

Rethinking Freire: Globalization and the Environmental Crisis

reviewed by Richard Kahn – 2005

Title: Rethinking Freire: Globalization and the Environmental Crisis

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The political legacy of Paulo Freire, roughly spanning a period from the 1950s to the present, runs in large part alongside contemporary globalization processes and the emergence of the general acknowledgment of widespread environmental crises. Despite Freire's rise to fame as an anti-imperialist who railed against "cultural invasion" and his well-known indignation at oppressive neoliberalism in its many guises, the essays collected in *Rethinking Freire* seek to more deeply implicate the radical pedagogue as unconsciously complicit with the aggressive and unsavory aspects of global development agendas. Further, as the book links environmental crisis to the industrialized and monetized secular culture that has proven to be entailed by developmental modernization, Freirean pedagogy is additionally tagged as being a hindrance in the ongoing fight for ecological sustainability.

Those familiar with C.A. Bowers's work, or who count themselves scholars of Freire, know that Bowers first advanced this critique in the important essay from 1983, "Linguistic Roots of Cultural Invasion in Paulo Freire's Pedagogy." In that piece, Bowers (1993) noted the influence upon his thinking of maverick social critic Ivan Illich, the friend and sometimes rival of Freire, who during the 1970s challenged the latter's political reliance upon conscientization and schooling techniques. Instead, Illich attempted to theorize and practice what would later come to be named "post-development" politics (Rahnema and Bawtree, 1997), and *Rethinking Freire* should be considered post-development literature in its portrayal of mainstream development approaches as largely continuous with forces of Western globalization, in the manner in which it problematizes a deficit model of Third World poverty, and in the cynical critique of modernism it tends to advance.

A 2004 AESA Critics' Choice Selection, *Rethinking Freire* interestingly augments Bowers's earlier work by placing it in the context of a variety of personal narratives made by current and former Third World and indigenous activists, almost all of whom once considered themselves devoted Freireans and now share the opinion that Freirean pedagogy should be considered more of a roadblock for 21st century postcolonial issues than an emancipating tool. Their overarching legend is that the active desire to change the world for the benefit of all, an ethical ethos for Freireans, is ultimately an exuberance that should be tempered through a more humble engagement with place-based cultures that already contain the sort of long-standing alternatives to transnational capitalism and global imperialism that can lead to a more peaceful and natural ecology. All told, the pieces included in *Rethinking Freire* do an adequate job in once again raising problems about casting indigenous and vernacular thinking as either "naïve" or "magical" (as at least some readings of Freirean conscientization have done), and in polemicizing for the

viability and need for other post-critical experiences of the world, such as non-anthropocentric “interbeing” (p. 98). Additionally, the book’s various contributions help to enliven Bowers’s call for a more central relationship to “intergenerational knowledge” (p. 11) and his *Afterward* presents a cogent summary of the many points raised in his latest books that will be useful for those who want to grasp Bowers’s Ecojustice platform.

Despite *Rethinking Freire*’s positive contributions, the book is seriously flawed in both form and content. As a result, anyone interested in the contemporary state of critical pedagogy will unfortunately find too much of this book dismissible for its tone and lack of familiarity with the many intricacies of both the later Freire’s work and the work of those who have found inspiration in him.

For instance, while claiming to rethink Freire, most of the essays in fact critique specific Popular Education interventions of the 1960s that are then loosely tied to a handful of sentences ripped abortively from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. There is never any self-reflection evident that the activism chronicled as oppressive technocracy in this book was itself, despite the activists’ then self-professed regard for Freire, non-Freirean. Nor is there any rigorous attempt to engage the ways in which the Freirean corpus transformed over time and addressed earlier mis-statements and conceptions, thusly helping to prevent the sort of mis-applications of critical pedagogy professedly collected in the book. As one *Rethinking Freire* contributor tellingly puts it, “I am aware that the later Paulo Freire has made some clarifications and modifications of his ideas, but I have chosen to remain with the Freire of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*” (p. 95).

As the faithfulness to that text is itself often questionable throughout the book, when combined with *Rethinking Freire*’s non-historical/holistic reading of Freirean praxis, many questionable images of Freire emerge as part of his being rethought—including Freire the conservative (p. 13), the subordinator of the sensuous and affective (p. 37), the Leninist vanguardist (p. 51), the promoter of the single universal solution (p. 71), the underemphasizer of knowledge held by ordinary people (p. 84), the oppression expert (p. 110), the Rescuer (p. 116), and the Western industrial essentialist (p. 134). All combine to make the sort of pointedly distorted representation that is more typical of the political cartoon than the scholarly critique.

In terms of scholarship, amazingly, some of the bibliographies cite not a single work by Freire despite leveling the strongest of charges against him, and bibliographies and citations are by and large scant. While this is not true of the submissions made by Bowers himself, he repeatedly inveighs against “Freire’s followers” in a manner that appears to confusedly enclose within a single name and frame of reference a widely contested terrain inhabited by leftist, centrist, and (increasingly) rightist educators, all who claim to utilize Freirean methods. When Bowers does invoke particular critical pedagogues for rebuke, these figures are themselves treated to a largely generalized and polemical denunciation that makes *Rethinking Freire* seem more of a Hatfields and McCoys feud amongst radicals than it does the decisive intervention in education that it seeks to (and could) be.

Rethinking Freire notes that “a genuine dialogue with the leading educational theorists who are promoting Freire’s ideas in the nation’s colleges of education” is missing from its pages (p. 7). As dialogue is an approach valued by all parties involved, one wonders if the book could have gone much further by staging a presentation of how both Ecojustice and Freirean educators might set about speaking with one another. Ostensibly, the editorial decision to forego that approach was made because though Freireans favor dialogue, Ecojustice practitioners feel that Freireans have yet to recognize how they also use dialogue to promote Western assumptions that undermine non-Western students’ belief systems (p. 189). Hence, this book’s purpose is to present the sort of issues that Freireans will need to address should dialogue ensue (p. 11).

Yet, if Freireans have not been quick to address some of these concerns, public debate has occurred--notably Roberts (2000; 2003) and McLaren and Houston (2004)--to which *Rethinking Freire* neither makes acknowledgement nor attempts a response. More importantly, in presenting the opinions of Third World and indigenous activists as being unanimously post-Freire, the book hides the copious amount of scholarship and activism involved with and taking place in indigenous and Third World communities that draws fruitfully upon Freirean pedagogy. It seems, then, a glaring omission to talk about the non-relevance of Freire in places like Cochabamba, Bolivia, without also discussing the success of Popular Education strategies that led to arguably the greatest victory against neoliberal globalization in Latin America: Cochabamba’s Water War (Olivera, 2004). In like manner, seminal postcolonial scholar-activists like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) deserve to be better known by Ecojustice educators for her incorporation of the Freirean idea of naming the word and the world in order to literally re-name and decolonize the landscape with original indigenous terminology as part of the Maori political project.

Again, despite its limitations, *Rethinking Freire* does have serious points to make as it cautions about the potential imperialism involved in political interventions in indigenous communities and the Third World, the unconscious role that the Western worldview plays in contemporary critical pedagogy, and the need for social justice to be much more deeply integrated into programs for ecological well being. The major problem with the book’s argument is that it asserts this constitutes a major rebuttal of Freire’s philosophy. In fact, whether sooner or later, Freireans themselves would happily agree to much of what Ecojustice education ultimately seeks to support. It is true that Freire, unlike Illich, was not “a leading theorist of an ecopedagogy” (p. viii), but by the end of his life Freire too was in the process of transforming pedagogy in this direction. Thus, in his final book, *Pedagogy of Indignation* (2004), he significantly wrote, “Ecology has gained tremendous importance at the end of this century. It must be present in any educational practice of a radical, critical, and liberating nature” (p. 47).

Rethinking Freire is skeptical that a Freirean platform can be ecologically sound. Yet, there are many reasons to be more secure that critical pedagogy can and will do more to deeply address planet threatening ecological crises, even as it continues to interrogate and challenge the astounding growth of global market ideology that has in large part helped to spawn them. Hopefully, Freireans and Ecojustice educators can begin to close ranks, be more respectful of each other, and realize that if neither plan of action is entirely correct,

each has valuable strengths that can help in the reconstruction of education that is now required. Otherwise, if they cannot find ways to effect more fruitful dialogue on these issues soon, market ideologues may make of this debate little more than an historical footnote to transnational capitalism's zoöcidal excesses.

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