

Re-Reading Paulo Freire

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In "Relational Pedagogy Without Foundations: Reconstructing the Work of Paulo Freire," Frank Margonis revisits the core problem that has dominated mainstream professional philosophy of education for the last fifty years. What is the relationship between a philosopher's metaphysical foundations and his or her educational theory? For Margonis, this relationship is problematic in two senses. On one hand, if an educational theory rests on no substantive metaphysical foundations, it "leaves progressive pedagogy without guidance in developing liberating educational approaches and a democratic political vision." On the other hand, the presence of such a foundation which incorporates universalistic assumptions of human nature and essence may serve as a "surreptitious means of domination" by which the characteristics of a small segment of people are codified as universal and used as a "means of policing and coercing those who do not already embody these traits." Faced with this dilemma, Margonis considers the case of Paulo Freire and attempts to provide a non-foundational reconstruction of Freire which would preserve the progressive possibilities of Freire's pedagogy without an appeal to a metaphysical foundation.

As mentioned, various forms of this problem have dominated the discourse of philosophy of education since its emergence as a professional discipline. Margonis mentions Dewey as an example of an educational theorist who suffers from this "foundationalist" problem, so a brief comment on Dewey may give the present case of Freire some context. For Richard Rorty, Dewey's commitment to democracy required no such discipline as "philosophical anthropology," no special analysis or "philosophical backup" of democracy expressed as a theory of human nature or self. For Rorty, Dewey gave democracy priority over philosophy, saw no need to ground democracy in some theory of persons, rights, or Nature, and thus tailored his philosophy to suit his politics instead of grounding his political theory in some philosophical position.¹ In sharp contrast, Robert Westbrook writes that,

Dewey insisted that an adequate democratic theory required a deep-seated philosophical anthropology that addressed the fundamental features of human experience. He remarked that "any theory of activity in social and moral matters, liberal or otherwise, which is not grounded in a comprehensive philosophy seems to me to be only a projection of arbitrary personal preference."²

While I think Dewey successfully overcame this dilemma by developing a foundation of uncertainty, a comprehensive philosophy of incompleteness, an ontology of chance, the dueling quotes between these two serious Deweyan scholars should give us reason to consider whether this form of inquiry is not only intractable but interminable.

The case of Freire is much the same. Indeed, if we are inquiring into Freire's "foundations," it is not even clear what we are looking for. For example, at various places in the text, Margonis writes of a philosophical foundation as "a theory of

human nature,” “fundamental human traits,” “philosophical anthropology,” “descriptions of human essence,” “universalistic descriptions of humans,” “assumptions about how people learn and what will serve the students’ long-term fruition,” “a utopian vision,” “a norm,” “a foundational commitment,” “an ontological description,” “an *a priori* commitment,” among others. I recount these not as a criticism of Margonis, but as evidence of what I believe is the ineffability at the core of the project. We could analyze language with some benefits. Surely an “*a priori* commitment” is different in kind from a “philosophical anthropology” and an assumption about how humans learn. Or we could go to the primary Freirean texts. Unfortunately, as some of the examples Margonis uses make clear, rather than a source of clarification, this is where the ambiguity dwells. There is certainly no shortage of “foundation-like” statements in Freire, from the stipulative claims about the human vocation for liberation, the law-like descriptions of the three stages of all thought, the essentialization of the oppressed-oppressor relationship, and the ontological status given to dialogue. Yet, we will also find incisive criticisms of sectarianism, paeans to the necessity of doubt, and passages where Freire insists that rather than a foundation, ontology is an emergent or event of transformative praxis.

Freire struggles bravely, though in vain in my view, with this problem, especially in the later works. As he writes,

It is because we are this being—a being of ongoing, curious search.... It is because we are this being, given to adventure and the “passion to know”.... It is because this is “the way we are” that we live the life of a vocation, a calling, to *humanization*, and that in *dehumanization*, which is a concrete fact of history, we live the life of a distortion of the *call*—never another calling. Neither one, humanization of dehumanization, is sure destiny, given datum, lot, or fate.... It is important to emphasize that in speaking... of humanization as ontological vocation of the human being, I am not falling into any fundamentalistic position — which, incidentally, is always conservative. Hence my... emphasis on the fact that this “vocation,” this calling, rather than being anything *a priori* in history, on the contrary is something constituted in history. On the other hand, the striving for it, and the means of accomplishing it... require, importantly, the adoption of a utopia.³

In this extended passage which goes on for several more pages on the same theme, Freire confronts the inescapably conservative nature of what he calls the “fundamentalistic” position of foundational assumptions while still clinging to universalizing descriptions of the “being we are” and the necessity of grounding our struggles for freedom in a normative utopian vision.

I cite this evidence not to assert some simple privileging of philosophical or conceptual clarity, but the reverse. While convinced that foundationalism is a problem for progressive educational theory, Margonis nonetheless adopts the foundationalist problem as his own. As he writes, “Freire’s foundationalism supplies aims to guide the educational endeavor: the ideal of the developed human directs the educational process and supplies a portrait of the liberated student.” In this view, the ethic of the educational process is strangely parasitic on the ineffable and interminable debates in philosophy, while the point of Freire’s work, like Dewey’s, is to give priority to educational practices of freedom and democracy over any “fundamentalist,” necessarily conservative, philosophical point of view. In my view, instead of attempting to solve the foundational problem, we would do better to abandon it and its enabling assumptions that philosophy is prior to educational

theory and practice, admit that Freire is as ambiguous in his foundational statements as everyone else, and that this ambiguity is the source of Freire's creativity and the reason it is worthwhile re-reading his work. Harold Bloom reminds us that "confusion," in its literal sense as in a libation, refers to the blending together of disparate elements in creative ferment, and surely Freire is better re-read as a contributor to new forms of educational thought than he is reconstructed as a systematic professional philosopher of education.

While I am not at all satisfied with the outcomes of his argument, I think Rorty may provide some helpful language for such a re-reading. Following Milan Kundera, Rorty distinguishes between the treatise and the novel as educational forms. The treatise is didactic, seeks to replace complexity with a formula, reduce multiplicity to structure and possibility to Truth. The novel, in contrast, teaches by focusing on particularity, contingency, the acuteness of real pain and exultation of real joy as expressed in concrete persons. The novel makes fun of the project of the treatise as simply someone's attempt to manipulate others and, by ridiculing certainty, insists upon the need to imagine a world without foundations, what Rorty calls a "democratic utopia."⁴

I think re-reading Freire's work as novel rather than treatise will help us to engage the work as a continuing expression of democratic utopian hope, unshakable in its resistance to both practical pessimism and philosophical professionalization. To me, Freire's last several books take this narrative form more consciously and invite this re-reading. In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire writes of the necessity of unveiling, of dreams and utopias as he revisits how his life was written in and by *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In *Pedagogy of the City*, he tells the story of his experience in São Paulo as a "collective dream." And in *Letters to Cristina*, while the epistolary style is stilted, Freire's belief that "a progressive, postmodernist requirement is that we not be too certain of our certainties," invites us to read his work not as an abstract and interminable philosophical problem to be solved, but as a set of narratives about concrete progressive educational projects imagined and sometimes undertaken by a utopian realist.⁵

There is much real drama in these stories, much serious scholarship on the real effects of Freirean-based programs which runs counter to the received wisdom of supporters and critics alike. I think these are the problematic stories in which Margonis and Freire are really interested, and while remembering, re-reading, and re-imagining them might not be central to the project of professional philosophy of education, it is the core work required for inquiry into the more beautiful and pressing problems of democratic educational theory.

1. Richard Rorty, *Objectivism, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 178-81 *passim*.

2. Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), x.

3. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 98-9. Italics in original.

4. Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 73-80 *passim*.

5. Paulo Freire, *Letters to Cristina* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 4.