as "dialectical," "praxis," and "humanization" are explained, the language too frequently remains technical and obscure to those

unfamiliar with this literature. Another omission is that Freire's philosophy is presented separately from the fields of educational theory and Latin American education. For example, how did educational issues in Latin America, and in Brazil specifically, evolve during Freire's lifetime?

The interpretive pieces of this book are limited to a few selected topics, which I found to be at times inconsistent. An example is the author's handling of the issue of (mis) appropriation: that people call themselves or their work Freirean without a complete understanding of his work. Freire was at times aware of this issue, but of course he had a more intimate understanding of his work than is possible by another reader. It is uncertain, however, how a real Freirean might be distinguished from a "false" one, and what the criteria would be if possible. The author provides guidelines for reading Freire – that reading should be done "contextually, holistically, and critically" – but these criteria are valid for reading any author. Furthermore, this statement seems incongruous with the point he makes in the Introduction that "although Freire would have insisted that some readings of his work might be better than others, there can be no complete or final account of his theory and practice" (p. 3).

The author recognizes that applying a theory involves interpretation and negotiation, in which we relate the ideas to our own experience, and thus is necessarily partial and incomplete. Here, I believe he belabors a valid but inconsequential point – that educators should not superficially adopt a theoretical position, and then claim it to legitimize their project. There is disjunction between writing about how Freire's writing should be read, and about how Freirean ideas are actually put into practice. And here lies the problem: a prescription for reading Freire (or any other author), even if it allows for different conclusions, is not an appropriate rationale for criticizing apparent or phantom misuses in practice. The author neglects how Freire's ideas have been implemented in case studies of programs using Freirean concepts. Indeed, Rosa Maria Torres makes the case that Freire is special precisely *because of* the multiple ways in which his work has been interpreted and put to use.

Across the world, in the most diverse places and cultures, each person found in Freire essentially what he or she needed

and wanted. And here is probably part of the explanation for the multiplicity of interpretations of his message. Nobody can and will agree on what Freire did or did not say. Freire himself could not have assumed – maybe even imagined – the innumerable tailor-made Freires people have been inventing all over the world. From this perspective, it is irrelevant whether some understood Freire's thoughts better than others. (Torres, 1998, p. 113)

Thus, it is more important for an educational program to be of value to its participants than for it to be faithful to a theoretical position. In other words, it is not clear that the 'legitimate' use of labels (e.g., Freirean, Deweyan, Socratic) is as important as the nature and impact of the educational intervention and the influence that the ideas can have on individual lives.

*Education, Literacy, and Humanization* is a work of high academic quality and an excellent introduction to the work of Paulo Freire. It is engaging and thought provoking, and its limitations are not fatal to the overall aim and effectiveness of the book. This work seems best suited as a textbook for the beginning reader of Freire, and for the theorist interested in a broad overview of his work. It is less relevant for practitioners in the fields of literacy or adult education who want a book that will directly inform their practice.

#### REFERENCES

Torres, R.M. (1986). *Educación popular: Un encuentro con Paulo Freire* [Popular education: An encounter with Paulo Freire]. Quito: CECCA/CEDECO.

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