

Review Response:

On 'Blind Spots' and 'Unfinishedness' – A Brief Response to Sihra

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I have read with interest Karen Sihra's review of my book, *Liberating Praxis* (this issue, pp. 109-113). I thank her for taking the trouble to review this text and also for her engagement with some of the issues raised in this book. I too have been grappling with some of these issues for a number of years. I would like to limit my response to two points raised by Sihra: the issue of 'blind spots' borrowed from bell hooks (1993, 1994) and the issue of 'unfinishedness'. The latter is a central theme throughout my exposition of Freire's work. This is closely related to the other central theme of 'reinvention' which is given considerable treatment in the last two chapters of the book, where two Mediterranean contexts are dealt with and where I modestly claim some originality for this work.

While I consider it unfair to say that I overlook shortcomings in Freire's work in this volume (my discussions of such aspects of his work as his earlier gender obliviousness, his crude and problematic assertions in this regard, his limited discussion on race, and his anthropocentrism should suggest otherwise), I would like to remind the reviewer of a point made on page 93. There I state that I dedicated a whole chapter of my previous work, *Gramsci Freire and Adult Education* (Mayo, 1999), to the discussion of many 'blind spots' in both Gramsci's and Freire's works. In this chapter, I dealt with such issues as his overlooking certain aspects of class oppression, gender oppression, racial oppression and the contemporary role of information technology. I also underscored the limits of his discussion around 'class suicide', habitus and marginalisation. The chapter, entitled 'Some of the Limitations of Gramsci and Freire for a Contemporary project', was originally published as a stand alone piece in the journal, *Humanity & Society* (Mayo, 1994) with the title: 'Gramsci, Freire and Radical Adult Education: A Few 'Blind Spots'.' It is ironic that the reviewer should refer to my failure to discuss Freire's "blind spots." The inspiration for the use of the same term in both cases derived from the same source, bell hooks. The long and short of this is that, when writing the book under review, I was most reluctant to rehearse arguments I had already expressed in my previously published work. A writer (Lauri-Lucente, 2005) wrote recently that she regards the two books as constituting a diptych.

Incidentally, I conclude the first book by referring to the work contained therein as "an unfinished canvas, the issues raised being far from settled." This brings me to the point raised by Sihra concerning my purported treatment of Freire's work as a "finished project." To this end, she reproduces well known arguments by Kathleen Weiler. By what stretch of the imagination, and on the basis of what evidence, does the reviewer arrive at such a conclusion? I constantly refer to Freire's conceptions of education, democracy and decolonization, and the struggle for freedom, coherence and the reinvention of power, as having no endpoint. To state that I treat Freire's work as a finished project strikes me as being a trifle gratuitous. The processes involved are ongoing characterized by annunciation and denunciation. I maintain this throughout the book, including my expository chapter 3

where I revisit some of Freire's pre-1990s ideas to *contextualise* them and for the benefit of those readers not previously acquainted with Freire's work. I also maintain this, most clearly, on pages 93 and 94:

Gaining coherence, for Freire, entails gaining greater awareness of one's 'unfinishedness'... and one's 'multiple and layered identities'. These identities are often contradictory, rendering a person oppressed in one context and an oppressor in another, in the latter case being a manifestation of the 'oppressor within', a very important theme in Freire's most celebrated work. This makes nonsense of the criticism, often leveled at Freire in US circles, that he fails to recognize that one can be oppressed in one situation and an oppressor in another and that he posits a binary opposition between oppressor and oppressed. If anything, the relations between oppressor and oppressed have always been presented by Freire as *dialectical* rather than as binary opposites ...

Gaining greater coherence entails getting to know and engaging in solidarity with, as well as learning from, the 'other'. This theme becomes all the more pertinent given the quest, among democratic educators/cultural workers, to press for a revolutionary, critical form of multiculturalism The theme of gaining coherence is a recurring one in Freire's later work, especially in a brilliant piece that constitutes a response to a number of commentators on his work It reflects recognition, on Freire's part, that forms of domestication can emerge from an ostensibly emancipatory practice. The contradictions arising from our multiple and layered subjectivities render this a constant possibility. Rather than indulging in a nihilistic renunciation of attempts at an empowering pedagogical practice, Freire sees this as one of the strengths of critical pedagogy. Being based on *praxis*, on the recognition of our 'unfinishedness' as human beings and as pedagogues and on the constant need to engage in annunciation and denunciation, genuine critical pedagogy involves the ongoing struggle of reflecting on oneself, on the social collectivity involved and on the pedagogical practice. This is done with a view to transformative action - action intended to enable one to confront one's contradictions to become less 'unfinished'/incomplete, less incoherent. This emerges from the piece by Freire in *Mentoring the Mentor* but it was always present in his work. It is implied in Freire's exhortation, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, to recognize the presence of and to confront the 'oppressor within' (the 'oppressor consciousness' - the internalization of the oppressor's image). In this work, Freire had argued that, through a problem-posing approach to education, human beings are conceived of as persons engaged in a "process of becoming"; they are unfinished persons engaged in and with an "unfinished reality."... Being central to his notion of history as possibility, the notion of 'incompleteness' remains a central theme in his work and features in practically all of his later works which include at least one essay, available in English translation, focusing on the topic ... (NB. I left out the references for the purpose of space)

Because 'unfinishedness' is one of the strengths of critical pedagogy, of which Freire is widely held to be a major exponent, its insights can continue to be enhanced and rendered "less incomplete" through a transcendence of its perceived contours to incorporate insights from other sources of knowledge and learning. This, for instance, is what the Paulo Freire Institute tries to accomplish through its transcendence of the anthropocentrism of much of Freire's work (though his last book, *Pedagogy of Indignation*, expresses more bio-centric concerns) to provide signposts for an eco-pedagogy. The 'unfinishedness' and dynamic nature of Freire's pedagogical philosophy allows it to be *reinvented* in different settings and contexts ('malleability' is too unfortunate a choice of word, in my view), the kind of reinvention I attempted in the chapters on the Mediterranean and my native Malta. For, far from being 'malleable', Freire's ideas, when appropriately contextualised and not denuded of their underlying

political-philosophical underpinnings, serve as a source of inspiration and are capable of reinvention in different settings *with emancipatory and social justice goals in mind*. I would like to think that my writing in these two exploratory chapters is of a tentative and groping nature, appropriate for what should be an *ongoing* (unfinished) process of enquiry.

These two points notwithstanding, I still found much in the review that is instructive and constructive.

References

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