

## On Translating *Ser Mais* in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Tomas Rocha

*Teachers College, Columbia University*

I want to start by thanking Sam Rocha for being so helpful when I started preparing my response to his work. After reaching out to Sam for some details about some of the sources he cites throughout his article, he very generously took the time to send me an article I couldn't access. He even scanned copies of some of the original editions of the French and Spanish texts he's been reading. He didn't have to do this, but he did. It was very kind and I'd like to thank him. One final note: throughout my response I'll refer to Sam as 'Sam' and not as 'Rocha' simply in order to avoid repeating my own name over and over again.

My response to Sam's thought-provoking essay will take more or less the following form: I am first going to agree with some of the core themes and beliefs about persons that Sam upholds in his presentation. Once our alliance on that front has been made clear, I am going to try and articulate a concern I have with the way Sam approaches some of his arguments and critiques.

So, let me start by restating a few things about the intellectual tradition that serves as the background for his essay. Sam is interested in what we might call 'personalist thought', a term I'll use here, following Williams & Bengtsson, to refer to a family of worldviews that take the "centrality of the person as the primary locus of investigation for philosophical, theological, and humanistic studies."<sup>1</sup> Historically, personalist thinking has, certainly with exceptions, been theistic and attached to Biblical theism in particular. Freire was himself Catholic and, in his writings and interviews, makes no apology about the marriage between his Christianity and his Marxism.

Regardless, those of us who don't consider ourselves theists should easily sympathize with the personalist impulse if we understand it as a worldview emerging in the context of a critical reaction against *impersonalistic* philosophies

that seemed to emerge out of, for example, the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment eras in Europe and South America. We could think of *impersonalistic* philosophies here as *rationalistic* as opposed to *rational*/philosophies; *scientific* as oppose to scientifically informed philosophies. We could think of, for instance, naturalistic forms of nationalism and racism; totalizing notions of historical determinism; reductive ways of conceiving materialism—all of these have been seen by various personalist thinkers as historical contributors to destructively anti-personalist (we might even say anti-person, perhaps) political movements: Nazism, state-controlled Communism of the Stalinist variety, apartheid regimes, state-sanctioned violence against Indigenous communities, and so forth. At the same time, it's clear from my limited background reading on personalism, and from what I've gathered from Sam's paper, that personalists tend also to reject the kind of radical individualism celebrated in run-of-the-mill liberal capitalism. Sam's depiction of Freire's personalism highlights Freire's reaction against modern alienation and its various causes, and in response to this alienation, Freire's yearning for greater social and political solidarity.

To the extent that Sam's reading of Freire, Mounier, and de Unamuno draws out and highlights their respective concerns over this same alienation—their yearning for solidarity and their deep respect for persons as ends in themselves and never as mere means—then I take absolutely no issue with his interpretation. I believe Sam and I find ourselves on the same page in our affinity for what these thinkers seem to stand for existentially, socially, politically, pedagogically, and so on.

With that on the record, I will transition to the critical portion of my response. I have three concerns but given limited time will only focus substantively on one. The other two I will briefly mention towards the very end of my response.

Here is the first. I believe that the issue of translation Sam points to has, by my lights, actually very little effect on either (a) the disagreement between humanists and posthumanists discussed in the paper, or (b) the analysis of personalism as it exists in what Sam sees as Freire's more "transcendental" humanism.

What is the issue Sam points to? If we turn to the early part of his essay, we see him take issue with the fact that Myra Ramos frequently translated the Portuguese *ser mais* into the English phrase ‘becoming more fully human.’ Sam suggests not only that this is a mistranslation, but that such a mistranslation opens the door for further trouble. It allows posthumanists like Nathan Snaza to step in and attack Freire on the grounds that “his philosophy is troubled because his concept of the human being relies on a dialectic of human and animal.”<sup>2</sup> Sam argues the following:

What is lost in the Ramos translation, and consequently in Snaza’s posthumanist critique that employs it, is this italicized sense of ‘*ser mais*,’ [which Sam translates more literally as] ‘*be more*.’ The posthumanists are in such a rush to move beyond the human that they seem to neglect the proper use of the human language, uncritically accepting a translation that badly mistakes Freire’s clear emphasis on “*be more*” with the unemphasized, “becoming more fully human”—an overdressed Anglophone substitute.

Now I want to be clear that as far as I’m concerned Sam’s alternative translation is perfectly acceptable—it is certainly more transparent—but I am not yet convinced that it gets him the additional mileage he thinks it does. I believe the existing translation does a perfectly good job of capturing what Freire is going on about, and that if people fail to see the personalism that Sam sees in Freire, that this failure probably has not much to do with the translation itself. Here are two reasons why a focus on the translation might be a red herring.<sup>3</sup>

First, the human-animal distinction that Freire relies on, and which a posthumanist could take issue with, is most palpable *not* in the rendering of *ser mais* into ‘more fully human,’ but rather on pages 97-101 of the Ramos edition, where we see Freire drawing a very *explicit* distinction between the categories human and animal, a distinction that cannot be chalked up to an issue of translation.<sup>4</sup> There, Freire writes, for example, that contrary to non-human animals, “it is as transforming and creative beings that humans, in their permanent relations with reality, produce not only materials goods—tangible objects—but

also social institutions, ideas, and concepts.”<sup>25</sup> Freire also argues in this section of the text that humans have a deep historical consciousness, and an ability to enact choice on the basis of this deep historical consciousness<sup>6</sup>, two features I am fairly confident are lacking in any non-human animals we have observed so far. Freire takes these distinctions to have at least some relevance to facts about what we should value *as* human beings, and not merely as living creatures.

I should mention that Snaza, furthermore, doesn't seem to do much interpretation of Freire on his own, at least not in the paper of his that Sam critiques. Snaza cites Corman as arguing that “Freire relies on reductive, fixed, and speciesist constructions of ‘the animal’ and animality throughout the text,” and that “despite the radical intention of his theory and its liberatory potential, he nonetheless perpetuates a deeply anthropocentric and speciesist understanding of animals.”<sup>27</sup> Now, if arguing, as Freire does, that the aforementioned distinctions have some relevance to what humans should value, is equivalent to being ‘reductive,’ ‘fixed,’ ‘speciesist,’ and ‘anthropocentric,’ then I suppose I'm a happy member of the reductive, anthropocentric club. Though he does not explore it the way I have just now, I know that Sam too has been unconvinced by Snaza's analysis of Freire on this matter. But my point is this: even if Ramos hadn't translated *ser mais* in the way that she did, there is plenty in the text for posthumanists to gripe about. Some of us may not think the gripe holds up, but that would have been a different paper, one focused more directly on undermining the posthumanist's argument *against* Freire and less on exploring the personalist influences *on* Freire. The two, I think, stand more clearly as separate analyses.

I mentioned a second reason why this issue of translation may be misleading. This reason is perhaps in more direct contrast to some of Sam's claims in his paper, for it is not just Ramos but Freire himself who suggests an equivalency between what it means to *ser mais*, on the one hand, and the process of striving towards a fuller humanity (or ‘becoming more fully human’) on the other. If we look to the end of Chapter 2 in the Ramos translation, for example, we see Freire arguing that one form of violence is the violence of preventing people from engaging in the process of inquiry that—once they attain a “deepened

consciousness” of their own oppression—may help lead the way out of said oppression. Freire says: “This movement of inquiry must be directed towards humanization—the people’s historical vocation.”<sup>8</sup> Now, this is interesting because in this bit of English translation we see a mention of “humanization” (a very exasperating notion for posthumanists) and yet no mention of the supposedly problematic phrase “becoming more fully human,” which as we learned from Sam’s paper has been rendered from the Portuguese *ser mais*.

And yet the corresponding Portuguese source text is as follows: “Este movimento de busca, porém, só se justifica na medida em que se dirige ao *ser mais*, à humanização dos homens.”<sup>9</sup>

Here we see Freire himself, in the last clause of the sentence, offering a clarification of what he means by *ser mais*, at least in this portion of the text: the humanization of people. By my reading of this passage, and by my reading of the context surrounding his other uses of *ser mais*, it seems perfectly reasonable to argue that *ser mais* (in line with Ramos’s translation) really can simply mean the pursuit of a fuller humanity, a fuller humanity that, as we see in the next sentence after the passage I just pointed to, can be contradicted; a humanity that can be forced to *ser menos* by the process of *desumanização*.

In light of this connection, upheld by Freire himself, I wonder if Sam’s project—of examining what personalism might have meant to Freire—wouldn’t be more fruitful if it avoided altogether trying to establish a real distinction between a humanism of what we might call the standard variety, and what Sam suggests is a distinctively more “transcendental” humanism.<sup>10</sup> In light of what I’ve just said, I can now very quickly mention my two remaining concerns. As I read and re-read the paper, I must admit that I was never entirely sure what exactly Sam meant by the term *transcendence*—as in, for example, the idea of a “transcendental” humanism—though I acknowledge upfront that this is perhaps entirely a function of my relative inexperience with the personalist tradition. Finally, and this is a much more minor point, it was difficult to evaluate Sam’s critiques of Anglophone critical pedagogy without further philosophical or empirical evidence of the ironic self-deception under which he claims it currently suffers.

---

1 Thomas D. Williams & Jan O. Bengtsson, "Personalism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last updated May 11, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/personalism/>.

2 Nathan Snaza, "Bewildering Education," *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 10, no. 1 (2013): 44.

3 Through subsequent conversations with Sam I have been persuaded about the necessity, generally speaking, of a new translation of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogia do Oprimido*. However, I believe the friendly challenge I have developed in this response might still hold.

4 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Myra Bergman Ramos trans. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000).

5 Freire, *Pedagogy*, 97.

6 Freire, *Pedagogy*, 98-100.

7 Snaza, "Bewildering," 44.

8 Freire, *Pedagogy*, 85.

9 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogia do Oprimido* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1987/1970): 43. [http://www.dhnet.org.br/direitos/militantes/paulofreire/paulo\\_freire\\_pedagogia\\_do\\_oprimido.pdf](http://www.dhnet.org.br/direitos/militantes/paulofreire/paulo_freire_pedagogia_do_oprimido.pdf).

10 It's perfectly possible that there are other reasons to focus on "transcendental" humanism in Freire, but I don't think they emerge from problems in the translation of *this* particular phrase: *ser mais*.