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DEFENDING FREIREAN INTERVENTION

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Few thinkers have exerted wider educational influence than Paulo Freire.¹ Drawing on his experiences with illiterate adults in Brazil and Chile, Freire theorizes an intimate connection between education and the process of becoming more fully human.² For Freire, education is humanizing when it is critical, dialogical, and praxical.³ Repudiating the notion that education can be neutral, Freire calls upon teachers to disclose, but not *impose*, their political views in seeking, with students, to understand more deeply a given object of study.⁴ To educate, in the Freirean sense, is to foster reflection and action upon both "word" and "world."⁵ This entails the rigorous interrogation of texts and contexts, through structured, purposeful dialogue, coupled with practical involvement in the struggles of everyday life.⁶ Freire rejects a "banking" model of the teaching process in favor of a problem-posing approach, and encourages students to adopt a curious, questioning, probing stance in

1. For an affirmation of Freire's influence, and a critical reappraisal of his work, see Peter McLaren and Peter Leonard, eds., *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter* (London: Routledge, 1993) and Peter McLaren and Colin Lankshear, eds., *Politics of Liberation: Paths from Freire* (London: Routledge, 1994).

2. Freire outlines his approach to adult literacy education in two early texts: Paulo Freire, *Education: The Practice of Freedom* (London: Writers and Readers, 1976) and Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972). For summaries and analyses of Freire's literacy work, see Cynthia Brown, "Literacy in 30 Hours: Paulo Freire's Process in Northeast Brazil," *Social Policy* 5, no. 2 (1974): 25-32; T.G. Sanders, "The Paulo Freire Method: Literacy Training and Conscientization," in *Education and Development: Latin America and the Caribbean*, ed. T.J. La Belle (Latin American Center, 1972); Barbara Bee, "The Politics of Literacy," in *Literacy and Revolution: The Pedagogy of Paulo Freire*, ed. Robert Mackie (London: Pluto Press, 1980); Paul V. Taylor, *The Texts of Paulo Freire* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993); and Peter Roberts, "Education, Dialogue and Intervention: Revisiting the Freirean Project," *Educational Studies* 20, no. 3 (1994): 307-27.

3. On education and humanization, see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

4. On the nonneutrality of education, compare, among many other sources, Paulo Freire, "Education: Domestication or Liberation?" *Prospects* 2, no. 2 (1972), 173-74 and Paulo Freire, "Letter to North American Educators," in *Freire for the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching*, ed. Ira Shor (New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook, 1987). Questions about disclosure and imposition are explored at length in Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

5. The relationship between "word" and "world" is central to Freire's theory of literacy. See Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987).

6. Freire's later works are especially helpful in highlighting the importance of structure and rigor in dialogical education. See Paulo Freire and Ira Shor, *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (London: MacMillan, 1987); Paulo Freire and Antonio Faundez, *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1989); Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); and Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*. This theme has been investigated at length in Peter Roberts, "Structure, Direction and Rigour in Liberating Education," *Oxford Review of Education* 22 (1996).

exploring educational issues.⁷ Freirean education demands a deep commitment to the goal of building a better social world, and necessitates active resistance against oppressive structures, ideas, and practices.

While Freire's work has been widely admired, his pedagogy has also attracted strong criticism in some quarters. One of Freire's most persistent critics has been C.A. Bowers. In a series of publications dating from the early 1980s, Bowers has mounted a comprehensive attack on Freire and the assumptions allegedly underpinning his work. This article concentrates on Bowers's major essay on Freire, "Linguistic Roots of Cultural Invasion in Paulo Freire's Pedagogy."⁸ While this piece has drawn occasional critical comment, the response to Bowers's article has been less vigorous and visible than might reasonably have been expected, given Freire's popularity and influence. The absence of an extended critique of Bowers's position on Freirean pedagogy is of more than passing significance, for while Bowers has devoted special attention to Freire, his claims — if correct — have wide-ranging implications for all teachers and educational theorists. Bowers sees Freire as a "carrier" of a highly problematic Western mind set: one with a "cultural bias" toward progressive change, critical reflection, and intervention. Bowers suggests that Freirean adult literacy programs, in challenging traditional systems of authority and belief, are potentially invasive and hegemonic. This paper finds fault with both the structure and the substantive content of Bowers's critique.

My central argument is that pedagogical intervention was justified in the situations with which Freire was dealing. In supporting this position, I maintain: that in building his case against Freire, Bowers homogenizes Western modes of thought and romanticizes "traditional" cultures; that Bowers's critique relies on a problematic comparison between Freire and the Chipewyan of Canada; that programs of education are *necessarily* interventionist; that Bowers fails to contextualize adequately Freire's work; and that, in effectively avoiding the problem of oppression, Bowers gives support to a form of cultural conservatism Freire would find ethically indefensible. I acknowledge, nevertheless, that Bowers's writings are helpful in highlighting the potential dangers educators face in involving themselves in the lives of others. Following a brief summary of Bowers's argument, I draw attention to flaws in his analysis and defend Freirean intervention.

7. See Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, chap. 2; and Paulo Freire, *Politics of Education* (London: MacMillan, 1985), 1-4.

8. C.A. Bowers, "Linguistic Roots of Cultural Invasion in Paulo Freire's Pedagogy," *Teachers College Record* 84, no. 4 (1983): 935-53. This work will be referred to as *LR* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent citations. Bowers also refers to Freire's work in a number of other publications, including: C.A. Bowers, "The Problem of Individualism and Community in Neo-Marxist Educational Thought," *Teachers College Record* 85, no. 3 (1984): 365-90; and C.A. Bowers, "Review of *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation*," *Educational Studies* 17, no. 1 (1986): 147-54; C.A. Bowers *Elements of a Post-Liberal Theory of Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1987).

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BOWERS'S CRITIQUE OF FREIREAN PEDAGOGY

Bowers argues that Freire's pedagogy imposes a Western mode of thought on traditional cultural groups. Bowers sees Freire as a "carrier" of a Western mind set: this is perpetuated by Freire's references to liberation, critical reflection, praxis, and social transformation. Bowers believes that Freire takes for granted Western assumptions about the progressive nature of change, the importance of critical reflection, and the moral authority of individualism. Bowers supports Freire's focus on the lifeworld of learners in literacy programs, and sees the dialectical relating of thought to action within specific cultural settings as a major strength of Freirean pedagogy. He concedes that much of Freire's work has been in politically volatile, revolutionary situations where indigenous cultures have already been colonized, but suggests that greater consideration needs to be given to the possibility of preserving elements of traditional belief systems (LR, pp. 935-939).

Bowers draws a comparison between Freire and the Chipewyan of Canada in sketching two distinct worldviews. The Chipewyan, Bowers reports, tend to think more holistically than Westerners, eschewing the segmentation of knowledge and experience into component parts. Nonintervention is fostered, and freedom from dependence on other people is sought. Where Freirean literacy education encourages a form of distancing and abstraction from the gestalt of the lifeworld, the Chipewyan adopt an integrative and practical approach to knowledge. Freire advocates the continuous problematization of everyday life; the Chipewyan, on the other hand, try to avoid being in situations which are likely to lead to a questioning and renegotiation of existing beliefs (LR, pp. 939-941).

Bowers links Freire with what Max Weber described as the "emissary prophecy" tradition in Western thought. Thinkers such as Freire subscribe to the view "that one possesses a truth that must be shared with, and even imposed on, others in order to save them" (LR, p. 942). Bowers aligns Freire with Christian missionaries, Marxists, and bourgeois liberals in describing examples of the emissary prophecy at work. Missionaries no longer exert the influence they once did, but have been replaced by secular authorities who also provide a moral justification for intervening in the lives of others. Thus, on the one hand, there are Marxists, who wish to eliminate the social injustices associated with capitalism and traditional (non-Western) belief structures; on the other, there are bourgeois liberals, who support democracy and public education on moral and social grounds. Freirean intervention has both a moral and an ontological basis, and is premised on a distinctly Western set of assumptions about the value of critical reflection, change, progress, and revolution (LR, p. 942).

Taking Freire's letters to Mario Cabral on education in Guinea-Bissau as his reference point, Bowers also mounts an attack on modernization, secularization, and the role of the state in social organization.⁹ Bowers maintains that the connection between modernization and secularization "can be understood in terms of the increasing privatization of religious beliefs and the use of utilitarian principles and

9. The letters were published in Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau* (London: Writers and Readers, 1978).

a purposive mode of rationality to justify the moral basis of social policy" (LR, p. 944). There are, Bowers suggests, four issues to be addressed by people adopting a Freirean pedagogical approach. These are: (1) the tension between Freirean individualism, based on critical reflection, and traditional religious beliefs and moral codes; (2) the possible contribution of secularization to the rise of a new class of intellectuals and technocrats; (3) the question of how democratic and collective decisionmaking can be maintained when purposive rationality becomes the only acceptable basis for public discourse and value clarification; and (4) the rise of state ideology over traditional forms of religious control (LR, p. 946).

Bowers claims that Freire would want to privatize religious beliefs or replace them with rational thought. There is a "double bind" in Freire's view of individualism. The first aspect of this relates to Freire's uneasy attempt to reconcile a "planned society" with the Enlightenment notion of the rational, critical, responsible individual; the second difficulty lies in the promotion of a kind of "subjectivism," where traditional forms of knowledge and morality give way to subjective feeling as the only source of authority (LR, pp. 947-948). In Bowers's opinion, Freire's stress on the importance of "making history" glorifies the individual's right to overturn tradition. At the same time, Bowers contends, Freire also supports state control over the population: promoting universal literacy is one means of securing this end. Freire's Western conception of the state, "with its emphasis on change, growth, and centralized planning," does not appear to mesh comfortably with the ideal of "re-Africanizing" thought in Guinea-Bissau (LR, p. 950). Bowers concludes that Freire's pedagogy "carries a powerful and seductive message" and "will undoubtedly have a modernizing effect" (LR, p. 952). When applied in non-Western settings, however, Freirean ideas and practices can be seen as "a continuation of Western domination" (LR, p. 950).

PROBLEMATIZING BOWERS'S ARGUMENTS

Bowers's critique poses a formidable challenge for Freirean scholars and practitioners. If his arguments hold weight, doubt is cast not only on Freirean pedagogical principles and practices, but on the very assumptions underpinning many programs of education in the Western and non-Western world. The strength of Bowers's analysis lies in the significance of the questions he raises. For Bowers calls into question precisely those characteristics often most valued in Freirean education: critical reflection, the questioning of established beliefs and authority structures, the dialogical problematization of everyday life, and the commitment to social transformation. Bowers draws attention to one of the deepest concerns facing teachers, namely, the question of how their actions as educators might affect the lives of their students. His work serves as a reminder that there is always a fine line between affirming and denying the experiences of others. In according the problem of intervention a central place in his investigation, Bowers anticipates later work by postmodern theorists on the dangers of attempting to speak for, or even with, others. Bowers thus addresses issues of fundamental importance not only for Freireans, but for all educationists and, in this respect, his discussion is stimulating and helpful. Nevertheless, I hope to show that his critique is flawed, in both its structure and

arguments. I highlight two areas for critical comment in this section. First, I examine some of the difficulties associated with the binary division between "Western" and "non-Western" cultures in Bowers's analysis. I concentrate on Bowers's homogenizing of diverse Western ideas and practices, and draw attention to the danger of romanticizing non-Western and traditional cultures. Second, I consider the problematic nature of the comparison between Freire and the Chipewyan.

"WESTERN" AND "NON-WESTERN" CULTURES

Bowers employs the general category "Western" in buttressing many of his claims about the nature of Freirean pedagogy. He talks, for example, of "Western culture," "[the] Westernizing mode of consciousness," "the Western episteme," "Western assumptions about progressive change," "the dominant pattern of Western thinking," "the traditional Western pattern of thinking," "the Western mind set," "this Western view of literacy," and "Western ideology" (LR, pp. 935, 937, 938, 939, 940, 947, 949, 951). This is problematic. In speaking of "the" Western mode of consciousness, episteme, pattern of thinking, mind set, and so forth, Bowers glosses, to the point of grossly reifying the term "Western," the complexities, contradictions, and deep divisions between different theoretical perspectives in Western thought. There is no uniform Western "mind set," no single "dominant pattern of Western thinking," no view of literacy that is typically Western.

In assuming such homogeneity in Western ways of thinking and acting, some of Bowers's examples border on the absurd. He draws a contrast, for instance, between Chipewyan and Western approaches to learning how to drive a road grader. Bowers claims that "the Western approach...would involve reading operating manuals and listening to someone else explain the steps of the operation" (LR, p. 940). The Chipewyan, on the other hand, used a quite different strategy:

[They] sat on the side of the road watching the operation of the road grader. After watching for several days, the man operated the grader with skill and ease. In interviewing the man [it was found that]...he could not explain how he operated the machine. The integrative way of thinking enabled him to learn from direct experience, and to be able to explain the operation in the abstract, to have knowledge in our sense, was useless — particularly in terms of other Chipewyans who would trust only what they learned from their own experience (LR, p. 940).

The way this example is constructed, it is as if no Westerners ever learn via direct experience, or through practical example, or informal apprenticeship. All or most Westerners, Bowers would have us believe, use abstract, print-based, linear, or lock-step approaches to learning, even where the task is an obviously practical one such as driving a grader. In using references to "the" Western way of doing things as a bludgeon in criticizing Freire, this example is highly ironic. Freire has always emphasized the importance of learning through experience. Freirean adult literacy education is built around words, themes, and codifications that derive directly from, or relate to, the existential reality of participants.¹⁰ At a deeper level, Freire conceives of knowledge in a profoundly *anti*-abstract way. Knowledge, for Freire, can only be

10. See Freire, *Education: The Practice of Freedom*, 41-84; Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 81-95; and Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, 29-47.

acquired, or, more correctly, authentically *constructed*, through practical experience: through one's interaction with others and with the objective world.¹¹ Westerners make sense of the world in an enormous variety of different ways, as do those in traditional and non-Western societies. As Freire has long recognized, there is no one way of learning, understanding, or educating in the West. Some approaches to learning have Freire's support (those that are critical, dialogical, praxical, or problem-posing); others, also prevalent in the West, have been the object of Freire's critique. Freire has, for example, strongly criticized antidialogical and authoritarian systems of learning, and has noted with regret the frequent separation of theory from practice in schools and other institutions.

Bowers's very act of positioning himself against (supposedly) Western assumptions contradicts his own thesis on the Western mind set, for while he admits that he too "cannot escape entirely" Western categories of thought, his analysis attempts to do precisely this — from a Western setting, in a Western publication, for predominantly Western readers (*LR*, p. 944). Lest Bowers claim that he is a lone battler against the tide, his citation of the work of several other accomplished scholars in this piece and other articles provides further evidence that within "the" Western tradition, there are many thinkers who advance views that radically oppose the individualism, liberal rationalism, and Marxist historicism he finds so objectionable. In addition to Bowers himself and the writers he cites, of course, there are literally hundreds of others who have undertaken detailed critiques of, and in many cases advanced alternatives to, the elements within Western scholarship with which Bowers deals.

Bowers says very little about the way in which ideological and material forces affect cultural practices, attitudes, and patterns of thought. He does comment in places about the "hegemonic" influence of Western culture (*LR*, p. 935). While he does not elaborate on what the notion of "hegemony" means in his account (that is, whether it closely approximates the classic Gramscian rendition, or derives from some other source), the implication is that representatives of "Western Culture" have often colonized the consciousnesses of non-Western cultures, wittingly or unwittingly imposing a Western way of thinking in place of traditional belief structures: this is a form of cultural domination. On ideology, Bowers is even less forthcoming. He admits at one point, however, that he has been conditioned by humanist ideology, and he clearly wants to say that Freire has likewise been shaped in his thinking by liberal, existentialist, Marxist, and humanist strands in the Western mind set (*LR*, p. 949). Indeed, according to Bowers, Freire is so immersed in these Western traditions, he cannot detect their (pervasive) influence on his pedagogical thinking.

Bowers says virtually nothing, however, about the ways in which ideological processes operate in traditional or non-Western societies to shape attitudes, practices, and ideas. In commenting on traditional societies, Bowers adopts a peculiarly decontextualized, depoliticized, and ahistorical view of social practice and the

11. Compare Freire, *Education: The Practice of Freedom*, 99.

formation of consciousness. "Ideology," "hegemony," "domination": these all seem to be features of Western societies and the Western mind set. In non-Western and traditional societies they appear curiously absent (in Bowers's account). While Bowers does not claim that everything about Western culture is undesirable, he certainly finds a great deal that is problematic. Non-Western cultures, by contrast, appear remarkably free of faults — to the point, in fact, of being almost "pure" by comparison with their opposite in Bowers's binary. Bowers anticipates this criticism, but does not *address* it, leaving himself open to the charge of romanticizing traditional cultures, and of positing an idealized notion of community (LR, p. 943).

FREIRE AND THE CHIPEWYAN

Bowers attributes to Freire a number of ideas which neither Freire's written works nor his practice bear out. In part, this is a result of the rhetorical device of collapsing diverse intellectual traditions and ways of life into two clearly opposing groups: "Western" and "non-Western." Bowers's argument depends on Freire being placed squarely with the former, at least as far as the pivotal assumptions in Freire's philosophy and educational practice are concerned. The Chipewyan are juxtaposed against Freire as a logical "Other" in undermining these ostensibly "Western" patterns of thought. Freire gains a form of guilt by association, where both aspects of the association and the portrayal of that with which he is allegedly associated are questionable. At the most fundamental level, the very nature of the comparison between Freire's approach and Chipewyan belief structures is problematic.

Bowers aligns Freire with certain strands of Western thought, alludes to some of the problems in these views, and then asks, in effect, "*What if Freire's pedagogy were to be applied to the Chipewyan context?*" Bowers then proceeds to show how Freirean theory and Chipewyan conceptions of reality do not comfortably mesh, concluding that it would be problematic to "use" Freire's pedagogy "in an Islamic culture or one [such as the Chipewyan's] not already partially assimilated to the Western mind set" (LR, p. 943). At best, then, Bowers's critique allows us to draw a lesson about where a Freirean educational program might not work. In making this point, however, Bowers fails to heed Freire's warnings about the dangers of decontextualization.

Freire has never (to the best of my knowledge) provided any detailed comment on the Chipewyan context, and certainly never "used" his pedagogy in working with Chipewyan people. Leaving aside problems pertaining to the term "use" here, it is imperative to recognize Freire's insistence on dealing with each setting for a major educational initiative in its proper historical, social, and cultural context. Some of the beliefs Bowers outlines as integral to the Chipewyan worldview are certainly at odds with elements of Freire's ethical ideal, but before Freire could comment on how he might interpret or respond to these beliefs he would insist, if his approach to adult literacy education is taken as evidence, that he first be given the opportunity to learn something of the people with whom he might potentially be working. On the "nonquestioning" and "noninterventionist" qualities of Chipewyan thought, for example, Freire might say that one would have to examine the way in which these

attributes had developed before any decision could be made as to whether and how they ought to be challenged. This would involve considering these patterns of thought in relation to the wider cultural and social customs, structures, practices, and relations that characterize Chipewyan society. Despite Freire's repeated warnings that his pedagogical ideas should never simply be transported or transposed from one context to another, and notwithstanding the fact that Freire has never discussed the complexities of Chipewyan culture, Bowers states unequivocally,

If a revolutionary socialist government were to come to power in Canada and invite Freire to use his adult literacy program with the Chipewyan, he would undoubtedly welcome the opportunity to emancipate another group from the oppression of their own history. Even if it were possible to establish dialogue, the pedagogy would involve the most fundamental forms of cultural intervention (LR, p. 942).¹²

This is pure speculation, however, for neither Bowers nor Freire have established whether and in what ways the Chipewyan *are* (or have been) oppressed. The extent to which dialogue might be possible, and the precise form that dialogue might take, could only be gauged on assessment of the concrete realities of Chipewyan life, with due regard being given to the nature of any proposed educational program.

Bowers's differentiation between the Chipewyan's "integrative form of knowing" and Freire's emphasis on the importance of gaining rational distance from the everyday tide of experience is also problematic. Bowers notes with regard to Freire's view, "[t]he same pattern of thought, when carried to an extreme, is expressed in the activities of technocrats who have reified the power of abstract-theoretical thought" (LR, p. 941). Bowers concedes that Freire is "highly critical" of the nondialectical and authoritarian nature of abstract theory, but asserts nonetheless: "the cultural episteme underlying his pedagogy is based on the same epistemological assumption that can easily lead to the extreme forms of technological culture that he criticizes" (LR, p. 941). The point is, however, that Freire does *not* carry his ideas on rational or critical thought processes, and in particular those pertaining to the notion of human beings gaining "distance" from their social surroundings, to a technocratic form of rationality. Freire would argue that human beings can never completely separate themselves from "the ongoing flow of experience" (LR, p. 941).¹³ Even if it were true that Freire and technocrats begin from similar premises about rational distance, there would still be no logical reason to draw the connections Bowers does, for many of the *other* theoretical assumptions (about dialogue, the nature of knowledge, and dialectical thinking) which give Freire's views on rationality their sense contrast markedly with, and in some cases diametrically oppose, technocratic views.¹⁴ Fundamental premises on rational distance *may or may not* lead to "extreme forms of technological culture," and with respect to Freire, they demonstrably do not.

12. See Stanley Aronowitz, "Paulo Freire's Radical Democratic Humanism," in McLaren and Leonard, *Paulo Freire*, 8-24.

13. For an excellent discussion of Freire's position on "experience," see Peter McLaren and Tomaz Tadeu da Silva, "Decentering Pedagogy: Critical Literacy, Resistance and the Politics of Memory," in McLaren and Leonard, *Paulo Freire*, 47-89.

14. See Peter Roberts, "Rethinking Conscientization," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 30, no. 2 (1996): 175-92.

EDUCATION, OPPRESSION, AND INTERVENTION

I turn now to those aspects of Bowers's analysis that bear directly on Freirean pedagogical intervention. Bowers argues that Freire's approach to pedagogy has a "bias" toward change (LR, p. 942). But this is true of *any* educational program, and indeed of any educational process. In this section I stress the importance of change as a fundamental educational aim, highlight potential tensions and contradictions in a noninterventionist system of education, and defend the particular form of change initiated by Freirean pedagogical intervention in situations of oppression.

EDUCATION AND CHANGE

Education, on a variety of liberal and radical positions, and on some conservative accounts as well, is necessarily concerned with changing those being educated. Indeed, "change" is one of the few themes that binds otherwise disparate groups commenting on education together. While there are deep disagreements over the nature and direction of that change, and over questions as to whether it is, for example, "personal" or "social" or "structural" in character, most commentators on pedagogical matters argue that *some* sort of transformation ought to occur through education. Hence, if the term "program" is taken to mean any structured, organized form of pedagogy or system of education, then change is always a fundamental objective, and intervention a logical necessity. Whether examining an educational program in schools, in prisons, for the elderly, or with adults learning to read and write, it would not be a "program" at all unless it was assumed that people would change in some way as a result of their participation or involvement.

NONINTERVENTIONIST EDUCATION?

Bowers is particularly critical of Freire's stress on the importance of change through critical reflection, questioning, and problematization. If a principle of nonquestioning is endorsed, it is instructive to contemplate what might properly count as "the process of education" when the principle is coupled with a policy of nonintervention. One possibility is that educational processes become those in which existing forms of knowledge are transmitted. But the notion of "transmission" is problematic here, since this implies a "transmitter" and someone to whom ideas are transmitted: such a relationship is ruled out by the nonintervention requirement. Even the broader notion of "passing on" existing knowledge must be rejected, since this still implies someone doing the passing and someone receiving. It might be more accurate, therefore, to talk of educational processes as those activities through which the accepted beliefs, values, and practices are acquired or learned by experience. If a policy of nonintervention is strictly applied, this must be a wholly spontaneous process. Even if there might be situations in which adults might override this policy in, for example, protecting a child from physical harm, the general attitude would be one, as in the Chipewyan case, of "*rarely* exercising control" over children's activities (LR, p. 940). Individuals would be largely, and *on principle*, free to learn whatever they wished, when they wished, as they pleased.

But what if, in encouraging children to "learn by their own experience," a child, on the basis of this experience, questioned or challenged some aspect of the existing belief system? (LR, p. 940). This would pose a dilemma, for if the imperative of

nonintervention is to be met, no one ought to step in to prohibit such questioning, or even to dissuade it. Bowers points out that the Chipewyan try to avoid being in situations that lead to the questioning and renegotiation of beliefs (LR, p. 941). It seems highly unlikely, though, that such instances could be entirely eluded. Indeed, given the curiosity children often display in spontaneously investigating the wonders of everyday life, it seems probable that the questioning of established beliefs, ideas, practices, and forms of authority — even if in a relatively unsophisticated way — might occur quite regularly. In the case of adults, if, despite the discouragement of problematization, one or two people did question accepted views or existing modes of practice, what steps would be taken to censure this questioning? The moment at which *any* move is made to stem the problematization or renegotiation of beliefs, the principle of nonintervention is subverted. A similar difficulty might arise in a situation where one member of the group *did* intervene in the activities of others (in, for example, helping a child). If other members of the group intervene to prevent this intervention, the principle of nonintervention is violated. On the other hand, if they do not intervene, this allows the original intervention to continue. In his analysis of Chipewyan society, Bowers says nothing about how such contradictions might be resolved, or when they might be justified, or which principles override others under given circumstances.

Some answers to these questions can be found in Ronald and Suzanne B.K. Scollon's *Linguistic Convergence*, the book to which Bowers refers in discussing Chipewyan culture.¹⁵ Scollon and Scollon note that Chipewyan children are given the opportunity to observe a wide range of adult activities, and are restrained only when there is a risk of serious injury. Children are expected to emulate the model of noninterference exemplified by adults, and "any intervention by adults is taken as a very serious matter."¹⁶ Learning is noninterventionist in two senses:

As educator, the teacher does not directly intervene in the activities of the student. The child... is expected to watch and learn without active intervention on the part of the teacher. On the other hand, the learner is expected to learn how to do things without immediately intervening in their operation. That is, learning is holistic and not incremental.¹⁷

An apparent contrast with the Freirean conception of teaching and educating is evident here. "Teaching," for Freire, implies directiveness.¹⁸ On the Freirean view, a teacher or educator (Freire uses these terms interchangeably) has not only a right but a *responsibility* to become involved in the lives of others. Intervention, for Freire, is one of the defining characteristics of teaching. Kevin Harris adopts a similar stance:

The simple reality is that one cannot be a teacher and neutrally lay out options or for ever hold one's peace. To teach, which can include academics stating their cases in highly privileged legitimated contexts like journals and books..., is to be interventionary: it is to state one's views, or at the weakest to place one's ideas "on the agenda," and to do so from a position of privilege from which power and ascribed status cannot be removed.¹⁹

15. Ronald Scollon and Suzanne B.K. Scollon, *Linguistic Convergence: An Ethnography of Speaking at Fort Chipewyan, Alberta* (New York: Academic Press, 1979).

16. *Ibid.*, 188.

17. *Ibid.*, 202.

18. See, for example, Freire and Shor, *Pedagogy for Liberation*, 171-72.

19. Kevin Harris, "Empowering Teachers: Towards a Justification for Intervention," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 24, no. 2 (1990): 180-81.

If an "educator" is a person who intends or hopes that others will learn from him or her, or gain in some way from participating in an educative relationship, then such people cannot exist in a strictly noninterventionist system. Even the notion of being a "facilitator" must be ruled out, for there is still an element of intervention present in attempting to set up the conditions for others to learn.²⁰ In fact, there can be no hint of deliberate guidance of any kind, for *intentional* assistance in the learning process necessitates intervention in the lives of others. From a Freirean point of view, the entire process of education must be abandoned under such conditions. Freire argues that "[i]f we have nothing to put forward, or if we simply refuse to do it, we really have nothing to do with the practice of education."²¹ The question for Freire is not, How can one, as an educator, avoid intervening in the lives of others? but What form will this intervention take?

In addressing the relationship between education and nonintervention in Chipewyan society, much hinges on how the terms "teacher" and "educator" are understood. For Freire and Harris, teaching is a necessarily interventionist process. If their view of teaching is accepted, either Scollon and Scollon must be seen as mistaken in designating the adults from whom Chipewyan children learn "teachers," or an element of intervention is still present despite the claim that learning in Chipewyan society is noninterventionist. The latter possibility seems to provide a sounder basis for rendering problematic Bowers's and the Scollons' account of Chipewyan attitudes and practices. In contemplating this line of argument, an incident recounted by Scollon and Scollon (but not Bowers) is revealing. Noting that it is wrong, in Chipewyan culture, to "take any distance from oneself," Scollon and Scollon recall the case of "a mother who taped over a mirror on a baby's toy because the baby was looking at herself in it."²² This suggests that intervention is practiced, and seen as justifiable, in situations where a key feature of what Scollon and Scollon call the Chipewyan's "bush consciousness" is threatened. In this example, intervention was seen as necessary in order to discourage a form of reflexivity that contravened the integrative dimension of the Chipewyan worldview. In setting up conditions for children to learn about the entropic, integrative, individualistic, and nonintervening aspects of Chipewyan thought, Chipewyan adults practice a form of pedagogical intervention.²³ Thus, intervention of a certain kind, at particular times, becomes necessary in encouraging children to become minimally interventionist — in some respects — as adults. Hence, rather than claiming that the Chipewyan are noninterventionist, it might be more accurate to say that the *kind* of intervention they exercise is of a different order to that practiced by Freire (and others). I turn now to the question of whether the particular form of intervention initiated by Freire in Brazil in the late 1950s and early 1960s was justified.

20. In recent texts, Freire makes it plain that the teacher cannot be a mere facilitator. See Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 180 and Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, "A Dialogue: Culture, Language, and Race," *Harvard Educational Review* 65, no. 3 (1995): 377-402.

21. Freire and Faundez, *Learning to Question*, 34.

22. Scollon and Scollon, *Linguistic Convergence*, 188.

23. Scollon and Scollon, in *Linguistic Convergence*, 178-92, summarize these four dimensions of the Chipewyan worldview.

PEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTION IN SITUATIONS OF OPPRESSION

Bowers, in building a case for nonintervention, effectively avoids some of the most difficult practical and ethical questions facing Freire (and other educators). What would he do if he were in Freire's position? In the literacy program for which he gained international recognition, Freire was not dealing with the Chipewyan — the group upon which so much of Bowers's analysis depends — but with illiterate adults in Brazil in the early 1960s, the majority of whom were severely impoverished. Even a fleeting glimpse at Brazil's history provides sobering reading. Despite rapid industrial expansion in Brazil between 1956 and 1961, much of the wealth remained concentrated in the hands of relatively few people. In 1960, the share of the total national income of the lower 50% of the population was only 14.5%; the lowest 10% of income earners enjoyed only 1.9% of the country's wealth. By 1970, these figures had decreased even further to 13.9% and 1.2% for the lower 50% and lowest 10% respectively.²⁴ The poor, in both urban and rural areas, endured horrific hardships. The northeast area of Brazil, especially, was marked in the early 1960s by "truly appalling social conditions — 60,000 square miles of suffering."²⁵ In sections of the northeast in the years immediately prior to Freire's appointment as Director of the national literacy program average caloric intakes were at levels barely high enough to sustain life, the life expectancy was 28 years for men and 32 for women, and infants frequently died before reaching their first year.²⁶ Freire speaks of malnutrition so severe that permanent damage to mental faculties resulted.²⁷ With high rates of disease, substandard housing, and minimal facilities for basic hygiene practices, living conditions for the poor in Brazil were virtually intolerable.

Freire's claim that those subject to such appalling conditions tended to see the world in "magical" terms needs to be considered against the background of Brazil's history. Freire describes the "semi-intransitive" consciousness which prevailed among illiterate peasant communities thus:

Men of semi-intransitive consciousness cannot apprehend problems situated outside their sphere of biological necessity. Their interests center almost totally around survival, and they lack a sense of life on a more historic plane....[S]emi-intransitivity represents a near disengagement between men and their existence. In this state, discernment is difficult. Men confuse their perceptions of the objects and challenges of the environment, and fall prey to magical explanations because they cannot apprehend true causality.²⁸

Semi-intransitive consciousness was, in Freire's words, "a consciousness historically conditioned by the social structures"; it was a *dominated* consciousness.²⁹ None of the features of magical or semi-intransitive thought — passivity, fatalism, the attributing of problems to higher powers, and so on — existed in an ahistorical void. Rather, all emerged within relations in which power was structured unequally.

24. From the 1970 Brazilian census, cited in Taylor, *Texts of Paulo Freire*, 18.

25. Comments from Josue de Castro, cited in Taylor, *Texts of Paulo Freire*, 16.

26. From Tad Szulc, cited in Taylor, *Texts of Paulo Freire*, 17.

27. Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, 62.

28. Freire, *Education: The Practice of Freedom*, 17.

29. Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, 62.

Dominant groups — and here reference can be made to landowners, the conservative wing of the church, and the emerging class of corporate elites — exerted enormous influence over the lives of others, restricting the parameters within which illiterate adults (among other groups) could act and think. Encouraged by others to think in magical terms, peasants not only “explained” but *reinforced* their own material domination, and thus played a part, *though not an intentional one*, in perpetuating the very system that oppressed them.³⁰

What, then, was Freire to do, given these circumstances? With no intervention of any kind, the situation was unlikely to change; indeed, there was some evidence to suggest that conditions might continue to deteriorate.³¹ Should Freire have washed his hands of the situation, ignored it, and not intervened at all? Or was some kind of intervention in this situation justified? If so, what direction should this take? Bowers has virtually nothing to say on these questions, yet they are surely vital from an ethical and an educational standpoint. As Bowers points out, if Freire was convinced that large numbers of illiterate adults were oppressed, intervention directed at transforming this oppressive situation would, given Freire’s philosophical, ethical, and educational position, seem imperative. Bowers generally seems to sidestep the question of oppression: for him, the paramount concern is to respect the culture of certain groups. For Freire, however, inaction on the grounds of “respect for the culture” would, in the case with which he was dealing (but not every case) amount to *de facto* support for the status quo and hence for the continuation of an oppressive situation. While Bowers argues that Freirean adult literacy programs perpetuate Western domination, Freire would turn the tables and say that Bowers, were he to do nothing in the same circumstances, could be accused of reinforcing domination himself. Of course, Bowers might not object to intervention under such conditions. He might simply articulate cautions about the nature, and potential consequences, of educational involvement. It is difficult to know exactly what Bowers would do, however, because he never adequately addresses the relationship between oppression, education, and intervention in Brazil, Chile and the other countries in which Freire was working.³²

BEYOND CULTURAL CONSERVATISM

Freirean pedagogy is not without its difficulties. Of particular significance for present purposes, in promoting the ideal of critical consciousness there is at least one dilemma from which Freire cannot easily escape. Freire argues that all ideas should be open to question. A logical corollary of this is that there are no ideas that cannot

30. It is important, of course, not to ignore or underestimate the extent of peasant resistance to oppressive structures and practices. For an insightful discussion of the subtle and hidden forms of resistance in peasant societies, see James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

31. Compare, Taylor, *Texts of Paulo Freire*, on the changes between 1960 and 1970.

32. It should be noted, moreover, that much of Freire’s educational work has been initiated by invitation. In other words, his “intervention” has been actively sought out by others. This (further) weakens the argument that Freire’s pedagogy is imperialist. It is possible, as an anonymous referee has observed, that different types of education may accomplish different kinds of liberation. This proposition might provide a useful starting point for further critical work on Bowers and Freire.

be questioned. All ideas, for Freire, are thus potentially subject to change. We should never, as Freire puts it, be too certain of our certainties. We should always be open to the possibility that some ideas might be rejected on the basis of critical reflection. Yet this must also include the idea that there are no ideas that cannot be questioned. But to question this idea is simultaneously to uphold this idea. In effect, then, there is one idea that cannot be questioned, namely, the idea that there are no ideas that cannot be questioned.³³

Notice, however, that in saying that there are no ideas that cannot be questioned, it does not necessarily follow that all ideas should be questioned all of the time. Freire grants what might be termed "provisional" acceptance to certain ideas in order to allow theoretical and practical work to proceed. He appears to recognize that it would be quite impossible to engage in any kind of consciously directed action, or to develop a philosophy, or to advance an ethical position, without taking some ideas for granted — for the time being.³⁴ This is true whatever political stance one adopts, and applies as much to Bowers as it does to Freire. Bowers takes for granted the divisibility of cultures into "Western" and "non-Western" categories, the value of tradition, and the importance of community, just as Freire assumes that reality is dialectical, that education should be dialogical, that liberation from oppression is desirable, and so on.

Nevertheless, questioning is a vital element of Freire's ethical ideal. Freire argues for a restless, searching, investigative, *critical* orientation toward the world.³⁵ Education, for Freire, should foster this critical attitude. To participate in a Freirean program of adult literacy education, then, is to be inducted into a particular way of thinking and acting. As Bowers's analysis shows, this critical orientation is likely to be different from the approach many people in "traditional" cultures adopt in understanding reality. Bowers is, I believe, theoretically astray in arguing that Freire's pedagogy reflects, reinforces, and reproduces "the Western mind set," but it is undeniable that Freirean adult literacy programs privilege (and foster) a critical mode of consciousness over what Freire regards as passive and naive forms of thought.³⁶

This "bias" toward critical thought can, however, be strongly defended if a moment's consideration is given to alternative positions. Bowers does not make his

33. An alternative line of argument is possible here. A person might often question the idea that no ideas cannot be questioned, entertaining the possibility that there may well be some absolutes, but acknowledging that he or she has not found them yet. If such absolutes are (subsequently) discovered, that person may then change his or her view that no ideas cannot be questioned. I owe this point to an anonymous referee.

34. See, for example, the discussion of dialogue in Freire and Shor, *Pedagogy for Liberation*, 101-2.

35. Compare, among other statements, Freire's concise discussion of reading and the act of study in Freire, *The Politics of Education*, 1-4. Freire's views on the characteristics of the critical reader have been explored and applied in Peter Roberts, "Philosophy, Education and Literacy: Some Comments on Bloom," *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* 28, no. 2 (1993): 165-80 and Peter Roberts, "Critical Literacy, Breadth of Perspective, and Universities: Applying Insights from Freire," *Studies in Higher Education* 21, no. 2 (1996), 149-63.

36. For an extended discussion of the levels of consciousness identified by Freire in his early work, and a reappraisal of the notion of conscientization, see Roberts, "Rethinking Conscientization."

ethical position clear in "Linguistic Roots of Cultural Invasion," but elsewhere, in a critique of Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren, he maintains,

[T]here are certain beliefs, values, and practices that should not be politicized. For example, if we could arrive at a new cultural consensus on viewing our relationships with the rest of the biotic community as part of our sense of the moral order I would not recommend that teachers politicize it by encouraging each generation of students to make up their own "individualistic mind" about it. Should students be encouraged to demythologize the Constitution and Bill of Rights? Should the relativizing power of pedagogical *negativism* be directed at the emerging sense of taken for grantedness relating to the immorality of gender and racial discrimination?³⁷

This comment suggests that there are certain matters that are beyond interrogation or critical reflection, about which we ought to strive to achieve a binding consensus. Some ideas, in Bowers's view, should not be questioned, nor, it seems, even *open* for questioning and critical debate (or "politicizing" as Bowers puts it). It is important to point out that this position is *not* explicitly conveyed in Bowers's earlier critique of Freire.³⁸ Bowers's discussion of the Chipewyan *does*, however, question the value of promoting critical reflection among the young. Bowers's later call for cultural consensus on some issues does not *necessarily* follow from his earlier critique of Freirean pedagogical intervention, but it is consistent with it.

Neither Freire nor Giroux or McLaren would accept that some views are beyond questioning or politicization. But leaving all ideas open to problematization does not mean that every view must be immediately superseded by a superior position. It is precisely through allowing ideas to be critically analyzed that they can be held with greater conviction. Bowers laments the lack of agreement on issues such as abortion and education in Western societies, as if these matters could somehow be definitively resolved and closed to further questioning. Freire's ethic does not preclude the possibility of a consensus on such complex problems; a Freirean position simply demands that such agreement not be regarded as fixed, absolute, and binding for all groups, in every cultural or social context, for all time.

Bowers's critique is helpful in highlighting the sensitivities educationists must display in involving themselves in the lives of others. The actions of teachers, discussion facilitators, adult literacy coordinators, and others invested with educational responsibilities always have consequences, some of which might be construed as "invasive," "dominating," or "oppressive." Freire has long been aware of this, and was very deliberate in the approach he adopted in his adult literacy work. He knew that if his program worked as he hoped it would, participants would never be the same again. The worth of a critical orientation toward the world, therefore, had to be such that it would, as far as any educator could reasonably foresee, substantially improve the lives of those among whom it was being fostered. While participants in

37. C.A. Bowers, "Critical Pedagogy and the 'Arch of Social Dreaming': A Response to the Criticisms of Peter McLaren," *Curriculum Inquiry* 21, no. 4 (1991): 483. See also C.A. Bowers, "Some Questions About the Anachronistic Elements in the Giroux-McLaren Theory of Critical Pedagogy," *Curriculum Inquiry* 21, no. 2 (1991): 239-52; Peter McLaren, "The Emptiness of Nothingness: Criticism as Imperial Anti-Politics," *Curriculum Inquiry* 21, no. 4 (1991): 459-77.

38. Bowers, "Linguistic Roots of Cultural Invasion." I am grateful to an anonymous referee for drawing this to my attention.

a Freirean adult literacy program might never be able to go back (entirely) to their former ways of thinking, in advocating an ideal of critical reflection Freire promoted the means through which people might *revisit* and *reinterpret* their old patterns of thought and behavior. Of course, in reinterpreting ideas we can distort them: the frequent misrepresentation of Freirean principles is a case in point.³⁹ Equally, however, some forms of reinterpretation may result in a significantly enhanced appreciation of the object of study. The development of a critical consciousness does not imply the necessary abandonment of traditional practices, rituals, customs, and forms of authority; it simply demands that these elements of the lifeworld of any group not be above questioning.

Bowers identifies some of the most positive features of traditional worldviews, drawing attention in particular to the importance of a holistic perspective on the relation between human beings and their wider environment. The elevation of human activity over all other forms of ecological life by some Westerners is arguably highly problematic. There is, as many Western thinkers (Bowers included) have recognized, much that might be learned from cultural groups other than our own. Yet, Bowers seems to forget that a willingness to investigate seriously alternative ways of viewing the world is one of the defining features of critical consciousness. To affirm that Freire draws upon a number of Western intellectual traditions, adopting and endorsing principles favored by many other Western scholars, is not to say (as Bowers seems to suggest) that Freire is an unreflexive, "blinded," carrier of all Western views, or of some reified, homogeneous, generalized "Western mind set." The Freirean notion of critical consciousness embraces possibilities for appreciating, understanding, and sanctioning a variety of Western and non-Western ideas.

In aligning Freire with the "Western" side of the Western/non-Western binary, Bowers is compelled to see Freire as an opponent of not only traditional cultures but "tradition" itself.⁴⁰ Yet, Freire notes that among other distinguishing features, critical consciousness is defined by "receptivity to the new for reasons beyond mere novelty and by the good sense not to reject the old just because it is old — *by accepting what is valid in both old and new.*"⁴¹ This statement is absent from Bowers's account of the Freirean critical ideal. Bowers is certainly correct in arguing that Freire hoped participants in his Brazilian literacy program would develop a critical consciousness, but he fails to provide a rounded picture of what the Freirean view of critical consciousness embraces. This failing needs to be seen as one aspect of a broader problem in Bowers's critique. In portraying Freire as a *de facto* supporter of

39. See Freire and Macedo, "A Dialogue: Culture, Language, and Race"; Peter Roberts, "The Danger of Domestication: A Case-Study," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 15, no. 2 (1996), 94-106.

40. Bowers makes this explicit in an article published in 1986, where he maintains, "Freire's theory, by presenting us with an oversimplified view of tradition — one he inherited from the Enlightenment, leads to an intellectual stance that would reject as reactionary any consideration of the possibility that traditions can be sources of individual meaning, empowerment, and bonding to the shared life of the community." Bowers, "Review of *The Politics of Education*," 150.

41. Freire, *Education: The Practice of Freedom*, 18, emphasis mine.

generalized "Western" views on critical agency, individual freedom, rational autonomy, and so on, Bowers ignores or downplays many of the subtleties of Freire's analysis: those features which give his work its distinctiveness, and which demarcate his interpretation of concepts such as "praxis," "dialogue," "critical reflection," "knowing," and "the dialectic" from other accounts.

Bowers wants to uphold traditional beliefs and practices because they provide a form of authority that promotes community cohesion. He claims that members of traditional cultural groups tend to adopt a more "integrated" approach to life and to exist more harmoniously with their biotic environment than their Western counterparts. Freire would not only criticize Bowers's proclivity to romanticizing traditional cultures, but also question the uncritical valuing of group cohesion. Apparent agreements often mask subtle or deep-seated differences: Consensus and harmony, Freire would say, are often illusory. Moreover, a high degree of social cohesion can exist among groups whose actions are regarded by many as profoundly oppressive (the Ku Klux Klan and the Hitler Youth provide two obvious examples). In such cases, Freire would not want to uphold traditional beliefs and established practices at all costs; indeed, he would be in favor of *disrupting* traditional patterns of life if these were demonstrably oppressive.

It could be argued against Freire that those who come to view their situation critically might remain as powerless as ever to effect change, given the overwhelming dominance of certain groups, but be more frustrated, more unhappy, more resentful and bitter, than ever before. For where in the past a magical or naive mode of consciousness might have acted as a kind of "insulating" device, allowing adults to "explain" or "rationalize" or "make sense of" their circumstances in such a way that they, in a certain sense, *accepted* them, with the development of a more critical orientation toward the social world, suddenly nothing seems so simple any more. The world is, following the emergence of a critical mode of being, rendered at once more complex and more unbearable than ever before. What, however, is the alternative to this? Freire would certainly not defend an "ignorance is bliss" view of the world. ("Ignorance" is always a relational concept in Freire's philosophy: it is always a case of examining ignorance *relative to* a particular domain of knowledge. Freire argues that no one is either totally ignorant, just as no one can possess absolute knowledge.⁴²) Maintaining people in a state of ignorance about the deeper reasons behind their suffering is, from Freire's point of view, never justified. Certainly it does not provide a sufficient reason for not allowing people to see the world in a different way. In Freire's ethic, liberation cannot be equated with "happiness": liberation involves *struggle*, sacrifice, and a profound respect for one's fellow human beings. Fighting for a better world, Freire would say, is always filled with risks and uncertainties. If becoming more critically conscious leads to unhappiness or frustration this is no reason to abandon the goal of critical consciousness as an ideal; rather, it is an affirmation of the need to change the structures and relations that form the object of critical reflection.

42. Freire, *Education: The Practice of Freedom*, 117.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

From a Freirean point of view, education can never be neutral. Freire did not "force" participants in his literacy programs to abandon their existing customs, values, beliefs, and practices; he merely encouraged people to consider others ways of thinking about social reality. This essay has highlighted the importance of addressing the question, *Given* the situation with which Freire was dealing, to what extent was the promotion of a critically conscious mode of being justified? Freire would have little to gain by asking what might be done in an ideal, "pure" community, for, in his view, such communities do not exist. While the preceding analysis suggests that Bowers reifies, exaggerates, and distorts elements of the Freirean ideal, it is clear that Freire's orientation to the social world contrasts in important ways with that adopted by the Chipewyan and many other groups in traditional societies. In encouraging a critical approach to reading the word and the world through his adult literacy work, Freire challenged prevailing modes of thought among Brazilian peasants and the urban poor (and other groups in other programs). Freire was quite explicit in his wish to promote this change: he saw it as an authentic part of the wider struggle for liberation from conditions of oppression. From Bowers's point of view, Freirean intervention is problematic. I have attempted to demonstrate that Bowers's critique rests on flawed foundations, and have argued that Freire's pedagogical approach was justified under the circumstances.

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