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The danger of domestication: a case study

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Attempting to apply the ideas of Third World theorists to First World contexts is an inherently risky enterprise: the danger of domestication is ever-present. In this article the author examines this thesis with reference to the work of the highly influential Brazilian adult educator, Paulo Freire. Four problematic tendencies are highlighted: the failure to consider Freire's work in its social context; fragmentation in reading Freirean texts; reductionism in appropriating Freirean principles and practices; and the reluctance to assess Freire's ideas critically.

Introduction

Western scholars have always enjoyed an ambivalent relationship with their Third World colleagues. On the one hand, the work of activists and intellectuals from Latin America and Africa (among other parts of the world) has been a source of fascination and inspiration for First World academics of a radical persuasion. Revolutionary leaders have been, if not revered, at least cautiously admired by many Left intellectuals struggling against dominant ideas (and social structures). There appears to be much that can be learned from Third World writers in seeking avenues for resistance in the First World. On the other hand, the problems which beset Third World countries are significantly different – sometimes if only in degree but often in kind – to those which confront the USA, Canada, UK, Australia and New Zealand. In applying the insights of Third World thinkers to First World settings, special care must be taken not to domesticate their ideas.

Certainly it can be claimed that within most First World countries there is – in effect – a Third World: the existence of genuine poverty in ostensibly 'civilized' societies has become readily apparent in recent years as an increasing number of people turn to food banks and other emergency sources in order to satisfy basic human needs. Unemployment (and underemployment) is now a seemingly permanent feature of most industrialized societies. While at one end of the social scale a growing underclass emerges, at the other multinationals and other large corporations seek to gain a stranglehold over the production and circulation of essential goods and services. Legislative moves to lower wages and crush the power of unions – the Employment Contracts Act in New Zealand, for instance – have exacerbated existing disparities between the rich and the poor.

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Paulo Freire, the subject of this article, speaks of both a Third World within the First World and a First World within the Third World. From the Freirean point of view, the notion of a Third World is ideological and political, not (merely) geographic:

The Third World is in the last analysis the world of silence, of oppression, of dependence, of exploitation, of the violence exercised by the ruling classes on the oppressed. (Freire 1985: 140)

These conditions are clearly evident in western countries, just as within so-called 'underdeveloped' nations élite groups enjoy a life of luxury and opulence. It could be suggested, moreover, that given the continuing growth of global networks of trade and communication, and the breakdown of the Cold War, the very categories of 'Third World' and 'First World' are now highly problematic.

There can be little doubt that the world is changing (rapidly and dramatically), yet the manifestation of gross inequities between nations is, I believe, sufficiently self-evident to retain certain distinctions. Hunger, exploitation and oppression are rife throughout the First World, but the difficulties endured by millions of people in the Third World (widespread malnutrition, diseases almost out of control, alarming rates of infant mortality, appalling housing conditions, staggeringly low or non-existent wages, etc.) are, in both scale and severity, of a magnitude few in western societies could imagine. The Third World is a *different* world, and any attempt to apply theoretical frameworks, methodological principles or innovations in practice from that world to the First World is fraught with danger.

Education is one area of human endeavour where the hazards of domestication have particular significance, and Freire's pedagogy seems to have been especially prone to this problem. As word of Freire's spectacular success in adult literacy work has spread, his reputation as a man who has much to offer many people has been enhanced, but the risk of distortion in conveying his ideas has increased proportionately. Among other problematic tendencies, failing to consider Freire's work in its social context, fragmentation in reading Freirean texts, and reductionism in appropriating Freirean concepts, principles and practices are especially common. To counter these possibilities, Freire should be read contextually, holistically and critically.

Considering Freire's work in its social context

Freire's pedagogy was forged within a particular social, cultural and historical context. At the time when his ideas on literacy were being formulated (the 1950s and early 1960s), Brazil was characterized by immense inequalities in the distribution of resources, with a high concentration of wealth in the hands of a few élite landowners and grinding poverty among rural peasant communities and the urban poor. Inequities between different groups in housing, food and water supplies, and provisions for health care and education were glaringly apparent. Then, as now, Brazil was a deeply divided society, whose social geography was one of contrasts. Though he was careful from the beginning not to see literacy as a cure-all for Brazil's social ills, Freire believed widespread illiteracy was a symptom of deep structural injustices. For Freire, illiteracy did not 'cause' poor health or nutrition; not did it 'explain' the sharp divisions between classes in Brazil. Rather, the high rates of illiteracy among the poor reflected and reinforced wider

imbalances in power and control. Patterned illiteracy, from Freire's point of view, was a direct consequence of political policies and an oppressive social order. Under these circumstances, becoming literate was always going to be about much *more* than 'simply' learning how to read and write: for Freire, literacy was inextricably linked with the broader process of social transformation. The very character of the literacy promoted by Freire was shaped by a particular conception of Brazilian reality and a distinct vision of life under more liberating social conditions.

In content and style the literacy campaign was profoundly Brazilian (see Roberts 1994). The words and themes which formed the core of the programme were derived in large measure from the people with whom the literacy facilitators were working. The discussion of nature, culture, work and human relationships which preceded what is sometimes (erroneously) called 'the actual literacy training' (Sanders 1972: 593) was, according to one commentator at least, well suited to the willingness among Brazilians – when appropriately prompted – to talk about their world (Lloyd 1972: 12). Although many of the issues problematized in Freire's culture circles were, he might claim, of universal human significance, the aims of the programme were quite specific: it was liberation from the particular forms of hardship and exploitation endured by the oppressed in Brazil during a given historical period with which Freire was concerned in the first instance.

The risks associated with decontextualized analyses of Freirean concepts have been vividly displayed in certain interpretations of 'conscientization'. Freire's depiction of three levels of consciousness ('magical', 'naïve' and 'critical') in early works is ripe for philosophical interrogation. When this framework is divorced from the social situation in which it was initially grounded, however, difficulties inherent in the notion of conscientization are compounded. The translation of 'conscientization' into 'consciousness raising' is especially problematic, as is the systematization of Freire's three levels into distinct, sequential stages of pre-defined personality and behavioural characteristics (Roberts 1993a). Freire used the terms 'magical' and 'naïve' to try and capture the essence of modes of thinking and acting among specific groups within Brazilian society during given historical periods. His theory of conscientization, as it was originally developed, was intended to explain (in the case of magical and naïve levels of consciousness) that which already existed in a particular society; it was *not* meant to serve as a blueprint for categorizing individuals in *all* societies.

While Freire welcomes critical engagement with all aspects of his work (a point I discuss further below), he positively urges readers to consider the context within which his ideas emerged when examining his texts. In a recent dialogue, Freire expresses dismay at the anger (still being) generated by his use of the male referent in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

... 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. (Freire and Macedo 1993: 171)

Freire is quick to point out that he is *not* making excuses for the sexist language in the book but simply stressing that his work must be viewed in light of his social and cultural background.¹ During his formative years, he 'did not escape the enveloping powers of

a highly sexist culture'; in later publications, Freire insisted that those translating his books into English use non-sexist language (Freire and Macedo 1993: 171). He acknowledges his debt to North American feminists in developing a greater awareness of issues of gender oppression. Both theoretical and social/cultural influences on an author's ideas (and his or her communication of them) need to be taken into account. Freire admits that his major focus when writing *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was social class. This reflected not only the visibility of 'incredibly cruel' class oppression in Brazil, but also the towering influence of Marx over Freire's intellectual development (Freire and Macedo 1993: 172). If Freire neglected questions of gender in his early writings, this can be explained (he claims), at least in part, by the lack of feminist works available to him at the time (Freire and Macedo 1993: 173). Were he to write *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* today, Freire notes, 'and ignore the immense world of information regarding sex discrimination and the level of awareness concerning sexism that both men and women have today, some of the criticism levelled against... [the book] would not only be valid but would be most necessary' (Freire and Macedo 1993: 173).

Reading Freire holistically

Freire first gained widespread international recognition in the early 1970s. With the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in English, his ideas became the subject of much discussion amongst educationists, political activists and social theorists in the West. Riding a wave of discontent with conventional teaching methods and state-funded systems of education,² Freire enjoyed a popularity most radicals could only dream of. The deschooling movement had taken off, and Freire was frequently seen as an ally to two of its most prominent spokespersons, Ivan Illich and Everett Reimer. While a retrospective assessment suggests Freire's theoretical and political kinship with the deschoolers was rather more tenuous than formerly believed,³ he shared with Illich and Reimer grave concerns about the formal educational institutions of the time, a commitment to improving the living conditions of people in Latin America, and a desire to enhance worthwhile modes of learning and being. Along with many other radical educationists – particularly, though not exclusively, Marxists – Freire saw existing schools as (primarily) sites for reproducing rather than resisting existing social inequities. Freire believed the alternative approach to education articulated in his books and embodied in his practice was not only unequivocally more liberating than traditional schooling systems but based on a deeper understanding of human beings and the learning process.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed became a bible for those dissatisfied with prevailing forms of pedagogy: 'banking education' emerged as an academic buzzword, and 'problem-posing education' quickly joined 'conscientization' and 'dialogue' as one of the least understood constructs in Freire's work. At seminar after seminar and in paper after paper Freire was compelled to explain what these terms meant in his philosophy, yet confusion persisted. The frustrations he experienced in trying to clarify complex concepts may have contributed to the dramatic decline in Freire's use of the most controversial of these terms, 'conscientization', in his writings after the mid-1970s.

While Freire has refined and reworked other key notions in his many publications following the release of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in English, many educationists and activists continue to base their understanding of his ideas on a reading of only very limited segments of his work. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is without doubt Freire's most

famous book; it is also perhaps the best concise presentation of his pivotal philosophical, political and educational principles. In any major study of Freire, this book is bound (and ought) to feature prominently in discussion. Yet, much has changed since the publication of this classic text, both in Freire's own thinking and in wider theoretical developments in education and other fields. Freire now has the added experience of extensive work in Guinea-Bissau behind him; he has returned to Brazil and again become active in national politics; and he has continued to reflect critically on earlier ideas in later publications. The succession of 'talking' books co-authored by Freire in late 1980s and early 1990s (Freire and Macedo 1987, Freire and Shor 1987, Freire and Faundez 1989, Horton and Freire 1990, Escobar *et al.* 1993) have been especially valuable in providing a richer, more complex picture of his educational and political principles than the early works (on their own) afford. The role of the teacher in liberating education has been discussed in great depth; distinctions between 'authoritative', 'authoritarian' and '*laissez-faire*' approaches to classroom organization have been clearly delineated; the nature of academic rigour has been carefully explored; and the fears and risks associated with a critical pedagogical stance have been thoroughly considered. The basic assumptions underpinning Freire's philosophy and practice, however, remain essentially modernist: 'Freire continues to depict "oppression" and "liberation" in largely universalist terms; he retains an undying faith in dialogue as a pivotal means of communication between teachers and students; and the notion of a unified, critically conscious, praxical Subject still lies at the centre of the Freirean ethic' (Roberts 1995a: 111–112). These features of Freire's work have drawn criticism from Freire's detractors in the past (cf. Bowers 1983, Walker 1980), and have recently provided a focus for continuing (postmodern) critical engagement by several of Freire's supporters (see Freire and Macedo 1993, Giroux 1993, Weiler 1991).

Whether agreeing or disagreeing with Freire, it is vital that readers address his work holistically and in its social and historical context. Freire's influence has extended to a wide range of educational, political, community and theological groups. From one point of view, this diversity is positive testament to Freire's eclecticism and the broad appeal of his ideas. Yet, there is a danger here that Freirean theory may be spread too thinly. Freire cannot be all things to all people. More importantly, still, his work should not be turned into something it is not. Distortions of the Freirean educational ideal have resulted not infrequently from superficial and selective readings of mere fragments of Freire's work (in particular, Chapter 2 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) or, worse, from the passing of purportedly Freirean ideas from person to person in increasingly 'watered-down' form. In some cases, those who declare themselves Freireans possess, at best, a 'second-hand' knowledge of Freire's texts. Even a modestly careful reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* negates (for example) the hypothesis that Freire supported a *laissez-faire* style of pedagogy; for an elaboration of the *reasons* behind Freire's rejection of such an approach, though, one must turn to later books. Given its enormous influence and widely acknowledged value as the most definitive statement of Freire's overall philosophy, it is hardly surprising that theorists and practitioners have paid so much attention to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. However, it is difficult to understand why many contemporary educationists, often in very rigorous commentaries (e.g. Weiler 1991), continue to concentrate almost exclusively on this text while downplaying if not ignoring later works which flesh out many crucial points of detail in Freire's pedagogical theory.

A holistic approach to studying Freire allows not only a fuller understanding of principles which have remained more-or-less consistent for the past 25 years, but also

permits inconsistencies and shifts in Freire's theory to be more readily identified and analysed. For example, although Freire made regular (written) reference to the notion of conscientization for only a relatively brief period, during that time his employment of the concept varied considerably (see Roberts 1993a). Similarly, Freire's interpretation of the relationship between education and politics has, by his own admission, moved through three discrete stages. The first shift in political position is sharply demonstrated in the contrast between the liberalism of *Education: The Practice of Freedom* and the revolutionary ethics of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Where in the former Freire 'did not speak about politics and education', in the latter he addressed the 'political aspects' of education. In his 1987 book with Ira Shor, Freire talks of a third moment, noting that he now believes 'education is politics' (Freire and Shor 1987: 61).

Freire has always been a reflexive thinker, constantly restless in his search for a deeper understanding of social reality, and ever-prepared to re-examine and repudiate earlier assumptions where necessary (cf. Freire 1976a: 195, 1985: 180). It is to be expected of any theorist that some of his or her ideas might change over the course of a long career. Paradoxically, it is entirely consistent with Freirean principles that inconsistencies of a kind occur from time to time. The critical reflection Freire advocates applies as much to his own work as it does to any other sphere of activity. In many cases, the impetus for this interrogation has been provided by others who have read and responded critically to his texts. Feminists provided the impulse for a change in Freire's written expression (and his perception of oppression); in more recent times, Freire has started to rethink fundamental ontological, ethical and political assumptions following postmodernist critiques of his writings (see Freire 1993a).

Freire has led a remarkable life and produced an extraordinarily rich body of published work spanning more than a quarter of a century. Educators who attempt to get to grips with his ideas through finding out about them 'second-hand', or by giving his publications only a very partial reading, run the risk of doing a disservice not only to Freire but also to those with whom they work. To take one example, Freire argues that students will be no better served by unstructured, directionless courses parading (falsely) under the heading 'liberating education' than they would be by authoritarian 'banking' methods. The answer to excessive, 'dictatorial' control over teaching and learning content and processes is not an anarchic abandonment of all constraints, such that choices pertaining to reading materials and subject matter are handed entirely over to students. Teachers and other educators, Freire stresses, have a responsibility to provide structure, direction and rigour. They should also, however, always be prepared for students to challenge their readings of the world; indeed, if Freire's views are taken seriously, teachers ought actively to encourage critical engagement with all ideas. Of course, it does not follow that a fragmented reading or second-hand knowledge of Freire will necessarily result in the type of misinterpretation described above. Nevertheless, to judge by Freire's own comments, distortions of this kind are common (see, for example, Freire 1985: 123–125, 152, Fonseca 1973: 94). On the question of valuing the experiences of learners, for example, Freire (1994: 85–86) notes:

My concerns with the respect due the local world of the educands continue, from time to time – to my dismay, again – to generate criticisms that see me adrift, caught with no means of escape, in the blind alley of the narrow horizons of localization. Once more, these criticisms are the upshot of a poor reading of me – or the reading of texts written about my work by someone who likewise has read me poorly, incompetently, or who has not read me.

Freire has long championed the value of a well-rounded, global approach to texts (see Roberts 1993b). While acknowledging, at least implicitly, the importance of not sacrificing depth in favour of breadth in reading, Freire would argue that any serious, comprehensive effort to understand a given theorist's thought demands careful, critical scrutiny of as many dimensions of that thinker's work as time and resources allow (cf. Roberts 1995b).

Avoiding reductionism in applying Freire's ideas

Freire has always maintained that his pedagogy cannot be reduced to a set of techniques, skills or methods (see, for instance, Freire 1976b: 70, 1985: 125). In his literacy work in Brazil, for example, the 'mechanical' aspects of reading and writing (learning how to form and decode letters, words and sentences) were but one part of the programme, inseparable from the wider discussions of nature, culture, work and human relationships, and intimately connected with the enhancement of political consciousness among participants. Yet, as Aronowitz (1993: 8) notes,

Freire's ideas have been assimilated to the prevailing obsession of North American education, following a tendency in all the human and social sciences, with *methods* – of verifying knowledge and, in schools, of teaching, that is, transmitting knowledge to otherwise unprepared students.

This propensity is one aspect of the wider trend – not only in the USA but in Canada, the UK, Australia and New Zealand as well – to translate Freirean theory and practice into technocratic terms. The term 'pedagogy' – employed by Freire to denote a complex philosophy, politics and practice of education – has been narrowly conceived by some as merely 'teaching methods' (Aronowitz 1993: 8–9; cf. also Bartolome, 1994, Macedo 1994). This had led to a proliferation of supposedly 'Freirean' courses and programmes, where teachers, often with the best of intentions, have assumed that modifications in teacher–student roles and changes in subject-matter suffice as examples of liberating education. Incomplete readings of Freirean texts serve to compound this problem. A misappropriation of Freire's list of characteristics of 'banking education' in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1972: 46–47), for example, might lead to the mistaken belief that the Freirean critique of dehumanizing pedagogical approaches can be *completely* summarized and explained in a list of 10 methods and attitudes. Neither banking education nor problem-posing education can be encapsulated in a set of prescriptive rules (cf. Brady 1994: 144). Of course, there *are* certain attitudes, methodological principles and techniques (e.g. for teaching reading and writing) which contribute to the distinctive character of Freirean education; the point is, however, that Freire's philosophy and practice imply *more* than this. In particular, Freire builds his pedagogy on a deep understanding of social theory (especially those strands derived from Marx), and demands of educators a clear ethical and political commitment to transforming oppressive social conditions. The risks of such a stance have been lucidly highlighted by Freire's own experiences: he was jailed, exiled from his homeland and savagely criticized. Others have been killed in their efforts to assist in the liberation of marginalized and exploited groups. Methods and techniques flow from revolutionary commitment, but they do not define it. Freirean pedagogy cannot be conveniently

'packaged' into a series of 'how to' techniques which can be transported and duplicated the world over.

A second (closely related) problem is that Freire has been used to justify or legitimize classroom practices which have, at best, only a limited or spurious connection with his pedagogy. In some cases the use of Freire's name as a banner for support is mischievous or positively misleading. For example, a teacher who describes him or herself as a 'Freirean' simply because he or she encourages students to discuss ideas among themselves or allows the political issues of the day to become a subject for student projects, unwittingly makes a mockery of the depth of Freire's theory and practice. Frequently, avowedly Freirean educators ask students to share their own experiences with others, working earnestly to set up a caring, supportive environment for this purpose. Yet many eschew the clear Freirean imperative to examine personal experiences *critically*; this demands reflection upon, rather than mere affirmation of, existing views and assumptions. Freire would have no difficulty with educators adapting or 'reinventing' his ideas to suit their own circumstances; indeed, he speaks of some efforts in this direction as 'exceedingly productive work' (Freire 1993a: ix). But he would (reasonably) object to his name being falsely invoked, and might be surprised at the number of programmes, courses, practices and attitudes which are *purportedly* Freirean in orientation (cf. Aronowitz 1993: 8).

There is a flip-side to this problem. Classroom processes have changed dramatically over the past two decades in many western countries. Many of these changes bear a certain similarity to transformations suggested by Freire in his discussion (and implementation) of problem-posing education. Far from being excessively eager to call upon Freire's name, politicians, policy makers and those responsible for training teachers have sometimes not even heard of Freire, let alone read his work. Just as Illich (1973) has long been forgotten in many references to the 'hidden curriculum', so too is Freire often invisible in criticisms of 'banking' education. This problem reflects a wider ignorance of the history of educational thought. It is a matter for amusement as well as mild annoyance that students graduating from colleges of education frequently make reference to the 'new' interactive, experience-based approaches to teaching currently being promoted in schools, as if Steiner, Dewey, Freire and a host of other educationists had never existed. Of course, there are important differences between these theorists, and between their ideas and those being promulgated in new curriculum developments. But credit should be given where credit is due. Thus, on the one hand it is crucial that practices which only vaguely or partially resemble Freirean pedagogy be identified as such and described as, at most, 'reworkings' or 'revisions' or 'modifications' of Freirean ideas. On the other hand, it is equally important that past contributions to educational theory and practice be accorded the recognition they deserve, and that ideas which masquerade as original or ground-breaking developments in pedagogical theory be placed in proper historical context.

At a different level, reductionist tendencies in the application of Freirean theory are signified by the 'watering down' of complex concepts to a point where they lose their original force. This phenomenon is not confined to commentaries on and adaptations of Freire. Dale has noted that

... 'the state' may be in danger of becoming an example of a vital concept drained of its original value through promiscuous use in exercises of theoretical painting by numbers, and consequently at risk of joining 'resistance' and 'critical' ... on the shelves of theoretical banality. The danger is that, like them, 'the state' has come

to be used to *name* the space where theoretical work is needed rather than to fill that space, and worse, by such naming, to apparently preclude the need for more theoretical work. (Cited in Lankshear and McLaren 1993: xvi–xvii.)

The theoretical impoverishment of many contemporary discussions of ‘empowerment’ – an ideal often associated with Freire’s work – has also been the subject of some attention. Lankshear (1994: 59) argues that the notion of empowerment is ‘in danger of being trivialised through unreflective over-use and, consequently, of losing its semantic viability and persuasive force’. Freirean concepts seem to be particularly susceptible to the problems identified by Dale and Lankshear.⁴ The fate of ‘conscientization’ has already been noted. ‘Dialogue’, too, has frequently been reduced to a shadow of its former self in (mis)appropriations of Freirean ideas in First World settings. Almost any form of discourse between two or more people now appears to count in some educational arenas as an example of Freirean dialogue in action. Yet Freire is adamant that educational dialogue should have a clear purpose, a sense of structure and a definite direction (see Freire 1972: 61, 65, Freire and Shor 1987: 102, 109, 171–172). (Freirean) dialogue is *not* an ‘anything goes’ affair: that is, it cannot be equated with (and indeed must be opposed to) mere ‘idle conversation’. More than this, though, dialogue for Freire has an overtly *political* dimension: *all* of Freire’s educative efforts are ultimately directed toward the goal of a better (more fully human) social world (see Roberts 1989).

Finally, if Aronowitz’s appraisal of the us education scene is accurate (and indicative of trends elsewhere in the western world), Freire appears to have often been viewed through distinctly atheoretical lenses. By this I do not mean that the self-proclaimed Freireans to whom Aronowitz refers bring no theoretical assumptions to bear on their interpretation or adaptation of Freire’s work; this, Freire himself tells us, is an impossibility. Rather, it is a case of forgetting ‘where Freire comes from’ in not only the physical, social and cultural senses but the intellectual as well. Freire draws upon a wide range of intellectual traditions, and regularly refers to other theorists’ ideas. His pedagogy is a *synthesis* of theory and practice: attempting to practise supposedly Freirean ‘methods’ in schools and other settings without examining Freirean theory denies this relationship.

Reading Freire’s work critically

One of Freire’s most striking characteristics is his humility. Despite the numerous official honours and collegial tributes bestowed upon him, he has never claimed to have anything especially original or insightful to offer; instead, he prefers to think of himself as a ‘vagabond of the obvious’ (Shallcrass 1974: 24). When asked in 1974 why his books had become so popular and widely read, Freire replied: ‘Mainly because they are saying obvious things, which a lot of people have inside them, but which they have not been able to express. They discover themselves when they read the books and think – “that is precisely what I thought”’ (*New Citizen* 1974).

Freire has always acknowledged his indebtedness to numerous people, including not only his intellectual forebears, but also those with whom he has worked (as both a teacher and colleague) over the years.⁵ The success of his literacy efforts in Brazil and Chile, together with the enormous impact of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, brought Freire international recognition and widespread acclaim. Freire provided the inspiration for

fresh examination of pedagogy and literacy, and gave many educationists a model of how theory and practice might be dynamically intertwined. However, his sudden (if unintentional) catapulting into the limelight also had the effect of mythicizing Freire and his approach to education. 'Conscientization' quickly came to be perceived by some as kind of 'magic bullet', capable of miraculously curing social ills overnight (see Freire's comments in *LP News Service* 1971). Freire was elevated to guru-like status and spoken of in reverential tones in some quarters. In the field of adult education, especially, Freire became almost an academic 'God'. His work had injected a scholarly rigour – supported by practical experience – into adult learning discourses, strengthening the legitimacy of the field as a serious area for inquiry within universities and other institutions. Such adoration has always made Freire nervous (cf. Hill 1974, Rowe 1974: 7). He resisted the efforts of others to turn him into a myth, seeking instead steadily to continue his written work while furthering his commitment to the liberation of the oppressed.

Uncritical acceptance of Freirean principles has, from the beginning, been a contradiction of all that Freire stands for. As noted already, Freire actively *encourages* readers to be critical of his work. At the end of *The Politics of Education*, for example, he advises readers to reread his book, with the second reading being far more critical than the first (Freire 1985: 198). The caveats noted earlier confirm rather than contradict this objective: among other features, a critical approach to texts implies reading them globally and in context (see Freire 1985: 1–4, 111–113). Freire wants readers to neither reject nor accept anything he says at face value: in reading his books, as with all other books, an effort should be made to get beneath the surface, searching, as he would put it, for the '*raison d'être*' or essence which explains statements in his texts. He is fundamentally opposed to mythicizing activity, whether it involves himself or anyone else. From his earliest writings Freire has spoken disparagingly of the ideological misrepresentation of reality by dominant groups and has urged educators and others to break myths down (see, for example, Freire 1976c: 3–6). Of course, Freire is not 'perfect'. Nor is his theoretical work (within and across texts) free from flaws, significant omissions, inconsistencies and even contradictions. Freire has commented on occasion that when confronted with criticisms of his work, he avoids the temptation to assume the posture of a person 'wounded'; rather, for him, constructive criticism represents a positive invitation to examine hitherto accepted ideas afresh (cf. Freire 1985: 151–152). His pedagogy does not provide a panacea for oppression: Freire is careful not to overestimate the potential of education for bringing about social change (see Freire 1975: 16, Freire and Shor 1987: 31–32). Few theorists have more to offer in understanding relationships between education, literacy, oppression and liberation than Freire. Freire would argue, though, that if scholars and practitioners are to find something of value in his work, they *must* (in both the logical and normative sense of 'must') approach it critically; anything less does him a disservice.

Conclusion

Since the early 1970s Freire has maintained extensive contact with educationists and others in First World countries. Freire was based in Geneva with the World Council of Churches for a decade, and he has accepted a number of invitations to visit the USA over the years. He has conducted seminars and workshops the world over, and collaborated

with western scholars in publishing activities. After being exiled from his native Brazil he received numerous international accolades. Yet Paulo Freire remains passionately and unmistakably a man of the Third World. Freire has often spoken of his longing for Brazil during the years between 1964 and 1980, and of the tension those in exile experience between the original environment of their homeland and the new world they inhabit:

Your body is impregnated, as is that of any exile, with your original environment, with its history and culture. Impregnated with the dreams you dreamed there, the struggles you were involved in, your commitment to the working classes. Impregnated with your hopes and ideals for that world. (Freire and Faundez 1989: 11)

Freire's willingness to take on the responsibilities associated with leading the Municipal Bureau of Education in São Paulo during the late 1980s and early 1990s is indicative of his continuing commitment to Brazil (see Freire 1993b). The challenges facing Freire were enormous. Torres talks of São Paulo's:

...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. (Torres and Freire 1994: 105)

Freire has returned to his writing and books, but has reaffirmed his dedication to building a 'more open society': one which is 'less perverse, less discriminatory, less racist, less *machista* than the society we now have' (Freire 1993b: 140).

Freire's work, flawed though it may be, has much to offer First World theorists and practitioners in diverse fields and disciplines. Freire encourages western educators to 'reinvent' his ideas in addressing the themes and tasks that characterize their own struggles. He also stresses, however, that this process of reinvention should be based upon a *thorough* reading of his works and an acknowledgment of the particular social circumstances under which his pedagogy was forged. In adapting Freirean theory to suit specific First World educative situations the risk of domesticating his ideas is ever present. There *are* certain key ideas in Freire's theory which (he would argue) transcend national and cultural boundaries, but in order to comprehend the full significance of these principles *for Freire*, his work must be studied holistically, contextually and critically.

Notes

1 Colin Lankshear recalls that his use of the female pronoun in *Freedom and Education* (Auckland: Milton Brookes, 1982) caused a 'furore'. The male referent was dominant in Anglo-American contexts until the mid-1980s. In private communication.

2 There were a host of different positions represented in the emerging 'alternative' educational literature at the time. Many of the best known books were strongly polemical and deliberately provocative, rather than thoroughly argued academic treatises. Compare, for example, the following: Illich (1973); Reimer (1971); Goodman (1971); Postman and Weingartner (1971); Holt (1969, 1970, 1971).

3 Illich, Reimer and other key figures in the deschooling movement tended to be more polemical than Freire in their critiques of education. If the major early texts by Illich and Freire are compared, it is clear that the latter's pedagogical ideas rest upon a more thoroughly argued ontological, ethical and political theoretical base than the former's. Compare, for example, Illich (1973) and Freire (1972). See also Freire's comments in Makins (1972: 80) and Lister (1973: 14).

4 Arguably, a litany of other concepts in social theory have been sapped of their original force and intent:

'empowerment', 'conscientization' and 'dialogue' could be joined with 'critical thinking', 'liberation', 'collaboration', 'participation', etc. in a broader discussion of this issue.

5 For an excellent overview of Freire's intellectual influences, see Mackie (1980).

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