

Relational Pedagogy Without Foundations: Reconstructing the Work of Paulo Freire

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In pedagogical debates, student-centered educators have long claimed the moral high ground, contrasting their own liberatory agenda with the stifling character of subject matter curricula, where students are compelled to endure abstract lessons and authoritarian disdain. The sense of superiority claimed by progressive educators was embodied in the terms progressives used to refer to members of the rival liberal arts group. In the early parts of this century, Mortimer Adler and company were referred to as the “authoritarians,” and once John Dewey stopped just short of calling Robert Maynard Hutchins a “fascist.”¹ Hutchins was not impressed by Dewey’s temperance.² This confidence in process pedagogies has been maintained in the work of Paulo Freire, who portrays subject matter curricula as tools of domination — a means of teaching oppressed groups to distrust their own knowledge and to assimilate the ideology of the oppressors. Freire says that in “banking education” students “themselves are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge.”³

Yet we have now reached a philosophical juncture in which this haughtiness must itself be questioned. For the confidence of progressive educators has long been rooted in a theory of human nature. Liberal arts educators, it was said, misunderstood the actual processes by which children learned. Students were said to be active, inquiring creatures, and those fundamental human traits should be respected in the educational process. However, contemporary arguments against ethical approaches reliant upon a philosophical anthropology suggest that universalistic portraits of humans serve as means of control as well as means of liberation. If Michel Foucault is right, descriptions of the human essence codify characteristics of a small segment of people and then become means of policing and coercing those who do not already embody those traits.⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s portrait of Emile or Dewey’s description of the inquiring child would thus appear as tools of assimilation whereby dominant groups discipline students to successively approximate a vision imposed upon them. Far from being a path of liberation, child-centered pedagogy might well be a particularly surreptitious means of domination.⁵ So, contemporary arguments against universalistic descriptions of humans, or “the child,” threaten to leave student-centered pedagogy without an ethical guidepost.

The fear of asserting a false universalism has led some philosophers to jettison substantive conceptions of human nature and the attempt to derive ethical principles from those conceptions. For instance, Richard Rorty has adopted a contentless conception of human nature; he praises Freud for leaving us “with a self which is a tissue of contingencies rather than an at least potentially well-ordered system of faculties.” Freud, says Rorty, “helps us take seriously the possibility that there is no central faculty, no central self, called ‘reason.’” Rorty’s historically situated self may indeed avoid the problems described by Foucault, but it also leaves progressive

pedagogy without guidance in developing liberating educational approaches and a democratic political mission.⁶ When educators act, they invariably make assumptions about how people learn and what will serve the student's long-term fruition, and student-centered philosophies have rightly attempted to inform such decisions.

Foucault's critique and Rorty's capitulation leave us with an undesirable choice between a disciplinary commitment to a universalistic view of human nature or a contentless view of the self which abandons a commitment to a liberatory project. Peter McLaren has argued that the works of Freire provide a route out of this impasse, that Freire balances the modernist commitment to a utopian vision with a process orientation which exhorts students and teachers to reinvent pedagogies to serve the practices and beliefs of people in specific historical situations.⁷ I share McLaren's hope that Freire's work may enable us to develop a reconstructed progressive pedagogy, but I find a tremendous obstacle to this vision in Freire's own foundationalist conception of humans. Foucault's fear that a conception of humans may become a way of judging and disciplining humans is partially vindicated in the legacy of Freire's work, where the dialogic subject becomes the norm for assessing students and educational interactions.⁸ Indeed, this foundational view of humans places rigid parameters on the educational relationship, excluding many forms that meaningful educational relationships may assume.

Freire may indeed point in a direction that allows us to develop a progressive ethic without reinventing a disciplinary norm, but it will take some rewriting of his position. Freire's thought includes two themes which stand in tension. On the one hand, Freire pushed progressive pedagogy to reconceive the educational relationship as a social dynamic, shaped by the interplay of student and teacher as well as their respective social, cultural, and political positions. Freire focused upon articulating terms of meaningful engagement, assuming that mutuality was achieved through commitment to a group process within which student and teacher were transformed. On the other hand, Freire makes foundationalist claims concerning the centrality of dialogue to reaching full human development. Here Freire's pedagogy at times becomes disciplinary and prescriptive. Indeed, Freire's foundational commitment to dialogue unwittingly undermines his relational commitment to pluralistic exchange. We may find that Freire's social ontology of the educational relationship — once detached from his dialogic conception of humans — will help supply ethical visions of liberating pedagogy with minimal policing.

FREIRE'S RELATIONAL CONCEPTION OF PROGRESSIVE PEDAGOGY

Freire's thought signals a remarkable advance over the romantic individualism that has characterized much student-centered thought. Where the most philosophically problematic child-centered views offered universalistic portraits of children as naturally curious, active, and good, Freire offers a far more complex account.⁹ As socio-historical beings constituted in the material practices, culture, language, economic position, and political power of their group, students and teachers enter the school from distinctive positions and must find a basis upon which to build relationships. The teacher must set up situations which allow her to engage meaningfully with the students' knowledge, so the teaching will "challenge and call forth in students their own act of knowing."¹⁰

Freire's thinking is relational, from an ontological perspective, both because students and teachers are socio-historical beings whose traits have been co-constructed with others in their daily lives and because the educational relationship is described as a dynamic unity in which student and teacher are internally-related aspects of a larger whole. Relying upon the social ontology of Martin Buber, Freire describes banking education relationally, saying "The antidialogical dominating *I* transforms the dominated, conquered *thou* into a mere *it*." In dialogical education, in contrast, the *thou* of the student calls forth the teacher, who "knows that the *thou* which calls forth his own existence in turn constitutes an *I* which has in his *I* its *thou*" (*PO*, 148). Called to the educational relationship by the students, the teacher honors the students' being by pursuing an educational relationship in which the intentions of both student and teacher direct the path of inquiry.

Freire's exhortation that teachers should "work with" students is, at once, an ontological description of humans and an ethical prescription to create educational experiences in which the intentions of both the students and teacher are recognized.¹¹ Freire adopts Heidegger's and Sartre's conception that people are situations, and as such, they are partly constituted by the people around them; people develop ways of acting and understanding in an intersubjective world where "we" precedes "I."¹² Since people naturally co-construct their ways of acting and understanding, Freire believes liberating pedagogy sets up contexts in which the students and teachers work together to learn.

Liberating education is characterized by a bond of solidarity between student and teacher, by a political stance of commitment to the causes of oppressed people; Freire calls upon teachers to commit "class suicide," placing their political and social commitments of their students above their own group interests.¹³ However, what Freire calls "true solidarity" is more than a political stance. It is also an ethical stance of relating to students, characterizing the appropriate relation of student and teacher.

Freire describes the bond of true solidarity, saying the dialogical relationship should embody love, trust, and humility (*PO*, 70-72). These traits describe the dynamics of meaningful educational relationships; that is, Freire is not so much describing the traits of individuals as he is capturing the character of the to-and-fro motion that characterizes the intersubjective act of dialogue and praxis, what Freire in one place calls "the inner movement of the act of discovery."¹⁴ When Freire says dialogue must be characterized by love, he refers to a joint commitment embodied in the act of inquiry: student and teacher treat one another as persons whose intentions deserve utmost respect. Trust and humility are present when inquiry seizes upon the possibilities of students' ideas just as readily as the teacher's and when ideas are criticized and discarded following the direction of group thought and not in deference to any particular member of the group. Failures in love, trust, and humility disable the educational relationship.

The dialogical unity of the student-teacher relationship provides the basis for the recreation of both students and teachers. Students, in Freire's view, often bring a wealth of knowledge to educational interactions but do not have the explanatory

models which are developed in the academy. Intellectuals often are informed by a variety of explanatory perspectives, but lack the knowledge and multiple sensitivities embodied in students' acts and words. Freire's primary recommendation to progressive educators is that they "soak themselves in this knowledge and... assimilate the feelings, the sensitivity, the actions of the masses."¹⁵ Coming to understand the students enriches and transforms the teachers. It makes "thinking with" possible, and it enables teachers to show the appropriate respect to their students.

Freire's prescriptions for building solidarity with students are complicated by the socio-historical positioning of students and teachers. Indeed, one of the distinctive strengths of Freire's relational perspective is the capacity to capture both the dynamics of the face-to-face encounter and the ways in which microscopic relationships are partly constituted by sociological and political institutions. In the day-to-day social relations where oppressed groups interact with bosses or landlords, the oppressed are continually taught to devalue themselves and to internalize the oppressors' judgments of them. The social relations between dominant and oppressed groups create an asymmetrical pattern: the landlord's demands are paired with the tenant's acquiescence; the landlord's assertiveness is paired with the tenant's fatalism and adaptability; the landlord's sense of entitlement is paired with the oppressed student's humility.¹⁶

The teacher, often drawn from more privileged groups, must learn to build relationships in a context where she has assimilated the confidence and entitlement of the oppressor while the students have accepted a humble conception of their own possibilities. The asymmetries of the larger society partly constitute the character of classroom interactions. Freire cautions against the practices of those teachers who, even though they work with oppressed students, nonetheless subtly or not so subtly imply that the students are inferior. A patronizing manner, an assumption of student naivete, or a slight to the student's ethnicity or gender violates the relational commitment Freire asks teachers to embody (*PO*, 36). Such cues reaffirm the asymmetrical relationship which was already present when the student and teacher began their interaction and are likely to lead students to withdraw their knowledge and engagement.

Freire asks teachers to check their arrogance and unlearn their privilege, but his primary recommendations lie less with self-criticism than with a relational commitment to oppressed students. Both teachers and students are transformed by education in true solidarity, the knowledge of each group being reconceived in the process of dialogue and praxis. Moreover, students and teachers should forge relationships which propel them beyond the traits of either oppressors or oppressed. The dialogical process this involves is intended to embolden the oppressed, allowing them to trust fully their ways of thinking and acting, while the teachers should learn a new form of humility and social commitment. Indeed, it is this process which Freire hopes will create a "new human": "neither oppressor nor oppressed, but [hu]man in the process of liberation" (*PO*, 38).

RELATIONAL THOUGHT CONSTRAINED BY PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

While Freire's social ontology of the educational relationship constitutes a powerful advance over previous progressive pedagogy, the fruits of Freire's work

are not fully realized, for Freire remains unduly reliant upon a foundational conception of human nature. When Freire portrays oppressed students in a way that underestimates their knowledge and dismisses their values, and when Freire underestimates nondialogical orientations to experience, we see the influence of his foundational conception of humans. Indeed, in these respects Freire's theory veers from the relational criteria of mutual engagement so painstakingly articulated in the substance of his work.

Let us first consider some of Freire's portraits of oppressed students. In his work in agrarian parts of Brazil and Chile, Freire reported that students displayed a combination of fatalism and magical thought. Years of hard work under authoritarian masters prevented oppressed people from developing sufficiently assertive and causal ways of thinking. Freire thinks some of these students are "submerged" in their daily reality and can think of nothing but survival. He says, for instance, that "men of semi-intransitive consciousness cannot apprehend problems situated outside their sphere of biological necessity."¹⁷ "Submerged in reality, the oppressed cannot perceive clearly the 'order' which serves the interest of the oppressors whose image they have internalized" (*PO*, 44). He attributes to many of these students a "magical consciousness" which "simply apprehends facts and attributes to them a superior power by which it is controlled and to which it must therefore submit."¹⁸ Freire is critical of these students' adaptive and passive orientation toward their environment and the groups who control them. He says, "They have a diffuse, magical belief in the invulnerability and power of the oppressor" (*PO*, 46).

These deficit portraits of oppressed students represent an aspect of Freire's thought which stands in direct opposition to Freire's exhortations to build relationships of respect with students. Like all deficit portraits of students, Freire's description of the oppressed privileges his vision of what people should be, not a sympathetic characterization of students' beliefs and practices. Where the process of building relationships involves knowing one's students, Freire's descriptions of farm workers in Brazil and Chile tell us very little about what the students do believe; we learn far more about their deviation from Western styles of explanation and farming — the aspect of their thought which Freire captures with the term "magical." Now it is undoubtedly true that many cultures have a far less aggressive and less scientific way of thinking than Western cultures, but such points only offer the initial terms of comparison and in no way justify a summary judgment of a culture.

Deficit portraits of students preempt the process of mutual engagement for which Freire's relational pedagogy calls. Students who sense the teacher's disrespect will react defensively, hiding their understandings, fearful the teacher has already judged their worldview. Indeed, Freire bemoans the many cases in which elite teachers are unable to show sufficient respect for students to allow for the unguarded development of meaningful educational engagements.¹⁹ When Freire's team of agricultural workers left the Chilean countryside judging their students to have a magical thought process, this was testimony to the shallowness of the relationship they had developed with their students; we can be sure that they did not follow his prescription to soak themselves in the knowledge of the oppressed. Nor

did they follow the exhortation to enter the educational relationship with love, patience, and humility. For the students surely had a complex way of interpreting their experience and guiding their lives. James Scott has argued that oppressed groups commonly display the traits ascribed to them by the dominant group as a means of reducing the surveillance of dominant group members; these strategies of concealment leave outsiders completely ignorant of the people's values, commitments, and critical judgments, and it appears as though Freire and his co-workers encountered such defensive strategies and went no further.²⁰

At root in Freire's critical judgments of oppressed students is his insistence that humanization comes through dialogue. This foundational conception of humans also leads Freire to overly rigid prescriptions concerning the character of educational exchanges. Dialogue, he says, is an "existential necessity," the way people "achieve significance as human beings" (*PO*, 69). He adds to this the suggestion that people are "authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation" (*PO*, 65). Freire expresses concern that many peasants reared within semi-feudal contexts have been denied dialogue in their daily circumstances. "Their existential experience is constituted within the limits of anti-dialogue."²¹ The educator here is expected to engage in an archaeology of consciousness, unearthing the natural dialogic character of the students, which has been buried after years of authoritarian treatment at work and in daily life.

Those students who resist dialogue, whether it be due to their cultural values or a belief that dialogue does not serve as an egalitarian way of interacting, are thus thought to be resisting the character of human development itself. Yet many groups of people have interaction styles which, in one way or another, conflict with the norms of dialogue. Consider, for instance, the patterns of talk described by Susan Philips on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation. In a culture where decisions are made through long speeches which endeavor to place holistically the subject in relation to many matters, where elders speak first, and where deference is shown to adults, the norms of egalitarian dialogue appear as culturally inappropriate.²² In this context, several aspects of dialogue would violate public norms: the analytical isolation of single topics for discussion, the fast-flowing give and take of debate, and the neglect of the speaker's seniority. Thus, Freire's foundational claims about the dialogical subject appear to be the cultural norms of some groups masquerading as universal truths, and Foucault's warning, that theories of human nature may operate as tools of normalization, may help prevent liberating education from becoming a process of cultural imperialism.

EDUCATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITHOUT FOUNDATIONS

If we adopt Freire's relational orientation, while abandoning his substantive statements concerning the nature of humans, we might move progressive pedagogy toward greater pluralism and away from a disciplinary universalism. Our effort to strike the foundationalist elements from Freire's conception of human nature does, however, create a further problem, for Freire's foundationalism supplies aims to guide the educational endeavor: the ideal of the dialogical human directs the educational process and supplies a portrait of the liberated student. Thus, any

attempt to reconstruct Freire's pedagogy, relying solely on his social ontology, will also require ethical reconstruction, for we will need to reconceive the aims of critical pedagogy if we abandon the *a priori* commitment to the dialogical self.

Let us first consider the possibility that Freire's position might be more pluralistic if we abandon the dialogic conception of humans. Freire's effort to articulate an ontology of educational relationships provides the basis for teachers to respect students across cultural and political differences. Social ontologies articulate those aspects of humans and their circumstances which must be adapted to rather than changed. By asking, "what traits are already present in the interaction of students and teacher?" we gain clues to the direction an educational interaction should pursue. By focusing our concern upon the dynamics of the educational relationship, a social ontology asks teachers and students to assume a humble attitude of adaptation, rather than an aggressive attitude which seeks to remake students in the teacher's image. In those cases where students are powerfully disposed toward hierarchical and nondialogic interaction, this would indeed become one of the factors shaping the development of the student-teacher relationship.

All this is completely in agreement with Freire's relational views, which focus our attention on the respective positions of students and teachers and the difficulties of developing meaningful relations. Freire's appropriation of Buber's work describes the educational relationship in which the students hail the teacher and the teacher in turn develops a relationship with the student in which both partners maintain the orientation of I-Thou. Buber's work, unlike Freire's, does not prescribe the terms the relationship will assume. Buber emphasizes that each person must respectfully orient toward the entire person, "so the other becomes present not merely in the imagination or feeling, but in the depths of one's substance, so that one experiences the mystery of the other's being in the mystery of one's own."²³

This humble attitude of respect and sympathetic understanding recognizes the difficulty of developing meaningful relationships, and it militates against the difficulties which arise in Freire's foundationalist conception of humans. Where Freire's commitment to a dialogic view of humans leads to deficit portraits of students, Buber's insistence that students and teachers approach one another as complete beings preempts the process wherein a teacher singles out one of the student's traits that needs to be changed. Moreover, the terms of the relationship would evolve in the process of interaction; neither partner has the authority to stipulate the specific rules of relating. Some educational interactions may be dialogic, while others might build shared meanings via dance, oratory, or determined silence. Educational interactions must begin with mutual understanding and respect — standards which will require that the teacher struggle to avoid the imposition of *a priori* beliefs concerning who the student should be.

Beginning with Freire's social ontology, we might then sketch aspects of a pedagogical ethics. The embodied dynamics of the educational relationship — the traits of students and teachers which are already there — carry profound ethical implications, for the aims of teachers and students will only be realized if a meaningful relationship is established. Some educational relationships proceed

smoothly as if the student and teacher are already comfortable with one another's attitudes, ways of acting, and ways of speaking. Other educational relationships are racked with tension and will only become meaningful if the student and teacher are able to negotiate mutually acceptable ways of interacting. If an Anglo teacher of an African-American student finds the student intensely resistant to learning that threatens her identity, this resistance becomes a principle which should shape the development of the educational relationship. If a male teacher interacts with a female student who finds the adversarial approach to argument and reasoning alienating, this too should shape the development of the relationship. In each of these cases, the student's resistance is a statement to a potentially threatening teacher: the resistance signals the damaging character of particular educational directions and is deserving of sincere respect. When these basic factors are not respected, students are likely to either withdraw or supply the outward appearance of conformity. In neither case does liberating learning occur.

Of course, the ethical principles which emerge from the dynamic of educational relationships are only one aspect of pedagogical ethics. A second level of educational ethics concerns the conscious beliefs of the student and teacher that have been developed using common sense and theoretical knowledge. Freire's hope to create a new human, neither oppressor nor oppressed, is this sort of ethical principle. Aims such as the creation of activist citizens are existentially secondary to those that emerge in educational interchange, for they can only be pursued insofar as the fundamental dynamics of the relationship are respected. Freire's critical citizen will be educated only if the student and teacher have developed the sort of solidarity he prescribes. However, the process of building a respectful student-teacher relation may lead to the understanding that critical citizenship is an inappropriate aim for this student or this group of students. Many students have historical paths that are not consonant with critical citizenship, and meaningful education must respect those paths. Some students hope to be artists or nurturers, while others hope for a day in which there are no longer nations to be citizens of.

Freire mistakenly seeks to root his argument for socialist liberation in the very traits of humans, when, in actuality, this is one vision of liberation that lies in tension and consonance with a multitude of educational ideals. For those of us who are persuaded by Freire's vision of liberation, we will need to seek the confirmation of those views, not by asserting their *a priori* truth, but by showing students and citizens their concrete possibilities.

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1. See, for instance, Harold Rugg, *Foundations for American Education* (Yonkers-on-Hudson: World Book, 1947), chap. 19.

2. John Dewey, "President Hutchins's Proposal to Remake Higher Education" and Robert Maynard Hutchins, "Grammar, Rhetoric, and Mr. Dewey," in John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 11 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1991), 400 and 596.

3. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1993), 53. This book will be cited as *PO* in the text for all subsequent references.
4. Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 42; William Connolly, *Politics and Ambiguity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 103-7; and Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation* (Boston: MIT Press, 1991), 144-45.
5. This is Valerie Walkerdine's view. See, for instance, "Progressive Pedagogy and Political Struggle," in *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, ed. Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore (New York: Routledge, 1992).
6. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 33, 34.
7. Peter McLaren, "Postmodernism and the Death of Politics: A Brazilian Reprieve," in *Politics of Liberation*, ed. Peter McLaren and Colin Lankshear (London: Routledge, 1994), 193-215.
8. This was Mary Leach's concern with the traits of dialogue in "Can We Talk?" *Harvard Educational Review*, 62 (1992): 257-63.
9. Perhaps the most extreme example of this tendency appears in A.S. Neill, *Summerhill* (New York: Hart Publishing, 1960).
10. Paulo Freire, "Letter to North American Teachers," in *Freire for the Classroom*, ed. Ira Shor (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1987), 213.
11. See, for instance, Freire and Antonio Faundez, *Learning to Question*, trans. Tony Coates (New York: Continuum, 1989), 33.
12. Freire states that humans are situations in *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum, 1973), 102.
13. Freire and Faundez, *Learning to Question*, 56.
14. *Ibid.*, 37.
15. *Ibid.*, 46.
16. Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, 120 and Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 45.
17. Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, 17.
18. *Ibid.*, 44.
19. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy in Process* (New York: Continuum, 1978), 104. See also Ira Shor, *Empowering Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 100.
20. James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
21. Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, 120.
22. Susan Philips, *The Invisible Culture* (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 1983), 42-44, 114-16.
23. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Smith (London: Kegan Paul, 1947), 170.