

## REVIEWS

### Books and other publications

**Schugurensky, D. *Paulo Freire* (Vol. 16). New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, ISBN 9780826484154, 2011, 272 pages.**

I never had the pleasure of meeting Paulo Freire. I am part of a new generation of educational scholars whose first engagement with Freire was after he passed away in 1997. Nonetheless, Freire's writings, and even more importantly the grassroots organizations that use Freire in their work, have transformed the last decade of my life. My experiences and "encounters" with Freire in the twenty-first century are the sole reason I decided to pursue graduate studies in the field of education. Given this personal connection to Freirean thought and practice, it is an honor to be asked to review Daniel Schugurensky's recently published book on Paulo Freire, and submit it as part of this special issue on adult education. Schugurensky, a professor in the School of Social Transformation at Arizona State University, wrote this book as part of the Continuum Library of Educational Thought. This is a series of philosophical biographies of educational scholars, which promote the idea "that theories and the practices that follow from them are vitally important for education" (p. vii). The goal of bridging educational theory and practice is laudable, and something Freire himself would have certainly approved.

However, is another book on Paulo Freire really necessary? As Schugurensky himself describes, there are

hundreds of books, articles, and interviews that engage with Freire, so much so that Schugurensky had “difficulty catching up with the pace of new publications released every month” (p. 116). Despite the plethora of resources on Freire, I argue that this book makes an important contribution to the literature for three reasons: 1) The manner in which the author contextualizes Freirean thought within a larger political and economic context; 2) The multiple and innovative ways the author synthesizes the contributions of Freirean thought; and, 3) The extended discussion on the critiques of Freire and responses to those critiques. In the following review, I summarize Schugurensky’s main arguments, keeping these three contributions at the forefront of my analysis.

In a typical Freirean fashion, Schugurensky begins the book by discussing his first four “encounters” with Freire. From his first experience with Freirean education within the Argentinian student movement, to his graduate studies and engagement with Freire as a professor, this introduction provides a critical framing for the rest of the book; it illustrates that “Freire” is not a person per se, but an idea that has been taken up in multiple ways. Schugurensky writes, “I continue meeting Freire when people who I don’t know tell me, often unprompted, about the significant influence that Freire has had in their personal biographies or in educational projects in which they have been involved” (p. 3). Instead of holding up Freire “the person” on a pedestal, Schugurensky puts value on the grassroots educators who use Freirean theories in their everyday practice.

Chapter 1 is the least original contribution of the book, offering a brief history of Freire’s life that has been told

previously (Freire, 1996; Gadotti, 1994; Kane, 2001; Kirylo, 2011). This section discusses Freire's childhood growing up in the city of Recife, the hunger he experienced, the values he learned from his parents and teachers, his influential time working at a social service agency, his literacy work in the early 1960s, his period of exile, and his eventual return to Brazil. This history is largely based on Freire's own writings, most significantly, a series of letters Freire wrote to his niece about his life (Freire, 1996).

Nonetheless, what makes this intellectual biography different from other summaries of Freire's life is the emphasis Schugurensky places on the context in which Freire was living. First, Schugurensky describes the rural and urban mobilizations of the 1950s and 1960s in Brazil, the progressive leaders that were taking power, and how Freire was pushed into the national spotlight because of this larger context. As Schugurensky quotes Freire as saying, "It was a time of fantastic popular mobilization, and education was part of it" (p. 22). In other words, the radical educational programs that Freire was implementing were just a small component of the larger political milieu. Schugurensky moves on to discuss Chile in the late-1960s, contextualizing Freire's literacy efforts within the "political mobilization that was part and parcel of Chilean society" at this historical moment (p. 25). Schugurensky argues that this context was critical for the radicalization of Freire's ideas. Similarly, during the period Freire lived in the United States, Schugurensky emphasizes the "deep social and racial conflicts, rising social movements, and youth rebellion" (p. 26). It was Freire's lived experiences during these moments of social conflict that helped him develop his pedagogical approach to education and his

understanding of the relationship between education, power, and politics. Schugurensky argues that this latter set of relationships—Education, Power, and Politics—is Freire’s main contribution to educational thought.

In Chapter 2, Schugurensky offers a critical exposition of Freire’s work. The author illustrates, once again, his dedication to understanding knowledge production in its historical context by analyzing Freirean thought chronologically. I found this a particularly useful form of analysis, as it allows the reader to learn at which point Freire was introduced to certain theorists (Hegel, Dewey, Sartre, Gramsci, Fanon), and how those theorists influenced his work. Of these theoretical influences, Antonio Gramsci was the least explicitly discussed. In this section of the chapter, Schugurensky provides short reviews of Freire’s major books and their main arguments. Again, the contribution here is Schugurensky’s analysis of how different theorists concretely influenced aspects of Freire’s work. For example, Schugurensky argues that the first chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* draws on Hegel’s dialectic between master and slave, while the second chapter on banking versus problem-posing education is based on Sartre’s concept of digestive or nutritive education. Schugurensky writes that, “Overall, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a product of its time, and as such it engaged with the issues, controversies, and aspirations that were part of the political and social context of the late 1960s” (p. 77). In other words, none of Freire’s writings were completely original; they were a synthesis of previous theories and products of particular historical moments. After reviewing Freire’s major writings, Schugurensky describes what he calls the “Seven Dimensions of Freire.”

These dimensions are philosophical (the “unfinishedness” of history and human agency), ethical (liberatory education as an ethical choice), epistemological (knowledge production as both social and historical), sociological (the relationship between education and social reproduction), psychological (internalized oppression), political (education leading to action), and pedagogical (problem-posing education and praxis). These seven “dimensions” provide an interesting synthesis of his work, which I can imagine helping to frame any lecture or class on Freirean thought.

In the last part of this chapter, Schugurensky begins what I believe to be the most interesting and critical aspect of this book: a discussion of the tensions and critiques in Freire’s work. The first tension he discusses is between eclecticism and coherence, or in other words, the fact that Freire draws on a multiplicity of theorists that could be seen as being in conflict. This leads Schugurensky to his second tension, which is Freire’s connection to both Christian and Marxist thought. Schugurensky argues that, “It is precisely in this dialogue between Christian humanism and Marxist humanism where we can find the foundation of Freire’s philosophical approach and core concepts of his political-educational theory such as humanization, agency, love, freedom, praxis, hope” (p. 98). In other words, despite the contradictions between Marxism and Christianity (which could have been examined in more detail in this section), it is this tension that makes Freire’s contribution unique. The third tension in Freire’s writing is between dialogical education and directiveness. I found this discussion particularly interesting, as Schugurensky makes clear, once and for all, that “dialogue” is *not* a “method.” Rather, a lecture can be

an example of dialogical education if it is engaging and challenges students. Furthermore, Freire did *not* believe in nondirective education, or what he referred to as “laissez faire” education. Schugurensky writes, “Freire’s suggestion is to accept the directive nature of education without manipulating students and, at the same time, accept the democratic nature of education without leaving students to themselves” (p. 102). In other words, teachers must be aware of the tension between directiveness and democracy, and they must disclose their political position without imposing their position. At the end of this chapter Schugurensky offers another list of Freire’s contributions, or what he refers to as the “gist” of Freire’s arguments (p. 103-105)

Chapter 3 was by far my favorite part of the book, bringing Schugurensky’s voice to the forefront of the analysis and illustrating the extensive research he had done for this project. This chapter articulates, once again, what I believe are the three main ways Schugurensky contributes to the contemporary literature on Paulo Freire: 1) He critiques the idea of Freire as a “myth, a guru, a radical hero, or an academic god,” and instead illustrates that Freire is a product of a historical moment; 2) He synthesizes Freire’s contributions, trying to separate out the theories that Freire drew on and Freire’s own original ideas; and, 3) He offers a comprehensive list of critiques of Freire, and responses to those critiques. This latter section (pp. 129-170) deserves particular emphasis, as Schugurensky succeeds in both summarizing and responding to these critiques, while not setting up a straw man argument. There are seven categories of critique that Schugurensky discusses: Language; Lack of originality;

Contradictions; Universal categories and dichotomies; Anti-dialogue, manipulation, authoritarianism; Cultural invasion; and, Implementation and outcomes.

I encourage anyone who engages with Freire's work to read this section of Schugurensky's book. I am certain that there is not a single educator, scholar, practitioner, or theorist that has read Freire and not had at least one of these categories of critique enter her or his mind. As an activist-scholar with a background in popular education, I was particularly interested in the discussion of Freirean education as potentially manipulative, as Freire's writings can be interpreted as assuming the superiority of some "critical" perspective over others. Schugurensky takes this debate seriously, even quoting the doubts of critical pedagogue Henry Giroux: "How can the task of validating certain forms of 'correct' thinking be reconciled with the pedagogical task of helping students to avoid authoritarian dictates, regardless of how radical they are?" (p. 144). In his response, Schugurensky emphasizes the fact that Freire believes *all* education is directive, regardless of whether teachers are open about their position. The issue, therefore, is not whether or not education is neutral, but if "the directivity of the educator interfered with the creative and investigative capacity of the student" (p. 161). Thus, the goal of an educator is to be directive without inhibiting student creativity. Schugurensky also argues that Freire did not conceptualize "conscientization"—the process of consciousness-raising<sup>1</sup>—as a linear process, but rather, as

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<sup>1</sup> The word "conscientization" in Portuguese—*conscientização*—has an interesting significance because the last four letters spell *ação* or action. Hence, this word is about both consciousness and action, a linguistic attribute that is lost in translation to English.

ever evolving. Therefore, he argues, Freire is not trying to impose some higher level of consciousness on students.

In truth, Schugurensky does not fully resolve this issue. Giroux's questions remain: Even if conscientization is not a linear process, who decides the direction of directive education? In practice, how are teachers supposed to be both directive and open to students' knowledge? Schugurensky admits that Freire has to be understood as a critical modernist, which perhaps puts him in an antagonistic relationship to postmodernism. However, even here Schugurensky attempts to save Freire by making a distinction between conservative postmodernism, which denies human agency, and progressive postmodernism, which is "radical, democratic, and utopian" (p. 166). In coming to Freire's defense while also discussing these critiques with seriousness, Schugurensky illustrates his "Freirean sensibility" by disclosing his position without imposing that position on the reader.

In Chapter 4, Schugurensky debates Freire's relevance in the twenty-first century. He offers an impressive summary of the current locations where Freire's ideas are being applied, from public schools and museums in the United States, to human rights and adult literacy in China, to the antiapartheid movement in South Africa. In particular, Latin America is a region where, "Freire is unlikely to be ignored or forgotten" (p. 183). This influence goes beyond adult literacy to include spheres such as theatre, agro-ecology, art, and literature. Schugurensky references one edited volume that includes twenty chapters of Freirean-inspired experiences in Latin America (Gadotti, Gomez, & Freire, 2003). From my perspective, Freire's



biggest influence in Latin America has been within grassroots social movements, who have used Freirean educational practices in their struggles for economic, political, and social justice. My own dissertation is on the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (MST) and the movement's attempt to transform the rural public school system—a struggle directly inspired by Paulo Freire. I have found that social movements in Latin America are not dogmatic in their use of Freire; rather, activists draw on Freire in addition to dozens of other theorists in their attempt to transform society. As one activist and leader in the MST's national education sector told me, "We dialogue with intellectuals of Brazil and the world, we do not think we have to follow one theorist, we choose the theorists that helps us to advance in our problems and challenges."<sup>2</sup> MST activists have chosen to incorporate Freire into their educational struggle because of the flexibility of his ideas, and the ways in which his already eclectic approach to education can be easily merged with other theorists.

The main point in Chapter 4 is that Freire is still *very* relevant in the twenty-first century. Schugurensky says that this relevance is due to the fact that Freire never separated theory from practice. He writes,

Freire provides to younger generations of educators a source of energy and empowerment, and at the same time acts as a role model by enacting certain personal dispositions, such as curiosity, honesty, love, humility, hope, and a critical attitude toward reality, combined with indignation about injustice and a commitment

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<sup>2</sup> Interview, November 18, 2011.

toward justice. This inspirational impact should not be underestimated. (p. 195)

In this statement, Schugurensky argues that it is Freire's disposition and commitment to justice that makes him an inspiration to a younger generation of educators. I am undeniably part of the "younger generation" to which Schugurensky refers. However, I would like to offer a slight correction to his assertion. I think for the "post-Freire Freirean generation," it is not Freire himself that inspires us. Unfortunately, we only will ever know Freire through stories we are told, and books that we read. Freire is not our role model, or at least not mine. My role model, ever since 2004 when Freire first entered my consciousness, is a woman named Lourdes Luna who founded a women's organization in the periphery of Recife, Brazil, in 1975. For over forty years this group has been offering Freirean educational classes in the community. When I met Lourdes, it was *her* "curiosity, honesty, love, humility, hope, and a critical attitude toward reality, combined with indignation about injustice and a commitment toward justice" that inspired me. It was through my participation in this women's organization and their "citizenship" classes that I began to think about the connection between education, power, and politics. I believe, and I think that Schugurensky would agree, that it is not Freire's commitment to justice but the commitment of those educators inspired by Freire that keeps him relevant in the twenty-first century.

The major "gap" (if we want to call it that) I found in this book was its rather light analysis of the connection

between Freire and liberation theology, and specifically Freire's influence on the liberation theology movement. For this critical aspect of Freire's legacy, I encourage people to read another recent book on Freire (Kirylo, 2011). I would also have liked to see more discussion on Freire's concept of "Unity with Diversity," which was mentioned several times in Schugurensky's discussion of how racial and gender oppression enter Freire's framework. In the United States this discussion about the non-class forms of oppression, and how to build a united movement while not imposing a class analysis, is critical.

Finally, given that this is a special issue on adult education, it is important to highlight Freire's contribution to this field. Schugurensky claims that Freire created a "Copernican Revolution" in adult education. Previously, he argues, adult literacy classes were implemented in the same manner as a child's literacy class. Adults were not just infantilized pedagogically but also physically, by being forced to sit in classrooms with child-size desks. In the cultural circles that Freire first implemented in the 1960s (drawing on other experiences), "participants were regarded as adults with experience, knowledge, and wisdom, who deserved respect and dignified treatment" (p. 57). Schugurensky claims that Freire had four main contributions to adult education: 1) Participation, allowing the learner to also be a participant in the educational process; 2) Social context, incorporating the social reality and vocabulary of the student into the classroom; 3) Problem-posing education, organizing the educational experience around critical dialogue with the students; and, 4) Emancipatory rationality, nurturing both critical

awareness and learners' capacity to liberate themselves from oppressive situations (p. 58).

I thoroughly enjoyed reading “yet another” book on Paulo Freire. I believe that, despite the hundreds of other publications on Freire, Schugurensky's book is an important contribution to the field. This is because the book does *not reify* Freire, but rather, makes Freire as a product of history; it *synthesizes* Freire's contribution, being clear about what is new and old about Freire's ideas; and, it takes seriously the *critiques* that have been laid against Freire, while also providing interesting—although not conclusive—responses to these critiques. *Parabéns* to Schugurensky for this wonderful work.

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