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InstitutoPauloFreire

FRF-PTPF-07-0311

MYTHS OF PAULO FREIRE

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> I am now more than seventy, and at the end of century, in whose final moment I hope to take part — maybe giving an interview to a television channel, or drinking cachaca or a good wine — I am sure I will be committed, as much as I am today, to a bohemian pedagogy of happiness, in the way that I am, tropical. This will be a pedagogy of laughter, of questioning, of curiosity, of seeing the future through the present, a pedagogy that believes in the possibility of the transformation of the world, that believes in history as a possibility.[1]

It seems almost incontestable that Paulo Freire is the most widely known educational theorist now living. Educators throughout the world acknowledge Freire's stature, even if they might disagree with his politics. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which was published in English in 1971 and has sold over 300,000 copies, according to the most recent English edition, is a key text for theorists concerned with literacy, adult education, and the political analysis of education.[2] Freire has been an inspiration to progressive educators in settings throughout the world — in schools and universities, labor unions, church groups, adult literacy programs, battered women's shelters, and community organizations; wherever people have attempted to organize and theorize oppositional practices and collectivities. Freire's inspirational style and personal charisma, along with his steadfast stance against repressive power, have made him a symbol of human strength and integrity. Like many others, I have been inspired by his writings and his life. In an intellectual and political climate in which the values of selfishness and competition, of "the market," have come to dominate official educational discourse, Freire's example seems even more important. But although Freire is frequently invoked in the work of progressive educators, in fact there are few critical discussions available of either his life or work. The main sources for biographical information about Freire's life are his own brief comments in the "talking books" of the 1980s and early 1990s and his recent account in *Pedagogy of Hope*.[3] There is as yet no detailed biography placing Freire's life in historical context, and the works examining his thought have been uneven.[4] The publication of five new books on Freire, then, is a welcome beginning to the rethinking of Freire and his place in educational thought and practice.

1. Paulo Freire, as quoted in Moacir Gadotti, *Reading Paulo Freire: His Life and Work* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 159-60.

2. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra B. Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1971).

3. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, trans. Robert Barr (New York: Continuum, 1994).

4. Until recently, most English speaking students of Freire have relied on Dennis Collins's brief *Paulo Freire: His Life Works and Thought* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977) or Cynthia Brown's even briefer account of the Brazilian literacy campaign, *Literacy in Thirty Hours: Paulo Freire's Process in North East Brazil* (London: Readers and Writers Cooperative, 1975).

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The books under review here include two collections of essays, both published by Routledge and coedited by Peter McLaren (one with Peter Leonard, one with Colin Lankshear); Moacir Gadotti's primer; John Elias's Catholic reading; and Paul Taylor's close and critical analysis of Freire's actual texts.[5] None of these books is hostile to Freire's ultimate political position, which can always be located somewhere on the Left, in support of ideas of democracy, freedom, and human possibility. The best of them employ a critical stance; the most problematic are written with the reverence of disciples. A reading of these five books illustrates the point that there are a number of different "Freires" called forth in educational discourse; they highlight the ways in which Freire has been used as a kind of icon or sign by educational writers on the Left to support a variety of progressive projects. But the political need for Freire and respect for him as a person should not, I think, mean an uncritical acceptance of his every statement or the romanticization of his past practice. Freire's own pedagogy calls for a profoundly critical way of being in the world. The canonization of Freire, his use as a symbol without an active and critical engagement with his thought, seems to me a betrayal of the ideals he is calling for in his best work. The following discussion of these five texts and of the various ways Freire has been deployed as sign or myth in them is presented in the spirit of a Freirean critique, a respectful but critical reading.

The two collections edited by McLaren with Leonard and Lankshear, respectively, present a wide-ranging discussion of Freire and his impact on Left educational thought. A number of these essays use a general reference to Freire to stand in for a conception of progressive political education and then move to discuss their own concerns, as in Marilyn Frankenstein and Arthur Powell's excellent and stimulating discussion of ethnomathematics, Marguerite and Michael Rivage-Seul's discussion of the philosophy for children project in Guatemala, or Lankshear's "Functional Literacy from a Freirean Point of View." Other essays engage Freire's thought in a wider context, such as Carlos Alberto Torres's useful essay on the Latin American and African political contexts in which Freire's thought developed, Adrianna Puiggros's reflections on Freirean pedagogy in the light of higher education in Argentina, or Tomas da Silva and McLaren's thoughtful reading of Freire in the context of contemporary epistemological debates, "Decentering Pedagogy: Critical Literacy, Resistance, and the Politics of Memory." My own essay, "Freire and a Feminist Pedagogy of Difference," is included in McLaren and Lankshear's *Politics of Liberation*.

The three single-authored books all purport to present critical readings of Freire. Elias presents an analysis of Freire's thought from a liberal Catholic perspective.

5. Peter McLaren and Peter Leonard, *Paulo Freire A Critical Encounter* (New York: Routledge, 1993; Peter McLaren and Colin Lankshear, *Politics of Liberation: Paths from Freire* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Gadotti, *Reading Paulo Freire*; John Elias, *Paulo Freire: Pedagogue of Revolution* (Melbourne, Fla.: Krieger Publishing Company, 1994); and Paul Taylor, *The Texts of Paulo Freire* (New York: Open University Press, 1993). These book will be referred to as *CE, PL, RPF, PF, and TPF*, respectively, with page numbers in the text for all subsequent citations.

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Although this book was published in 1994, it focuses almost exclusively on Freire's early works and contains few references to Freire's publications after the mid-1980s. Elias's discussion of Freire's life is brief and sometimes confusing, particularly compared to the much more detailed accounts of Torres and Taylor. For example, although Elias notes that Freire returned to Brazil in 1980, he does not discuss Freire's work during the subsequent fifteen years. He also makes factual errors, as in his statement that Freire "is presently a Minister of Education in Rio de Janeiro," which I assume refers to Freire's brief tenure as Secretary of Education in Sao Paulo between 1989 and 1991. This kind of confusion is disconcerting in a book that claims to be "the first full length treatment of Freire's thought in English to appear since the mid 1970s." Large sections of Elias's book are familiar expositions of Freire's classic texts; its contribution lies in its focus on the religious aspects of Freire's thought. Elias argues that Freire sees human beings

> essentially defined by their relationship to God, who has given them the power of reflective and free choice. Humans are best understood as beings of relationships, first of all to God, and secondarily to their fellow humans....For Freire, humans paradoxically must struggle to become what they already are by virtue of the God-given natures they possess (*RPF*, p. 50).

Elias is at his best, I think, when he considers both the strengths and weaknesses of the prophetic, religious, charismatic quality of Freire's writings. As he points out, "Prophets and charismatic persons are given to dramatic assertions, to putting things in black and white terms, to uttering condemnations of sin and evil, and to presenting idealized visions of a future" (*RPF*, p. 83).

In *Reading Paulo Freire*, Gadotti (Freire's former chief of staff at the Ministry of Education in São Paulo) presents what is essentially a work of hagiography. As a close associate of Freire's, Gadotti writes from an insider's position. Along with Freire, Gadotti was one of the founders in 1980 of the Brazilian *Partido dos Trabalhadores* or Workers' Party. Subsequently, he was the chair of the Educational Commission for the Workers' Party and in 1989 became the chief of the Educational Cabinet when Freire was appointed Secretary of Education of the city of São Paulo. According to Gadotti, this book, which was originally published in Brazil in 1988, was intended as an introduction to Freire's thought for high school students and prospective teachers. Perhaps because it is intended as a kind of primer, the book could easily be read by students with a junior high school reading level. Whether this makes it a useful text for educators struggling to understand the context and logic of Freire's ideas is another question, since Gadotti tends to simplify complex ideas while describing Freire's life in a tone of adulation and hyperbole. The introduction by McLaren and Henry Giroux, in which Freire is described as a "proud but humble warrior of the spirit," who presents his pedagogy with "the wisdom of an ancient sage and the unfailing passion of the social revolutionary," does nothing to mitigate these problems (*RPF*, p. xvi). On the other hand, although Gadotti's account of Freire's early years is quite similar to others, he does provide a more detailed discussion of Freire's work in São Paulo. The book ends with the by now familiar dialogue between Freire and the author, in which Freire repeats his inspirational message of optimism and love. As usual, this exchange is uplifting and a pleasure to read as a testimony to Freire's humanity.

Paul Taylor's careful study of Freire's actual texts is perhaps the most thoughtful and rewarding of all of these books. Taylor describes his approach as a "reading" of Freire, a striking contrast to Gadotti's reverential account of the life of a prophet. Taylor provides a detailed discussion of the European thinkers who influenced Freire's early work, and traces the underlying assumptions of both his theoretical works and the codifications that are the basis of his literacy practice. He points out that since Freire's return to Brazil in 1980, virtually all of his new published work is co-authored. Taylor is critical of Freire on a number of grounds. In particular he argues that the abstract quality of Freire's writings constitutes a serious intellectual and political problem. Taylor points out that Freire's use of broad generalizations and his lack of specific analyses allow him to make inspirational pronouncements without having to address the complexities of the local situations in which people find themselves. But at the same time he is sympathetic to Freire's ultimate political goals, and he makes the point that Freire's reliance on abstractions can be a strength as well as a weakness, because these idealistic statements can be appropriated to justify and support concrete political praxis.

CREATING THE REVOLUTIONARY LIFE OF "PAULO FREIRE"

All authors create a fictional self, whether implicitly or by creating a first person voice and drawing upon personal experience. But when authors themselves present a "self" in terms of history or politics, this self becomes particularly significant and open to critique. Since Freire often, particularly in his "spoken books," refers to his own life and experience as support for his ideas, he in a sense calls them to the reader's attention as evidence of authenticity or truth. In the case of Freire's own history, it is often difficult even to establish the facts of his life, not to mention the meaning of these "facts." As yet there is no detailed biography placing Freire within the context of Brazil and the various revolutionary movements with which he has worked. The details of his early history and accomplishments are confused and contradictory partly because of his own rewriting and reinventing of himself. A large part of the myth of the revolutionary Freire rests on these narratives as he has presented them in interviews and autobiographical fragments. The problem of distinguishing self-creation from possible alternative readings is highlighted as we try to capture the life of "Paulo Freire" in the books under review here.

One of the ways "Freire" is called forth is as the originator of a revolutionary pedagogy based on his own life experience. Freire frequently presents the events of his life in a way that helps to support this representation. The biographical details of Freire's childhood and youth are almost always based upon his own accounts: his Catholic mother; the fall of his middle-class family into poverty during the depression; his own difficulties with formal schooling — in part, he explains, because of hunger. Freire thus constructs the story of his youth to emphasize his own empathy with the oppressed. When commentators on Freire rely almost exclusively on his own self-presentation, they both accept a narrative of the self as a source of factual truth, but they also face the danger of ignoring the wider context in which he has lived: the political and economic development of Brazilian society; the debates over the meaning of literacy and the tensions among a number of radical literacy

movements in Brazil in the 1950s and early 1960s; the splits within the Catholic church; and the intersection of gender, race, and class in Freire's own history and in Brazilian society in general. Of the authors considered here, only Taylor and Torres, in his essay in *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter*, provide extensive discussions of the social and historical context of Freire's life; others accept Freire's narratives as unexamined truth.

Freire often writes as though he were directly involved with teaching and central to the invention of a totally new form of pedagogy framed in the context of a public, political movement. Both Taylor and Torres suggest a somewhat different history. For example, although Freire has always acknowledged the importance of his first wife, Elza, the extent of her influence on Freire's pedagogy remains unexplored.[6] They met when Freire, then 21, tutored Elza, then a nursery school teacher, for her exam to become a school principal. Freire has stated elsewhere that "it was she who led me to pedagogy."[7] Taylor says that it was Elza who encouraged Freire to teach, first privately, then in a secondary school, and who involved him in the Catholic Action Movement. In interviews and public presentations, Freire has consistently acknowledged the importance of his family and his relationships with both Elza and his second wife, Ana Maria. Freire has spoken frequently of his grief when Elza died of a heart condition and of his joy in his later marriage to Ana Maria Freire. In these comments, Freire presents himself as a man for whom personal relationships and love are a central part of his life, a stance that is consistent with his pedagogy, particularly his recent framing of a pedagogy of joy and hope. But the acknowledgment of the importance of these relationships also makes striking his own lack of theoretical concern with the intersection of the public and private or of the way in which these relationships were also supports for his public life or sources for his thought.

In his early manhood, Freire was influenced by a number of other educational experiments and theories. Again, of the books under review here, Taylor provides the most detailed discussion of these influences. Taylor notes the presence of émigré French professors such as Lucien Febvre at São Paulo University and their influence on Brazilian social theorists, including Freire. He also discusses the influence on Freire of what the French call *l'éducation nouvelle*, which includes such figures as Celestin Freinet and Edouard Claparéde, and of the Jena Plan, proposed by the Swedish educator Peter Peterson. In the French *nouvelle pédogogie*, the teacher was to encourage questioning on the part of students, who were encouraged to be active and responsible for their own education. The Jena Plan, which was similar, was based on *Stammgruppe* or Learning Circles. Taylor points out that the famous Freirean Culture Circles had their origins in these theoretical models as well as in the informal learning groups of labor and peasant movements in Latin America, Europe, and the United States (*TPF*, p. 22). Drawing primarily on Emanuel de Kadt's *Catholic Radicals in Brazil*, Taylor notes the growth of the Catholic Left in postwar Brazil and

6. Freire discusses this in Paulo Freire and Ira Shor, *A Pedagogy of Liberation* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1987), 29.

7. Freire, *The Politics of Education* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1985), 175.

Freire's close association with Dom Helder Camara, Bishop of Recife, and with the Basic Church Communities (*Communidades Eclesiales de Base)* which tried to relate Bible study to local and political questions. For example, according to Taylor, "the word *Conscientizacão* emerged from a discussion group within the Higher Institute of Brazilian Studies where it was popularized particularly by Dom Helder Camara" (*TPF*, p. 52).

The period between 1944 and 1954 has always been obscure in Freire's own accounts of his life. The authors of the books under review here provide conflicting accounts of this period. Taylor comments, "one has the impression that those experiences between 1944 and 1959, about which little has ever been said, are almost 'lost years' for Freire" (*TPF*, p. 13). In these years Freire practiced briefly as a lawyer, taught Portuguese in high school, and worked in adult education. But the most significant period in these years seems to have been Freire's time with the organization Social Service of Industry (SESI) in Recife. Freire has mentioned this as a deeply significant time for the development of his thought. In one interview, he calls SESI a "private industrial institute" and says he became involved with it through the Catholic church (*TPF*, p. 22). In another, he describes SESI as "a social service institution that provided services to urban workers and fishermen" that provided him with a "re-encounter" with the poor.[8] Puiggros, on the other hand, describes his work with SESI as comprising "part of a program aimed at extending a hegemony of modern culture" (*CE*, p. 158). She notes that SESI operated during the popular nationalist government of Getulio Vargas and continued until 1954 (the year of Vargas's suicide), aimed at increasing the basic literacy of peasants as well as training skilled urban workers to meet the needs of business. Although Gadotti gives a more detailed account, the simple and adulatory presentation (and possibly a weak translation) leave the reader mystified about key issues. A central piece of the myth of Paulo Freire the revolutionary educator is this early involvement with literacy programs, but the lack of specific information about SESI and Freire's activities in these years leaves a confused picture of the extent of Freire's actual participation in literacy work.[9] Was he a teacher, an administrator, or a publicist?

In 1959, Freire completed his doctoral thesis and was given a teaching position at the University of Recife. In early 1961, the liberal Goulart government encouraged the development of literacy programs in Brazil; literacy was a requirement for suffrage, and thus these literacy campaigns were deeply political. In 1961, Freire was asked by the Mayor of Recife to develop a literacy program for the city. In that same year, he was made director of the newly created Cultural Extension Service at the University of Recife, where his work was supported by United States Agency for International Development. This campaign gained a great deal of publicity, and as a result in 1963 Freire was asked to work with the national literacy program, the Movement for Basic Education or MEB. In 1963 the MEB prepared a literacy

8. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the City* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 100.

9. Freire's account of his work at SESI in his recent book *Pedagogy of Hope* includes a number of anecdotes from this period, but does not make clear the nature of his work or the ultimate goals of the organization.

campaign called *Vivir e lutar* (To Live is to Struggle), which consisted of thirty lessons using photographs of the life experiences of peasants as a basic text. Although Torres sees *Vivir e lutar* as reflecting Freire's influence, Elias notes that "from 1962 onward, a certain amount of give-and-take occurred, especially in the Northeast, among the various literacy programs" (*RPF*, pp. 5-6). The development of both political analysis and literary methods seem to have been a product of ongoing and collective work. Although some of the campaigns in the Northeast such as that in the State of Sergipe seem to have been strikingly successful, it is not clear how successful the wider national literacy program was. But however successful or problematic his practice, Freire was widely publicized as a liberal and even radical reformer. In the aftermath of the military coup that overthrew Goulart, Freire was labeled pro-Communist and anti-American, was arrested and held for seventy days, and eventually fled into exile.

Freire spent several years in Chile after he was forced to leave Brazil. Then in the early 1970s, after a year at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard, he moved to Geneva where he worked with the World Council of Churches until his return to Brazil in 1980. During his association with the World Council of Churches, Freire acted as a consultant to a number of literacy campaigns and participated in countless workshops and conferences in both Europe and the United States. It was in this period that the myth of "Freire the revolutionary" was in a sense created, not only through the success of his books, but also through his charismatic personal appearances. The one site where Freire was actually directly involved in a literacy campaign was in Guinea-Bissau, and it is here that criticisms of his literacy work are strongest. It seems clear from *Pedagogy in Process*, Freire's own 1978 account of this work, that he was deeply influenced by his contact with African revolutionaries such as Amalcar Cabral and Franz Fanon, and that he became enamored with the image of the charismatic revolutionary leader.[10] A number of authors note the change in Freire's thinking after his involvement with Africa. Because in Guinea-Bissau Freire was engaged in a concrete revolutionary situation in a culture not his own, he was forced to take direct political positions rather than put forth the kind of generalized inspirational calls typical of his other writings. This laid him open to criticisms, both of his celebration of the "revolutionary leader" and his advocacy of the use of Portuguese as the language of literacy instruction. There is also a great deal of evidence that this literacy campaign was largely a failure. Torres notes that "by 1980, reports from Guinea-Bissau began to acknowledge that the goals of literacy for national reconstruction had failed to materialize: of the 26,000 students involved in literacy training practically none became functionally literate" (*CE*, p. 133).

The contradictions in presentations of Freire's practice are again illustrated in the accounts of his work as Secretary of Education of the City of São Paulo between 1989 and 1991 in the administration of Luiza Erundina and the Workers Party. It is difficult to find accounts of this period that provide specific details. *Pedagogy of the City*, which is primarily a collection of interviews with Freire conducted in the early

10. Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters from Guinea Bissau*, trans. Carmen Hunter (New York: Continuum, 1970).

months of 1989, provides the best account of Freire's goals in São Paulo. In these interviews, Freire is scathing in his condemnation of the abandonment of poor children by earlier administrations and by Brazilian business elites, what Freire calls "the reactionary powers within this country."[11] He points to the deteriorated condition of school buildings, the lack of basic school supplies, the acceptance of large numbers of children who never attend school and others who are said to "drop out," but who, Freire argues, are actually forced out by poverty or expulsion.[12] He also points to the question of class language, to the need to support teachers and provide ongoing teacher education, and to the need for a curriculum that will create access to the dominant knowledge but also be grounded in students' own life experiences.

While Freire's discussion of the problems facing the schools of São Paulo is incisive and powerful, it is more difficult to discover the actual history of his time as Secretary of Education. Gadotti's book was published in Portuguese in 1988, before Freire actually took office, but in the English version, published in 1994, Gadotti presents Freire's work in São Paulo as an unqualified success. Taylor is more cautious. An example of the difficulties of evaluating Freire's practice from his own self-presentation is the 1989 discussion between Freire and Torres in *Politics of Education: Paths from Freire*, in which Freire discusses his goals as he begins his tenure as Secretary of Education (*PL*, p. 102).[13] In this interview, Torres notes the difficulties facing Freire, noting "the size of São Paulo, and its seemingly insurmountable problems of abandoned children living in the streets, growing poverty and urban violence, fiscal constraints, particularly due to Brazil's growing external debt, and the peculiarities of post-dictatorship Brazilian politics and electoral struggle" (*PL*, p. 105). Torres asks Freire what kind of "pedagogy of the oppressed" he intends to implement in such a situation. Freire's response illustrates well both the appeal of his rhetoric and the difficulty of grasping what exactly he is proposing:

> Today, I am Secretary of Education for the city of Sao Paulo, with much more clarity, with much more political and pedagogical understanding, I hope, than when I was thirty or thirty-five years old. I see things more clearly now and I feel more radical, although never sectarian, in the face of my country's reality. I have a more lucid vision of what we must do to change schooling from the public schooling we have now, into a school that is happy, into a school that is rigorous, into a school that works democratically. A school in which teachers and students know together and in which the teacher teaches, but while teaching does not domesticate the student who, upon learning, will end up also teaching the teacher. If you were to ask me, "Are you attempting to put into practice the concepts you described in your book?" of course I am, but in a manner in keeping with the times. It is one thing to write down concepts in books, but it is another to embody those concepts in praxis. Those things are showing themselves to be very challenging, but they continue to give me a sense of joy and satisfaction (*PL*, p. 105).

This response, while admirable as a general statement of a humane education, leaves many questions unaddressed: What were the obstacles facing Freire? What specifically did he propose? How can schools that are "happy, rigorous, and democratic" be

11. Freire, *Pedagogy of the City*, 45.

12. It is interesting to compare the conditions Freire describes with those described in U.S. cities by Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991).

13. According to Torres, Freire "instituted drastic changes in municipal education, including a comprehensive curriculum reform, new models of school management through the implementation of school councils — compromising teachers, principals, parents and government officials — and a movement for literacy training, MOVA-São Paulo, built on participative planning and delivery with support from non-governmental organizations and social movements," 102.

created in the brutal conditions of urban Brazil? While these questions are to some extent addressed in *Pedagogy of the City*, the actual accomplishments of Freire's administration or its impact are still unclear. In November, 1992, the Workers Party lost the municipal election, and it is also not clear what effect this defeat had on Freire's attempted reforms.

THE THOUGHT OF "PAULO FREIRE"

If "Paulo Freire" is in part created through mythic representations of his life, the process of inventing Freire is even more striking in terms of his thought. Because of the eclectic theoretical influences on his thought as well as his tendency to broad generalization, Freire can be interpreted and used in a variety of ways. Although Freire's basic ideas have remained in essence much the same, he has framed them somewhat differently depending on the context of their articulation or the intellectual currents of the time. While retaining a core of beliefs, he has shifted from the Catholic humanism of his earliest writings to a period of Marxist influence, particularly during his time in Chile and Africa, and most recently to more practical concerns with state educational policy and reform during and after his time as Minister of Education for São Paulo. Between the publication in 1978 of *Pedagogy in Process*, his account of the literacy campaign in Guinea-Bissau, and his recent book of reminiscences, *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire has only published transcriptions of seminars or dialogues with other educators who are sympathetic to him, all co-authored works.[14] The early debate over the meaning of Freire in the 1970s was framed as a tension between Catholicism and Marxism. For many, Freire was quintessentially a Marxist humanist, and he continues to be appropriated in this way. McLaren and Leonard, in the introduction to *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter*, for example, define Freire in just this light: "[Freire's] humanist philosophy, echoing the humanist Marx, centers on the ontological vocation of humans to become more fully human. To become more fully human involves discursive struggle over meaning: human subjects are, as in Marx, rooted in historical struggle" (*CE*, p. 3). Although Freire himself does not label himself as a Marxist, this reading of his work can certainly be supported by his own statements, particularly in the past fifteen years. On the other hand, Freire has been criticized by more "structural" Marxists for his failure to take economic and material forces into account. In Robert Mackie's 1980 collection *Literacy and Revolution*, for example, several authors attacked him for his idealism and failure to acknowledge the power of the material "base."[15] Of the books under review here, Taylor makes a similar criticism, that although Freire uses terms such as "praxis," he fails to provide an analysis of the specific economic forces shaping social sites; thus exactly what form praxis is to take remains obscure.

14. Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*. (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1987); Freire and Shor, *Pedagogy of Liberation*; Paulo Freire and Myles Horton, *We Make the Road by Walking* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Paulo Freire and Antonio Faundez, *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation* (New York: Continuum, 1989); and Miguel Escobar, Alfredo Fernandez, and Gilberto Guevara-Niebla with Paulo Freire, *Paulo Freire on Higher Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994). An exception is Freire, *Politics of Education*, which is primarily a collection of previously published reviews and articles.

15. Robert Mackie, ed., *Literacy and Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 1980).

While Freire is often read as a Marxist humanist, it is also possible to read him in the light of the tradition of liberation theology, particularly by emphasizing his early works. As we have seen, his early literacy work in Brazil emerged from his activities in the Catholic Action Movement. He seems to have been deeply influenced by the French Catholic philosophy of personalism, and his early work often cites Mounier's *Be Not Afraid*, a text that stresses Catholic collectivism.[16] Freire's continued use of a language of love, hope, faith, and humility certainly can be read as part of a Christian tradition. Taylor argues that Freire's "language of the Christian faith is more than the mere clothes for dressing and presentation: it is actually the skeleton or underpinning of his philosophy and social analysis" (*TPF*, p. 56). Freire's emergence from the same Catholic milieu that led to the Medellin conference of 1968 has frequently been noted. Elias, who provides the most comprehensive discussion of Freire as a Catholic thinker of the books reviewed here, argues that Freire, like the liberation theologians, looks to the Gospels as the source of social action. He quotes Freire from a speech delivered in Rome in 1970: "I am not yet completely a Catholic. I just keep trying to be one more completely day after day....I just feel passionately, corporately, physically, with all my being, that my stance is a Christian one because it is 100 percent revolutionary and human and liberating, and hence committed and utopian" (*PF*, p. 81). But although Elias is sympathetic with Freire's Catholicism, he also criticizes Freire for failing to address the issue of original sin or the existence of evil in the world. For Elias, Freire's vision, although deeply influenced by the Gospels, is flawed because it "lacks some of the realism of the Catholic tradition with its strong insistence upon original sin and human corruptibility" (*PF*, p. 57). Thus, just as Freire is appropriated as a Marxist but also criticized for being an inadequate Marxist, he also can be read as a Catholic or criticized as a mistaken Catholic.

Most recently, Freire has been appropriated into the debate over the political implications of postmodernism. Although his work clearly emerges from the modernist and humanist tradition, he is now called forth by writers deeply influenced by postmodern sources. As a humanist, Freire accepts the vision of human beings as capable of reflection and action in the world to change history.[17] As a modernist, he emphasizes his belief in the possibility of a progressive politics of hope. This modernist call for struggle for social justice and the possibility of progressive change rests, as many critics have noted, on his use of binary categories such as oppressor and oppressed, and on a metanarrative of human liberation. Giroux, in his essay in the McLaren and Leonard collection, argues that this dualism needs to be understood within the historical circumstances from which it emerged, that the use of such stark binarisms were themselves a tactical move: "Forged in the heat of life and death struggles, Freire's recourse to binarisms...raged bravely against the dominant languages and configurations of power that refused to address their own politics

16. Mounier, *Be Not Afraid* (London: Rodcliff, 1951).

17. See Collins, *Paulo Freire: His Life and Thought* for a discussion of the humanistic qualities of Freire's early work. Collins points out that Freire's conception of "man" is consistent with both Greek philosophy and the Christian tradition.

by appealing to the imperatives of politeness, objectivity and neutrality" (*PF*, p. 181). But Freire also has been criticized for this tendency to divide the world into oppositional categories, what Taylor calls "a world of polarities which comprises teachers and the taught, the oppressed and the oppressors, the necrophilic and the biophilic, light and dark, subjects and objects, liberators and the liberated."[18] Taylor goes on to argue that although it is heuristically useful, this approach "induces an overall simplicity that actually impedes the way in which we give meaning to experience. Freire relies heavily on this device, but the clarity of his argument allows us to see accurately only at the poles of the inter-arching continua which he has constructed; it allows little insight into the central canopy of everyday life where most people live" (*TPF*, p. 54).

Perhaps the most subtle and extensive attempt to use Freire as a way out of the political paralysis to which postmodernist theory often seems to lead can be found in the essays of Peter McLaren. McLaren argues that Freire's work

> captures the spirit of hope and the courage of one who remains in an unwavering struggle against injustice. In this light, Freire's work could become, for contemporary social theorists, both a modernist reminder that people still suffer pain, oppression, and abandonment and a postmodernist strategy for destabilizing totalizing regimes of signification....It is a politics whose sensibility animates a responsibility to others, and it does so by not dispensing entirely with the concept of totality. Freire works from the metanarrative of liberation and human freedom without allowing such a narrative to become the imposed totality of a categorical utopia (*CE*, p. 210).

While McLaren's defense of the value of Freire the Utopian modernist seems to me powerful and important, his claim that Freire's thought contains a "postmodernist strategy for destabilizing totalizing regimes of signification" is less persuasive. What do the profound dualism of Freire's thought, his emphases on the subject, on "authentic" insight, mean in the context of the postmodernist emphasis on ambiguity and the decentering of grand narratives?

The complexities of the debate over how Freire should be read reflects one of the most striking qualities of Freire's thought: his tendency toward inspirational but decontextualized generalizations. His pronouncements frequently invoke universal themes such as justice, love, and freedom — terms that can be appropriated by writers from a number of different traditions. When commentators want to appropriate Freire, they frequently "fill in" for Freire, elaborating and explaining what he "really" means, or taking his generalizations as specifics. This can lead to claims for his work that are closer to wishes than they are supported by his actual writings. Cornel West, for example, in his introduction to McLaren and Leonard's collection, writes of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "Freire's genius is to explicate in this text and exemplify in his life the dynamics of this process of how ordinary people can and do make history in how they think, feel, act and love" (*CE*, p. xiii). In actuality, Freire rarely discusses specific ordinary people; in all of his work he refers to general categories of "the oppressed," "peasants," "workers," and "intellectuals." The texture and complexity of the lives of ordinary (or extraordinary for that matter) people are not

18. A number of other critics have made this point. See, for example, Ofelia Shutte, *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993). Daniel Shipani also makes this argument that Freire sees the world as "a moralistic picture of good and evil depicted in terms of the struggle between the oppressed and the oppressors." Daniel Shipani, *Conscientization and Creativity* (London: University Press of America, 1984), 23.

evoked. In this passage, these lives are "filled in" by West, who assumes that the abstraction "the oppressed" captures the specificity of actual lives. Numerous similar examples can be found in the work of other commentators. McLaren, a thoughtful and sympathetic reader of Freire, comments,

> Certainly Freire stresses universal goals, such as human rights and self-determination, but he does so in the knowledge that such rights and determinations are always provisional, contextual, and the result of a material struggle over meaning and that they should not be situated transcendentally within a project of liberation but engaged in their historical specificity. One could perhaps invoke on behalf of Freire the term "contingent universalities" (*PL*, p. 211).

In fact, Freire's work is open to criticism precisely for a lack of "historical specificity." Although Freire frequently repeats the need to consider the historical specificity of the local, particularly in his later dialogues, in fact he almost never gives any specific local examples; and when he does, they are often themselves decontextualized figures — a "peasant" or a "student." The claim of location itself is too often an abstract generalization without specificity. In the passage quoted above, McLaren, who is well aware of these problems, introduces the phrase contingent universalities "on behalf of Freire," to try to reconcile the contradiction between Freire's grand but abstract claims of specificity.

This approach of presenting expositions "on behalf of Freire," of reinventing Freire, is employed by a number of writers in the McLaren and Leonard and McLaren and Lankshear collections. When commentators articulate this process, as McLaren does in the passage quoted in the previous paragraph, it seems to me a positive use of Freire, since it acknowledges that what is being claimed is a gloss, a reading. Ira Shor employs this approach in his essay, acknowledging that he is building upon Freire, not trying to copy him: "In the liberating classroom suggested by Freire's ideas, teachers pose problems derived from student life, social issues, and academic subjects, in a mutually created dialogue" (*CE*, p. 25). While claims such as these about "liberating classrooms" have themselves been criticized as regimes of truth, what I think is powerful here is Shor's use of the phrase "suggested by Freire's ideas," which acknowledges the influence of Freire's general perspective but does not attribute more to him than is justified by his texts. Other writers use similar phrases. Tomaz Tadeu da Silva and McLaren, in their essay "Decentering Pedagogy," present what they term

> a poststructuralist and postcolonialist rereading of Freire that while to a certain extent "reinventing" Freire's work in light of perspectives selectively culled from contemporary strands of critical social theory, attempts to remain faithful to the main contours of the Freirean problematic (*CE*, p. 48).

Puiggros, in her call for a form of dialogical education, begins, "Extending Freire's position beyond what is contained in his texts...," thus acknowledging from the outset that she is using Freire and his general call for dialogue to reflect upon and create a more specific analysis (*PL*, p. 171). The use of terms such as "reinventing," "extending," "suggested by," "on behalf of," encourages a critical distance and allows commentators to embrace Freirean goals while acknowledging the shortcomings of Freire's actual practice or mystical philosophy.

While a number of the writers in *A Critical Encounter* and *Politics of Liberation* implicitly acknowledge these shortcomings in his thought, their overall stance is

closer to reverential than critical. Other texts, however, take a more cautious approach, particularly to Freire's pedagogy. One major criticism that continues to be made of Freire as well as other theorists associated with both critical and feminist pedagogy is his failure to consider the power of the liberatory teacher, the desire of the teacher to be "the one who knows" and the ways in which teachers are implicated in the truth that is uncovered through the process of pedagogy. Although Freire is quite clear about where he stands politically, at the same time he claims that the pedagogy he supports will allow learners to "read the word and the world" as subjects without considering the complexity of the pedagogical encounter. Critics, most frequently those hostile to Left, have pointed to the dangers of manipulation in Freirean pedagogy.[19] More recently, feminist critics have applied the Foucauldian concept of "regime of truth" to Freirean and other critical pedagogies.[20] This argument rests on the idea that "truth" is called forth by the discourse itself. In the case of Freirean pedagogy, the concept of the revolutionary or liberatory educator is all too frequently called forth in an iconic fashion.[21]

Of the books under review here, Taylor provides by far the most extensive and critical discussion of the iconic quality of Freire's thought in his analysis of the codifications used in Freire's literacy campaigns. Taylor defines Freirean problematizing education as intending to interrogate

> what is given, bringing into question known structures, and examining conventional or taken-for granted "explanations" of reality. It discovers and then reacts to the possibility of "contradiction," identifying ways in which things can be said, done, or exist differently (*TPF*, p. 73).

Taylor goes on to argue that although this is a laudable goal, exactly how this is to be achieved by the Freirean literacy method is in fact very problematic. Taylor argues that a close examination of the sequence of the images used in the Freirean codifications reveals a subtext of "correct" answers that are already in the mind of the educator. In his analysis of the codifications, Taylor that although they are open to a variety of interpretations, Freire clearly has in mind one kind of conclusion — of human agency, the power of culture, the empowerment of literacy. Taylor argues that the codifications create a discursive system with an internal logic that leads the reader to one interpretation. In other words, while any one image might be open to

19. Probably the best know of these was Peter Berger's critical review, "The False Consciousness of Consciousness Raising," *Worldview* (January 1975): 33-38.

20. See Jennifer Gore, *The Struggle for Pedagogies* (New York: Routledge, 1993) for a detailed critique of the disciplinary quality of critical pedagogies in general as regimes of truth.

21. A visual example of the iconic use of Freirean pedagogy can be seen in the use of photographs as evidence in Gadotti's *Reading Paulo Freire*. In one photograph, a group of about twenty people is sitting on the ground of a barren plain. All of the men are Black, most dressed in tribal clothing, although four men are wearing Western style shirts. One of these four men is speaking; next to him is the only woman in the group, a White woman who is also wearing Western clothing. The caption reads: "This Photo was sent to Paulo Freire in 1986 by one of his readers, an educator who applied his ideas in approximately 80 classes with the nomads [*sic*] people of the desert of Kenya." Gadotti, *Reading Paulo Freire*, xxi. What are we to make of this image? Who is the "educator who applied his ideas?" What are these people speaking of? What is the relation of modernity and traditional culture? What are the dynamics of race and gender? I mention this photograph because it seems to capture visually one of the major problems in Freire's own thought and the way he frequently has been used: its meaning is expressed as an unproblematic icon. As readers, we are invited to read this image in one way, as evidence of a liberatory and revolutionary pedagogy. We are not invited to consider other possible readings or to reflect upon the process in which meaning is constructed.

any number of interpretations, the *sequence* as well as the questioning of the Freirean teacher has a particular logic and leads to one particular meaning. The codifications are a sign system — an argument, a particular way of making meaning — and the "reading of the word and the world" that Freire calls for is created by the structure of this sequence. Taylor notes that in the Freirean literacy campaigns the codifications were meant to be gone through in about two days, after which the techniques of reading, using the sixteen or seventeen generative words, would begin. Taylor points out that these word lists, while supposedly garnered from "the people," are selected by the literacy workers and inevitably reflect their own criteria of selection. He points out, for example, that the key words are all nouns; because there are no verbs, there is no way of asserting action or relationships. Moreover, "not one of the lists includes words relating to personal or family relationships: there is no mention of wife, husband, children, parents or friends, no mention of family or community" (*TPF*, p. 77).

Michel Foucault states that all discourses are regimes of truth, in the sense that they contain and call forth truth and falsehood. The problem with the Freirean method, as Taylor points out, is not that it is a regime of truth, but that this dynamic is not only unacknowledged but in a sense denied through Freire's insistence on the reader as subject, not object, the "reader of the word and the world." Taylor argues, and I think correctly, that a much clearer statement of the political beliefs and goals of the educator would be both more honest and more effective. A direct statement of belief can give learners more power, not less, because they can then agree, disagree, or contest the educator's truth. Although this goal — one of dialogue — is what Freire claims is his own, Taylor's analysis of the codifications is very useful in illuminating the contradictions between Freire's theoretical claims and the effects of his practice.

Another area in which Freire is open to criticism is his failure to address patriarchal privilege or sexist oppression. In the past these criticisms have been based on Freire's failure to consider exploring the specificities of oppression and to implicitly assume that "the oppressed" are male peasants or workers. Of the books under review here, neither Elias nor Gadotti is concerned with this issue. In fact, Gadotti himself uses the generic male pronoun to stand in for all people, a serious issue for a text published in 1994. Although this "he-man language" was universal in the late 1960s, when *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was written, it has been the focus of extensive criticism since then. Most universities and scholarly journals have guidelines for the use of non-sexist language and Freire himself is now careful to use the terms "women and men" or "human beings" in his writings and public presentations. That Gadotti's usage of the male pronoun is more than a convention is indicated by other points in his text. For example, Gadotti mentions Freire's love of the tango, the beautiful music of Buenos Aires. Gadotti describes the tango as the music of the urban underclass, the "children of immigrants" of Latin America. He continues,

> When we understand the tango as the bottled-up expression of machismo, of suffering in the face of deception, of the need to reflect the dignity of someone who has suffered misery, in short as the manifestation of the crisis of urban civilization, it becomes easier to understand why Freire likes tangos (*RPF*, p. 137).

The identification of "'machismo'" and "the crisis of urban civilization" in this passage makes very clear that the urban worker referred to in Gadotti's generalized use of "he" is in fact a male worker, and that the use of sexist language throughout this text is the reflection of sexist thinking. It is no wonder that Gadotti does not explore Freire's treatment of gender.

Other authors are more sensitive to this issue and more critical. Bell hooks, who presents a generous and sympathetic reading of Freire in the context of her own practice, nonetheless notes Freire's "blind spot" in matters of gender. Taylor, in his analysis of the Freirean literacy method, also notes the male bias of Freire's analysis of literacy:

> It is one of the paradoxes of literacy, but one ignored totally by Freire, that many non-literate or semi-literate women are more literate than their male counterparts. However, it is the male definition of literacy which is validated, forged as it is in the public economy of the workplace and tempered as it is with cultural and social patriarchy. Women's literacy is devalued because it belongs to the home, to the care of children and to the maintenance of private life (*TPF*, p. 138).

Da Silva and McLaren, in their discussion of Freire and what they call "the politics of memory," also note the problematic quality of his "phallocentric paradigm of liberation in which freedom and the experience of patriarchal manhood are conflated" (*CE*, p. 70). Both bell hooks and da Silva and McLaren argue that this "blind spot" should not lead us to discount the power of Freire's political stance.

Jeanne Brady, in her essay in the McLaren and Lankshear collection, is more critical. She notes Freire's failure to conceptualize women's oppression or subjectivity

> not only in the gendered language that populates his early works such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, but also in his notion of reproduction as being exclusively linked to the project of economic reconstruction, especially in *Pedagogy in Process*. By focusing on reproduction around agriculture, Freire ignores the complexity of reproduction for women around the issue of women's work, namely, health care, birthing, and family matters (*PL*, p. 145).[22]

Perhaps the most troubling evidence of the continued assumptions of patriarchal privilege in Freire's thought come from Freire's own recent texts. In the Forward to McLaren and Leonard's *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter*, Freire addresses unnamed "feminist critics" of his work:

> I also appreciate the attempts by feminist critics and educators to rethink my work through their own specific struggles. Since the 1970s I have learned much from feminism and have come to define my work as feminist, seeing feminism closely connected to the process of self-reflexivity and political action for human freedom. As the chapters in this volume attest, it is important to appreciate the multiplicity of modes of oppression suffered by women and people of color in the United States and elsewhere across the globe; it is equally important to discount claims to a unitary experience of oppression not only among women, but with respect to all oppressed peoples. I have always challenged the essentialism reflected in claims of a unitary experience of class and gender, inasmuch as it is assumed that suffering is a seamless web always cut from the same cloth. Oppression must always be understood in its multiple and contradictory instances, just as liberation must be grounded in the particularity of suffering and struggle in concrete, historical experiences, without resorting to transcendental guarantees (*CE*, p. x).

In this passage, Freire typically makes a number of generalizations about the need to be specific. But he does not provide us with any examples of either what he means

22. In my own essay in the McLaren and Lankshear collection, I make a similar criticism of Freire's implicit assumptions in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that the oppressed and the illiterate, the potential revolutionary class, are men.

by feminism or which essays in this volume he is referring to, since the collection includes only one essay by a woman, bell hooks, who is very sympathetic to Freire. Although da Silva and McLaren thoughtfully discuss feminist debates around essentialism and are clearly familiar with feminist theory, the other essays in this collection are striking in the absence of discussions of the specificity of gender or, with the exception of bell hooks, of race.

In the one instance in these books where Freire responds directly to feminist criticisms of his work, he takes quite a different tone from his statement in the Forward to the McLaren and Leonard collection. In his interview with Donaldo Macedo in this same volume, Freire is asked to reply to his feminist critics. The interview is prefaced by a statement by Macedo that although there is not enough space for Freire to respond to the "pertinent issues" raised by the essays in this collection, "What we would like to do is to address a recurring challenge to Freirean pedagogy concerning its treatment of gender" (*CE*, p. 169). This is itself an interesting choice, since this collection of essays does not in fact include any sustained feminist challenge to Freire. And although Macedo's initial framing of this exchange begins, "Some educators, particularly North American feminists" have criticized Freire, in the subsequent interview Freire never refers to any specific criticism; nor does he cite here (or in any other source with which I am familiar) a single feminist theorist, in or outside of education.[23]

In his interview with Macedo, Freire consistently refers to "the feminists," as though there were a single movement or voice, or else he uses anonymous examples, very much like his calling forth of "a peasant" in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In the interview with Macedo, he gives this example of feminist criticism:

> I received not long ago a letter from a young woman who recently came across *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* for the first time, criticizing my *machista* language. This letter was very insulting and somewhat vulgar but I was not upset by it. I was not upset by her letter because, most certainly, she has only read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and evaluated my language as if this book were written last year. That is, she did not contextualize *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in its historical context (*CE*, p. 171).

As is very frequently the case with Freire, he here identifies the feminist critique of his work as a question of sexist language. This question of pronouns, of course, is important but relatively simple to redress, and in his later work Freire has been careful to use "he or she" — in other words to acknowledge that men and women are both human beings and not the same (man). Since Freire has been sensitive to this issue for many years, recent feminist criticism has not focused on his past use of sexist language. But emphasizing this point and having it stand for feminist critique allows Freire to ignore more fundamental questions about his conceptualization of liberation and the oppressed in terms of male experience, or the failure to address the

23. The circumstance of the production of this text are somewhat unclear. There is some evidence that this is a transcript of an exchange between Macedo and Freire that actually took place in the summer of 1991, when Freire was in Cambridge, Massachusetts, participating in a conference at Lesley College. If so, it was before Freire could have read any of the essays in this collection. Macedo's introductory statement here, which includes quotations from an essay I wrote, could not have been a part of an interview conducted in 1991, since the passages quoted were not even written at that time. By framing the interview with reference to a later critique, Macedo provides a more sophisticated meaning to Freire's statements in this interview, and implies that Freire has read feminist analysis of his work, when it is not at all clear that this is the case.

specificity of oppressions in actual history and discourse. Even more disturbing in this passage is the introduction of the anonymous "young woman" to stand in for "the feminists," a young woman who writes a "very insulting and somewhat vulgar" letter. We know nothing of this "young woman" (not even how he knows she is young) and nothing of the content of the letter. She is a rhetorical device that can be used to support the idea of the out of bounds (insulting, vulgar) feminist attack, and the calm and condescending response of Freire ("I was not upset by it.")

It is clear as this interview unfolds that Freire still does not consider that there might be a more profound feminist critique of his thought. He consistently presents the idea of patriarchy as practices that can be changed; he never considers the need to analyze the underlying patriarchal assumptions of the European intellectual tradition from which his own thought has emerged. He subsumes gender within class, as in his discussion in this interview of the need to transform the world:

> I believed that this word *transformation* implied a bit of interest in class more so than individual or sex interest. In other words, liberation should take place for both men and women and not just for men or for women or along color or ethnic lines (*CE*, p. 172).

Again in this passage Freire assumes that class interest can be separated from "sex interest," failing to understand the ways in which class and sex (not to mention race) are intertwined, or that a concern with class exploitation is precisely structured by both racism and sexism. He goes on in this interview to instruct feminists in "correct pedagogical practice":

> For me the correct pedagogical practice is for feminists to understand the different levels of male oppression, while at the same time creating pedagogical structures in which men will have to confront their oppressive position. I believe that it is not enough for women to liberate themselves from the oppression of men who are in turn oppressed by the society as a whole, but that together they simultaneously move toward cutting the chains of oppression. Obviously, both these oppressed men and women need to understand their different positions in the oppressive structures so that together they can develop effective strategies and cease to be oppressed (*CE*, p. 174).

While Freire's call here for the need for simultaneous political strategies against overlapping oppressions echoes other progressive thinkers, this statement again illustrates the "blind spot" in his thinking. First is Freire's assumption that he can name "correct pedagogical practice" for women, that their main concern should be to "understand the different levels of male oppression," rather than examine and understand the levels of women's oppression — the different forms of oppression and privilege of black and white women, for example, or the differences between working class and bourgeois women, or the different positionings and interests of lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women. For Freire, the most important focus for women instead should be to understand men, and their second goal should be to "help" men confront their own sexism. In both cases, the historical actors are men, and women's role is to understand and help these men improve their own weakness. As Freire goes on to say, what is important is "to rectify the sexist behavior of men." He warns against the feminist preoccupation with women's struggle:

> If the oppressed women choose to fight exclusively against the oppressed men when they are both in the category of oppressed, they may rupture the oppressor-oppressed relations specific to both women and men. If this is done, the struggle will only be partial and perhaps tactically incorrect (*CE*, p. 174).

While this question of what Cameron McCarthy has called the "nonsynchrony of oppression" is a major concern to feminist thinkers, it seems to me that the tone of Freire's comments reflects not so much a desire to engage sexism as one of a number of intersecting and overlapping forms of oppression, but rather a wish that women would keep quiet and stop complaining, since the "real" struggle which their parochialism threatens does not concern sexism, or male privilege.

Freire's tendencies to smooth over and discount the significance of patriarchy, to overgeneralize and to construct his own "Paulo Freire" can be seen in his claim in this interview with Macedo that he, too, is a woman — a claim that Freire has frequently made in public lectures and workshops. He comments here that he first said this at the University of London sometime in the 1970s:

> I said: "I too am a woman." That is to say, this affirmation was not sexual but was an eminently political statement. What I would like to make very clear, even if my feminist friends do not agree, is that the concept of the gender struggle is political and not sexual. I do not want to have an antagonistic relationship with women. If that is the case, I deserve it and I accept it. I do recognize the sexual differences which positions [*sic*] both men and women in different oppressive locations, but for me, the fundamental issue is the political vision of sex, and not the sexist vision of sex. What is at stake is liberation and the creation of liberatory structures which is the overriding issue for both men and women (*CE*, p. 175).

When pushed by Macedo, who comments, "But Paulo, you must recognize that there are various levels of liberation," Freire falls back into idealistic abstractions: "For me the problem is the following: What is the strategy of the struggle of the oppressed? It is the Utopia of liberty that severs the chains of oppression. This should be dream of the struggle for liberation that never reaches a plenitude" (*CE*, p. 175). Once again Freire calls forth broad and almost mystical abstractions which may be inspirational, but certainly do not engage with the issue of male privilege or the specific complexities of overlapping oppressions. Who can argue with a "dream of liberation that never reaches a plenitude?"

CONCLUSION

Paulo Freire is a man, a theorist, and a political figure. "Paulo Freire" all too often is a sign, called forth to justify or stand in for the hopes of educators and theorists struggling to create a progressive praxis in a brutal world. The problem with this, as I think a discussion of these texts demonstrates, is that "Freire" is too often invoked without looking closely enough at his actual practice, his words, or the context in which they were written. "Freire" can be used in this way because of his personal charisma and stance on the side of progressive political movements, but also because of the abstract and sometimes mystical nature of his writings. In his actions in the world, Freire stands with the oppressed, in whatever setting he finds himself, and his public engagement encourages his use as a symbol of opposition or resistance to oppression. This use is valuable and important. As Peter McLaren comments,

> Suffering, and the historical memories of those who have suffered under the heels of the power elite, become, for Freire, the reference points that ground his revolutionary text. The task of liberating others from their suffering may not emerge from some transcendental fiat, yet it nevertheless compels us to affirm our humanity in solidarity with victims (*PL*, p. 203).

The downside of this, of course, is that the conflicts that emerge from the specificity of oppression, the internal contradictions of political projects, or the ambiguities of

history cannot be addressed in Freirean "high language." And when these conflicts are not articulated, they can grow and lead to the deflection of energies inward or to a sense of hopelessness or failure on the part of Freirean educators in whose practice the categories of oppressor and oppressed are not so clear.

These criticisms are important. It is not enough to "reinvent" Freire, as do writers such as McLaren, hooks, Shor, and Puiggros, without considering the potential dangers of his thought. But despite the need to read Freire with a critical eye and to explore in more detail the "blind spots" of his work, it is also important, as the writers in these five texts all emphasize, to capture the passion in Freire, his humanity, his compassion, and his instinctive siding with those who are suffering. It is difficult to articulate these qualities in an age of spiritual impoverishment, but there is no doubt that one of Freire's great appeals is the way in which this spiritual quality shines through his writings and speaks to deep longings and desires in people. As Taylor comments,

> Freire can be easily dismissed for comfortable idealism, utopianism, otherworldly mysticism and irrelevance. Yet beneath that, beneath the Banking system which he has diverted into a Co-operative Banking system, there is a pedagogy of contradiction, which is contradictory because it creates another reality, a critical, practical awareness, an "I know what I am in this world-ness" that presages action. It is disturbing, deranging, uncompromising and irreverent (*TPF*, p. 149).

Ultimately, it is Freire's stance against the values of the cruel and mean-spirited age in which we live, and his affirmation of the possibility of a "bohemian pedagogy of happiness," that have led to the creation and embracing of "Paulo Freire" by educators throughout the world.