

Race, Pedagogy, and Paulo Freire

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INTRODUCTION

The educational philosophical writings of Paulo Freire, most notably *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, have been greatly influential in defining the theoretical and practical concerns of radical education. This includes the fact that Freire's influence in terms of radical education has not only been felt in Latin American countries but also in the United States as well. Ann Berthoff asserts that "Freire's influence has been worldwide" and that "the success in confronting the problem of illiteracy, whether in the Third World or in the inner cities of the Western world, ... depend on [understanding] the significance of Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed."¹ These claims about Freire's relevance may be overstated when it comes to African Americans in the United States.

Maria del O'Cadiz maintains that in Latin America "popular education" is central to the concerns of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. O'Cadiz argues that the models of popular education in Latin America "spring from the original Freirean pedagogy of the oppressed developed in the 1960s."² These models "are connected to the [socialist] tradition of working class education initiated in Spain in the nineteenth century which further evolved until the Spanish Civil War."³ This early socialist tradition of working class education continued and evolved in Latin America *à la* Freire's model of popular education. O'Cadiz writes: "Popular education *à la* Freire arose from a political and social analysis of the living conditions of the poor and their outstanding problem, and attempted to engage the poor in individual and collective awareness of those conditions."⁴ This suggests that Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed is a class-based pedagogy, which is curious given the large Afro-Brazilian population and Afro-Latino communities throughout Latin America.

While not the specific focus of this essay, it should be briefly noted that Freire's philosophy of pedagogy should be understood within the wider context of the racial discourse about Afro-Latinos within the dominant Latin American intellectual tradition. This tradition's class over determinism is also supported by the claim that Latin America is a racial democracy because it is a racially mixed society with supposedly much less racism than in the United States. In disagreement Coco Fuso writes:

Latin cultural critics tend to insist on the historical difference of a more variegated racial classification system, claiming that class counts more than race, that Latinos have always had a higher rate of interracial unions and a progressive, nationalist, ant-colonialist tradition, which is, at least in theory, integrationist. Although it is true that the independence struggles and nationalist discourses of the Spanish Caribbean stipulated racial inequality...it is also true that no multiracial Latin American society has eliminated racial inequality. What are often left out of these equations are the similarities between northern and southern segregationist legislation, social practices, and economic hierarchies. What is also occluded is the political manipulation of hybridity, by Latin American official culture in the nineteenth

century, which encouraged miscegenation as a strategy for diminishing the threat of black political power. Finally, in the twentieth century, this rhetoric has been used both to mask racialized economic disparities and to fuel the popular conception that blackness is something Latinos get rid of with socialization, miscegenation with whites.⁵

This essay examines some of the limitations of Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed. Specifically, it queries the way in which Freire's liberation pedagogy ignores the existential ontological situation of "black people" of African descent in the United States because, it supports an epistemologically centered conception of pedagogy. It neglects the ontological content of racist epistemologies and beliefs, a content that questions the worth of a people, causing them to justify their existence as human beings on a daily basis. The result of Freire's epistemological preoccupation is that when it comes to race the obsession is with knowing its "true reality" not with how it is lived by "black people."

The first section addresses Freire's conception of pedagogy of liberation as "epistemologically curious," or what he calls "pedagogy of knowing." Pedagogy, in this instance, reduces reflective consciousness to an epistemologically centered notion of knowing in which the obsession is with knowing whether something is true or false. The last section discusses how the diminishing of reflective consciousness to an epistemologically centered conception of knowing makes Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed shortsighted when it comes to race and racism. Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed lacks of an existential phenomenological understanding of the existential ontological problem of racial oppression, and thus the pedagogical conditions necessary for African American freedom and liberation as "black people" in the United States.

FREIRE'S PEDAGOGY OF KNOWING

Freire's pedagogy of knowing is informed by philosophical anthropological presuppositions about what a human being is.⁶ For Freire, to be a human being is to be a historical being; and to be a being that makes history presupposes a particular kind of consciousness—reflective consciousness. Reflective consciousness is characterized by "intentionality," or Freire says, "being conscious of, not only as intent on objects but as turned in upon itself—consciousness as consciousness of consciousness."⁷ It is the intentionality of reflective consciousness that allows us to have a "historical sense" that is essential to our becoming more fully human.⁸ For Freire, the implication is that human beings relate to the world and to each other in fundamentally and qualitatively different ways than animals. Human beings relate to the world as knowing subjects; they "experience [the] world as an objective reality, independent of oneself, capable of being known."⁹

Berthoff says, "the magnitude of Freire's educational philosophy is related to his understanding that "[if] education is to serve other than as an instrument of oppression it must be conceived of as pedagogy of knowing" (*EC*, xii). In the words of Freire, "To be an act of knowing, the [educational] process demands among teachers and students a relationship of authentic dialogue" (*EC*, 12). This is an intersubjective relationship between the self and the other as knowing subjects or as Freire states: "true dialogue unites subjects together in the cognition of a knowable object which mediates between them" (*EC*, 12).

Freire's conception of knowledge and learning is informed by a "theory of representation that [divides] culture up into areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all."¹⁰ And, because the oppressor's values are "interiorized," "ejection must be achieved by a type of cultural action in which culture negates culture."¹¹ By this Freire means that "culture, as an interiorized product which in turn conditions men's subsequent acts must become the object of men's knowledge so that they can perceive its conditioning power."¹² Freire is referring to the "illiterate," whom he says: "we could help him to overcome his magic or naive understanding and to develop an increasingly critical understanding allowing him to be consciously reflective" (*EC*, 46).

Freire's notion of "critical understanding" assumes that culture is an epistemologically centered notion of knowing, or in Freire's words, culture is "the systematic acquisition of knowledge." Critical understanding is bounded up with a conception of culture that is preoccupied with accurately representing reality; therefore, knowing is equivalent to doing science. Says Freire, "to do science is to discover, to unveil truths about the world, about living beings, about things, truths that were awaiting the unveiling."¹³ It is in this context that some cultures, in particular, illiterate ones, according to Freire, are absent of a culture of knowing or science.

In illiterate cultures, where "concrete" rather than the "theoretical context is important, Freire says, "our minds do not function epistemologically. Our curiosity is not aroused to search for the reasons for things are as they are."¹⁴ "Epistemological curiosity" and therefore reflective consciousness is less likely to be acted upon because in the concrete world of daily life "the relationship between practice and knowledge of the practice are inseparable."¹⁵ Freire implies this in his description regarding the degree to which critical, naive and magical consciousness apprehend reality. For him, all men and women engage in a relation with the world and thus are capable of knowing. But, whether knowledge is mere opinion, or truth, depend on if in apprehending a phenomenon or problem, we grasp its "true causality," which is determined by whether the nature of the consciousness apprehending is critical (*EC*, 43). Freire writes: "[the] more accurately men grasp *true causality*, the more critical their understanding of reality will be. Critical consciousness represents things and facts as they exist empirically, in their *causal and circumstantial correlation* (*EC*, 43-44).

FREIRE AND THE PEDAGOGY OF RACE

While Freire did not explicitly develop pedagogy of race, his philosophy of education, with its assumption that knowing involves "epistemological curiosity" and therefore the apprehending of true causality, organizes his understanding of race. Freire acknowledges that it is only in his early work, particularly in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that "race as an ideological category did not feature predominantly."¹⁶ Freire declares:

I would like to point out that today I have spoken and written a great deal about the question of race in my deep quest to fight against any form of discrimination.... [Once] again my critics should not use *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as the only measure to evaluate my solidarity with subordinate racial groups, particularly Africans and African Americans (*DI*, 224).

Even though this may be the case, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* nevertheless influenced Freire's philosophical understanding of race. In a published dialogue Freire responds to Macedo's comment regarding Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. Macedo observes:

In his case, race is not a guarantee that the interests of millions of oppressed African Americans who have not yet broken loose from the yoke of White racism will be protected. Clarence Thomas's class interests override his race position. Thus, we cannot lump the many factors that cut across cultural difference into one monolithic cultural entity (*DI*, 220).

Macedo's understanding of Thomas's conservative thinking as merely a function of his class position is shortsighted. Macedo fails to recognize that Thomas's existential situation, as a black living in an anti-black racist society, is just as responsible as his class position for his black conservatism. Thomas's consciousness of himself as a black is inseparable from his intentional or conscious articulation of a conservatism that is both situated and explains his lived experience as a black man. This should not go without saying that his black conservatism is a "black anti-black racist" conservatism, which suggest then that Thomas has not yet broken loose from the yoke of white racism as suggested by Macedo.

Freire elaborates further on Macedo's comment by maintaining that to have a critical understanding of reality, "causal correlation" must be made with respect to the "intercultural relations" between race, class, and gender. Even though Freire does not explicitly use the term "causal correlation" it is implied when he says, "It is impossible to think of overcoming oppression, discrimination, passivity, or pure rebellion without first acquiring a critical comprehension of history in which these intercultural relations take place in a dialectical form. Thus, they are contradictory and part of a historical process" (*DI*, 220). Freire with this in mind claims that by achieving a critical comprehension of history, history does not only "make us but we make it." And, "as both objects and subjects of history, capable of reinventing the world in an ethical and aesthetic mold beyond the cultural patterns that exist" we need a historical perspective that is comprehensive" (*DI*, 222). Freire is implying that to not recognize that Clarence Thomas's "class position overrides his race position" is to not go "beyond the cultural patterns that exists." It is in failing to be comprehensive that a "true causality" is not made in regards to how race is interculturally related to class and in Freire's words, to not do this is to be "stuck in his or her historical location" (*DI*, 209).

At another point in the dialogue, Freire differentiates his conception of dialogue as a process of learning and knowing from that of other strands within critical pedagogy. Freire puts forward pedagogy of race that does not "overindulge" in the lived experience of race as do some forms of critical race pedagogy. He thinks to "overindulge" in this way is to be "stuck in his or her historical location," to not link the position of race with that of class or gender. In the dialogue Macedo poses to Freire the following argument:

By overindulging in the legacy and importance of their respective voices and experiences these educators often fail to move beyond uncritical appeals to the discourse of experience.....[I]t is for this reason that some of these educators invoke a romantic pedagogical mode that exoticizes discussing lived experience as a process of coming to voice....This creates the transformation of dialogical teaching...into group therapy (*DI*, 205).

Freire agrees with Macedo's concern but adds that, "what these educators are calling dialogical is a process that hides the true nature of dialogue as a process of learning and knowing." Freire explains too that the problem with other critical pedagogies is that although there are dialogical moments, dialogue, in general is "overly focused on the individual and removed from the object of knowledge" (*DI*, 205). Ignored, Freire says, is that "dialogue as the process of learning and knowing establishes a previous requirement that always involves an epistemological curiosity about the very elements of the dialogue." Again, in the case of race, this would mean for Freire that "the very elements of the dialogue" with respect to race is that, its "intercultural relations with class and gender are neglected." From this point in the dialogue, Freire agrees with Macedo's comment: "[The] over-celebration of one's own location and history eclipses the possibility of engaging the object of knowledge by refusing to struggle directly with readings that involve theory" (*DI*, 205). Freire and Macedo seem to have in mind a theory that transcends black people's lived experience. Freire particularly implies this when he suggests that theory can only be theory if it can be universalized.

The task of epistemological curiosity is to help gain a rigorous understanding of their historical location so they can turn this understanding into knowledge, thus transcending and universalizing it. If one remains stuck in his or her historical location, he or she runs the risk of fossilizing his or her world disconnected from other realities (*DI*, 209).

At the same time as Freire acknowledges the absence of any discussion of race in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he is perplexed about why his critics still continue to direct the same criticism at him. Freire and his supporters seem to be confident that his work after *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* addresses race and racism. The question is not that Freire does not look at race, and that there is no doubt about his sincere commitment to fighting racism, but it is his conceptual limitations regarding race that must be called into question. For example, Macedo shared with Freire a conversation with an African American woman after one of Freire's public lectures. Macedo states that her concern was why is it that Freire's "work on liberation struggles does not ever address the race issue in general, and the African American plight in particular" (*DI*, 222). Responding to this criticism, Freire stated:

when I wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I tried to understand and analyze the phenomenon of oppression with respect to its social, existential, and individual tendencies. *I did not focus specifically on oppression marked by specificities* such as color, gender, race, and so forth. I was extremely more preoccupied with the oppressed as a social class. But this, in my view, does not at all mean that I was ignoring the racial oppression that I have denounced always and struggled against even as a child (*DI*, 223).

Freire here does not acknowledge social class as an "oppression marked by specificities." Nevertheless, when referring to an African American friend, who refused to except class as a significant factor in social analysis of the African American reality," Freire states: "one cannot reduce the analysis of racism to social class" but adds, "we cannot understand racism fully without a class analysis" (*DI*, 226-27). While this is partly true, Freire's problem lies with his understanding of that relationship. The fact is that the reality of African Americans in an anti-black racist society is that they live class through race and therefore as "black people." In other words, Freire ignores the view that human beings are situated beings. This suggests

a notion of subjectivity that recognizes that the “self” is irreducibly sentient. Thus, to be a human is “to discover [oneself] as being a particular physique, race, gender, and as born into a human situation—a particular spatial and temporal location, a general and personal history, a cultural and economic context.”¹⁷

The black worker is born into and constructs a personal history out of a particular labor situation of existence that is inseparable from anti-black forms of racial oppression, which is vividly described by Charles Denby in his autobiography.¹⁸ Denby begins his autobiography about his long-time activism in the radical black labor movement by recalling his family history and struggle as slaves and later as sharecroppers in Georgia. The historical memory of the black worker is intricately bound up with the remembrance of chattel slavery with the attempt to make slavery a natural condition of the black to make the black existentially a slave. The memory of chattel slavery functions by giving historical particularity to the lived context or situation of existence of African American workers in a racist society that considers them “black.” And to be a worker that is considered “black” is to have your body perceived not as a lived body but as physical body. In *Detroit I Do Mind Dying*, a book about the formation of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, black autoworkers understand that their bodies are perceived by others as thing-like when they refer to “automation,” which “forced [them] to work harder and faster under unsafe and unhealthy conditions” as “niggermentation.”¹⁹

The problem, then, with Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed is that he assigns to the category “working class” a universal and transcendental quality, meaning in part that it is beyond any particular lived context or situation of existence. Thus, when Freire says, “[he] did not focus specifically on oppression marked by the specificities [of race and color]” in that “[he] was more preoccupied with the oppressed as a social class,” Freire fails to see that working class identities, and class identities more generally, can also be “black.” So, why does Freire ignore this possibility that some people’s class-consciousness is conscious of their bodies as black? Perhaps, it has to do with the fact that in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as well as in other major works, for example, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, and his newer work about race, the body is not the subject of self-consciousness. However, though, the one time Freire mentions the “body” is in *Education for Critical Consciousness*, in which he states: “The human being is a conscious body. His or her consciousness, with its ‘intentionality’ towards the world, is always conscious of something. It is in a permanent state of moving towards reality” (*EC*, 146). And forty years after *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire still is unable to connect consciousness with bodily presence when he says: “What I call epistemological curiosity is the readiness and eagerness of a conscious body that is open to the task of engaging an object of knowledge” (*DI*, 206). So, not only does Freire not claim that “the human being is a conscious body,” but even more importantly he does not understand the relationship between racial subjectivity and bodily consciousness, particularly in the case of black oppression and liberation. Freire, in other words, ignores the potentially existential emancipatory role that reflective consciousness can play in the lived experience of the black as a racialized embodied subjectivity.

Even in his use of Frantz Fanon, which also is not included in his post *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* discussions of race, Freire does not use Fanon's phenomenological analysis of the lived experience of the colonized black, in which bodily consciousness is a central existential preoccupation. In anti-black racist culture, the lived context of existence is one in which black people struggle existentially against a self-consciousness of their own body as a body that is for others and not for themselves. Fanon writes: "In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness."²⁰ And to be a body that is conscious of itself through the consciousness of a third person is to be a body that is without a point of view or perspective in world. In which case, it is to be like an animal in the cold wilderness. "My body" says Fanon, "was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in the white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look a nigger, it's cold, the nigger is shivering, the nigger is shivering because he is cold."²¹ So why does Freire in his post *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* discussions regarding race not develop his idea that "the human being is a conscious body."

One reason is because of his claim that to "overindulge" in the lived experience of race is to ignore race as an epistemological problem; that is, as a problem of accurately knowing the true reality of race, which for him is its causal link with class. The weakness of Freire's position is that it does not recognize that racial epistemologies, and more specifically racist epistemologies, have an ontological content that compels one whom is "black" to constantly ask himself or herself not "who am I?" but "what am I?"²² In terms of the former, one's humanity and uniqueness is given, as for the latter one's humanity is constantly scrutinized and negated. As such, the black's lived experience is one in which she has to justify her existence—in this case; the worth of black people is constantly questioned. Taken for granted by Freire, then, is the fact that race has to be understood through ontology, or as Lewis Gordon argues not through epistemology but through what he calls "existential ontology."

For a pedagogy of liberation to be relevant to "black people," it has to engaged with their existential struggles against being diminished into merely a physical body. Which is a body that moves without thought or what Descartes referred to as an "automata," a term he used to describe a brute animal. And a body that is without thought is a body that is incapable of representing itself as an "I." As such it is a body that is absent of a self or ego, which is a body that is without intention and not capable of becoming. Hegel, for example, associated "becoming" not with animal desire, which is restricted to only biological or material preservation and is dependent upon Nature, or on transforming Nature for its sustenance, but with human desire for recognition and therefore for self-consciousness. For Hegel, animal desire is incapable of recognition because it "does not transcend itself as given, as body, it does not rise above itself; it has no distance with respect to itself in order to contemplate itself." Human desire is self-conscious existence because "there must be transcendence of self with respect to self as given." It is this desire for recognition that directs an individual to go beyond his or her immediacy in order to become self-conscious. This recognition is reciprocal and requires individuals to transcend their

own immediacy of being so as to “apprehend the existence of the other as natural and more than natural reality.”²³

But the existential problem of black recognition and self-consciousness in an anti-black world is that the black is reduced to “natural reality.” For Fanon, this meant that the reciprocal recognition that is assumed in Hegel’s master-slave relationship is inappropriate for understanding the existential situation of black consciousness. This is because, in an anti-black world where the presence of black people signifies the absence of human presence, black people function neither as the other that *recognizes*, nor as the other that is *recognized*. Fanon argues that by not recognizing the slave, not allowing him to go beyond his own immediate being, the master keeps the slave “within himself, depriving him even of this being-for-itself, denying the slave his humanity as a black. With this in mind, Fanon says, “[as] long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, that other will remain a theme of his actions. It is on that other being that his own human worth and reality depends. It is that other being in whom the meaning of his life is condensed.”²⁴ The problem of ontology, then, for those individuals not recognized is that their being is perceived as having no lived experience, no conscious existence no perspective in the world. And as Fanon writes: “Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black.”²⁵ Thus, the existential predicament of the black is with the problem of his recognition. But for the black to represent himself as an “I,” “self” or “person” to be a body that is a body that is for-itself, a lived body, a body with conscious intention, the black living in an anti-black racist society is compelled to turn to other blacks for human recognition.

The pedagogical-existential question that Freire should have posed is this: What modes of black reciprocal recognition result in forms of black consciousness that open up the possibility for a radical black humanist politics of freedom and liberation? For Freire’s pedagogy to be relevant for black people, it must take seriously the ontological and teleological problem of black identity. The former concern with ontology is reflected in the way blacks name themselves, suggesting the problem of “who they are.” Cornel West, for example, says that “the existential predicament of New World Africans in the United States [is related to] how they were made and remade themselves into colored, Negro, black, and African American human beings.” It is, however, in defining who they are and consequently how they represent their “personhood” as “black people” that necessitates how they act morally and ethically in the world. West states: “This focus puts a premium on black cultural agency as a precondition for black collective insurgency.”²⁶ The problem of black identity therefore is bound up with the teleological problem of purpose, or as Lewis Gordon says: “with the question of what ought to be the strivings of Africana people.” This question Gordon explains that is a “teleological concern, [black] identity confronts Africana people as a problem of moral action.” The problem with Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed is that by not indulging in the lived experience of the black, Freire’s pedagogy in fact denies black existence and in doing so it denies that black people have a point of view in the world. Yet, this point of view is the very place that a black radical humanist pedagogy of liberation in the Africana context begins.

1. Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, "Forward," in *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1987), xii.
2. Maria del Pilar O'Cadiz, Pia Lindquist Wong and Carlos Alberto Torres, eds., *Education and Democracy: Paulo Freire, Social Movements, and Educational Reform in São Paulo* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998) 20.
3. *Ibid.*, 20.
4. *Ibid.*, 21.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Cambridge: *Harvard Educational Review*, Monograph Series no. 1, 1975), 5-6.
7. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 60.
8. Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, 6.
9. Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum, 1990) 3. This book will be cited as *EC* in the text for all subsequent references.
10. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) 3.
11. Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, 16.
12. *Ibid.*, 16.
13. Paulo Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers* (Boulder: Westview, 1998) 76.
14. *Ibid.*, 77.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo. "A Dialogue: Culture, Language, and Race," in *Breaking Free: The Transformative Power of Critical Pedagogy*, ed. Pepi Leistyna, Arlie Woodrum, and Stephen A. Sherblom (Cambridge: Harvard Educational Review, 1996), 223-24. This essay will be cited as *DI* in the text for all subsequent references.
17. Sonia Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 12.
18. Charles Denby, *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal* (Boston: South End Press, 1978).
19. Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: a Study in Urban Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975).
20. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 110.
21. *Ibid.*, 110.
22. See Lewis R. Gordon, "Introduction: Black Existential Philosophy" in *Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*. ed. Lewis R. Gordon (London: Routledge, 1997); also see interview with Lewis Gordon in *African American Philosophers: 17 Conversations* (London: Routledge, 1998).
23. Alexandre Kojève *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Allen Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 40-41.
24. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, 216-17.
25. *Ibid.*, 110.
26. Cornel West. "Afterwords" in *The House That Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 302.