

Review of

Paulo Freire: A Philosophical Biography

by Walter Omar Kohan (Jason Wozniak & Samuel D Rocha, Trans.), New York: Bloomsbury, 2021

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It is hard to overstate Paulo Freire's influence on educational theory. Whether defended quantitatively – for example, through Bloomsbury's claim that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has sold over a million copies, or the tens of thousands of citations of Freire's work in multiple languages – or argued qualitatively – for example, through his influence on scholars such as bell hooks and Henry Giroux – Freire's influence on the field of education is gigantic, as is the corpus of Freire-related literature which seems to balloon endlessly. Within such a plethora of works, it may be tempting to skim over some of the less well-known contributions. Yet, the philosophical biography of Freire by Walter Kohan – recently translated into English – may be of interest specifically because Kohan writes from a Brazilian context, and his insights are less shaped by some of the dominant Freirean voices in the North American academy. Kohan's project takes up the “thought and life” (p. 7) of Brazil's most famous educator to understand their “educational and philosophical value” and “to think with Freire on the specificity of the political value of the task of educating” (p. 9). Kohan does so through a fivefold thematization of principles, which, he painstakingly clarifies, are to be understood as beginnings or initiations or gestures through which to consider and think with Freire. Those beginnings are: life, equality, love, errantry, and childhood/infancy. If one comes to this text looking for merely an exegetical treatment of Freire's texts distilled into philosophical concepts, one will be disappointed. Instead, the reader will find the thematization drawn from Freire's corpus offered as conceptual tapestries interwoven with the events of Freire's life, which in turn are put into conversation with other thinkers, resulting in a polyvocal dialogue with and around Freire – a dialogue thickened with five appendices including interviews, conversations, and essays.

The five thematizations that constitute the majority of the text are offered as thick principles. The thickness of these beginnings results from Kohan's attempt at non-reductive syncretization. Rather than creating “thin” principles or concepts that may neatly contain one clear and delineated idea but would not reflect the breadth of Freire's life and work, Kohan elects to retain the large scope of Freire's somewhat unwieldy corpus by developing five principles, each of which contains multiple ideas. I found the duality of Kohan's aims – achieving brevity by reducing his themes to five principles, while retaining complexity within each principle – at the same time frustrating and generative. Perhaps my frustration was derived from approaching the text expecting clearly defined conceptual arrangements, and instead encountering conglomerate formulations of principles/beginnings or “births” (p. 12). Thus, if the reader comes with the expectation of exploring conglomerate principles and assemblages, they may elude the frustrations I encountered, thereby enabling a reveling in what is offered rather than being disappointed in what the text is not.

For the richness of Kohan's offering is precisely in the conglomerate nature of the thematization. The first principle is that of life, wherein Kohan brings together biological life, philosophy, education, school, and thinking as being intertwined, and reframes this corpus as existence, which he argues is its own political and philosophical education. Second, equality is used to expand somewhat on the first

principle, as equality is that of equality of life potential. In dialogue with Rancière, Jacotot, and Freire, Kohan builds out the meaning of equality beyond equality of intellect and toward ontological equality of a person's life potential. Third, Kohan assembles a sweeping principle of love that brings together several facets of love: love as inhabited, love as expansive, love as a life force, love as knowing, and love as political. Together, these aspects texture the space and time of love, shaping the principle towards the love of the stranger as an educational political force. Fourth, errantry is taken up in a twofold sense – wandering and erring – which in turn are multiplied through an exposition of travel, marches, exile, and trips. These forays, Kohan suggests, prompt questioning, imagining a world otherwise, and an interplay of ethics, aesthetics, and politics, all of which, it is argued, enable productive erring. Finally, childhood/infancy is developed thematically as an ongoing beginning, an initiation of questioning, and an induction into making connections. Thus, in a creative reversal, childhood becomes what educates, not what education brings one out of. Together, these five thematizations provide Kohan room to survey, comment on, and think with Freire about Freire's life and work, and Kohan thereby leaves the reader with a portrait, albeit a somewhat impressionistic one, of Freire.

Several Freirean traces infuse Kohan's treatment of Freire, such that the reader is immersed in a Freirean-informed exposition of Freire wherein the form and content intermingle. On occasion, this intermingling results in a somewhat slippery text; for example, the layered reading of "childhood" is described by Kohan as "my childlike reading of the childhood in Freire, of his childhood" (p. 149). Also worth mentioning is resistance to a strict linear method in favour of praxis and dialogue. Such resistance can be seen in Kohan's refusal to limit himself to the textual Freire, or even the human/homo sapiens Freire; instead, Kohan adds and dabbles in the archetypal/heroic Freire, the saint of education, the Socrates of Pernambuco. Such a non-curtailed method, however, enables Kohan to make interesting claims, such as that Freire "makes his life into a philosophical problem" and "it is life that carries theory, not the other way around" (p. 41). Furthermore, translations, global relations, and the composition of work in Portuguese, Spanish, and English make themselves felt throughout the book through reflexive remarks in the content and explanations of translation choices in the footnotes. The constitutive nature of the multilingual and global aspects of Freire's and Kohan's work thereby creates yet another tonality through which the text may be read, so much so that the prefatory note from the translators reports a self-awareness of their own (somewhat idiosyncratic) mirroring of languages and places inhabited by Freire and this text by Kohan. Finally, the significance of the political context and situation assert themselves. Just as Freire's work and subsequent literary frame are marked by his political literacy campaigns and exile to Chile, so too Kohan's work on Freire is marked and precipitated by the rise of Jair Bolsonaro and educational reforms in Brazil.

While the layering informs Kohan's life-wor(l)d creation of Freire, the section entitled "Childhood" in the English translation flirts with the risks of such an approach. The reader is confronted with a blended Kohan-Freire philosophical biography, which perhaps obscures Freire's own thoughts and concepts. A blended conceptual offering is of course always present when reading secondary literature, since in addition to challenges of interpretation by the reader and translator, the reader necessarily must consider the imprecise line where the person being written about ends and the author of the secondary literature begins. But where the potential obfuscation and fusing occurs in this text is found most poignantly through the importation of Kohan's own intellectual projects around childhood/infancy. That Kohan's work in developing philosophical conceptions of childhood may be laudable in and of itself is not up for debate here; rather that Kohan finds such a harmonious conceptual partner in Freire leaves the reader perhaps more uncertain than ever as to where Freire's conceptual arrangement of childhood ends and Kohan's own philosophical conception of childhood begins. This uncertainty is both compounded and clarified by the fifth appendix, in which Kohan attempts to connect Freire to the "philosophy for children" movement.

Interpretive quandaries aside, Kohan's work on Freire is no doubt generative for further praxis in education. He explicitly requests praxis from the reader in the epilogue, wherein he proposes that each of the five principles/beginnings/gestures be put into practice for one day of the school week to see

what might come out of these beginnings. Such praxis will in turn be a further practice of modifying Kohan's Freire, creating one's own Kohan-Freire hybrid mix. The resultant ever-amorphous Freire composite alongside the morphing principles/beginnings is faithful to the Freire who did not want to be repeated, but continually opened by new questions, and in so doing resists the impending fascism of the political moment with its nationalist xenophobia, instrumental-economization, uniformity, and control, which precipitated Kohan's work. Kohan was writing during the rise of Bolsonaro in Brazil and his purging and purification of Brazilian education. This is a context named by Antonia Darder in the opening sentence of the foreword as being an "authoritarian climate of neoliberal fascism." And here at this unsettling end, it is apt to have returned to a beginning.

About the Author

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