

Epistemology of the Oppressed: The Dialectics of Paulo Freire's Theory of Knowledge

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Introduction

As part of a critical analysis of his work, this paper argues that, at its core, Freire's critical, liberatory pedagogy as conceived in *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (P. Freire, 1982a), coherently systematized in *Extension or Communication* (P. Freire, 1982b) and carried out through *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (P. Freire, 1974) into his later works (P. Freire, 1992, 1998a; Shor & Freire, 1987), is grounded in a thoroughly Marxist, or dialectical materialist, theory of knowledge (Roberts, 2003). It is my contention in this paper that an explication of Freire's dialectical materialist epistemology provides for an increased understanding Freire's liberatory pedagogy as a whole because it is difficult to grasp Freire's pedagogy without understanding its Marxism (Allman, 1999).[i]

Even within Leftist, progressive, and critical education, the extent and trajectory of Freire's Marxism has consistently been up for debate. For instance, at the 2007 American Educational Research Association annual meeting, in a session entitled, "Paulo Freire and Marxism: Convergences and Complexities," a colleague and friend asserted that if we look at early Freire, we will find no Marx. Others, while admitting to Freire being influenced by Marxism, place it as one amongst a list of other cultural and political influences on Freire's thinking and work at the time (see, e.g., A. M. A. Freire & Macedo, 1998; Schugurensky, 1998). Still others make strong claims regarding Freire's Marxism largely on political grounds (see, e.g., McLaren, 2000). Although we may quibble over details, I generally embrace the wrangling regarding Freire and Marxism amongst critical educators, and would consider many of the authors mentioned here to be allies and comrades in our shared politics of educational and social transformation. However, one of my main concerns is that, aside from his politics of self-liberation and empowerment vis-à-vis education, a sustained explication of the Marxism in Freire's pedagogy remains absent. Granted, there are

excellent treatises on Freire's Marxist politics (McLaren, 2000), his Marxist conception of consciousness (Allman, 1999), and the power of his legacy for teachers and activists today (Darder, 2002), but a clear analysis of the Marxism within his conception of critical, liberatory pedagogy, has yet to be completed.

This paper is an attempt at such an analysis. Here my intension is to push in two directions. In the main, this article serves to provide a detailed, text-based outline of how Freire's pedagogy, at its core, is based on a Marxist, dialectical materialist epistemological view of consciousness, human interaction, and material transformation (Au & Apple, 2007). In this way I hope to encourage my colleagues in critical educational theory and politics to delve deeper into what I would argue is a very tangible conception of Freire the educator also as Freire the Marxist - a conception that, as I shall show, remains consistent throughout the corpus of his work (Aronowitz, 1993; McLaren, 2000), including his earliest writings translated into English. The secondary purpose of taking up this particular argument regarding Freirian pedagogy is to offer a firm defense against many of Freire's detractors, which I will later contend, maintain deep misunderstandings of Freire's dialectical materialism and therefore propagate deeply misplaced criticisms of his pedagogical framework (Au & Apple, 2007).

In this paper I begin with a very brief discussion of the basic tenets of dialectical materialism. I then follow with a detailed reading of Freire's works, finding textual support for the argument that Freire's epistemological underpinnings were in fact deeply committed to a dialectical materialist philosophical worldview and explain how Freire's conception of liberatory pedagogy flows directly from his epistemological commitments. Finally, I conclude by arguing that a lack of understanding of Freire's epistemological foundation leads to gross misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Freire's conception of liberatory pedagogy, using work from the collection *Rethinking Freire* (Bowers & Apffel-Marglin, 2005) as an illustration of one such case.

Dialectical Materialism and Freire's Epistemology

Dialectical materialism is a complex theoretical and philosophical system. For reasons of length, in this paper I will not be able to provide a full explication of this system of

thought and analysis. However, in order to explain Freire's application of dialectical materialist epistemology, a brief explanation of some basic concepts of dialectical materialism are required. At the heart of dialectics is the idea that all "things" are actually processes, that these processes are in constant motion, or development, and that this development is driven by the tension created by two interrelated opposites acting in contradiction with each other (Gadotti, 1996; Ollman, 2003; Woods & Grant, 2002). These two opposites require each other to exist (Allman, 1999), for together they make up a unified whole. Hence they are deeply integrated even though they are considered to be "opposites." A dialectical conception also sees a world as a layered, interrelated system, a totality, a chain of relationships and processes (Gadotti, 1996; Ollman, 2003; Sayers, 1990).

Dialectical philosophy is distinctively different from the individualist rational logic of the Enlightenment because in dialectics things can only be understood in relation to each other and cannot be analyzed as independently existing pieces (Allman, 1999). Contrary to dialectics, in the rationalist tradition, most notably the positivistic sciences, things exist in isolation of each other and are analyzed as if they fixed in space and time (Benton & Craib, 2001). This particular distinction will be of importance for the analysis contained in this paper. Further, to be "materialist" in a philosophical sense means that consciousness or ideas spring from and are a reflection of our interaction with an actually existing material world, and not vice versa - that is, the material world emerging from consciousness alone (Lenin, 1972). Within Marxist theory, dialectics and materialism need to be together to make sense because the point is to (1) understand the interrelated processes happening in the material world and (2) provide a space for human intervention in those processes to change that material world for the better. As we will see with Freire's conception, dialectical materialism provides a framework for analyzing objectively existing conditions in the world (i.e., various forms of oppression), for understanding that humans can become actively conscious of both the conditions themselves and their sources, and for changing these conditions through human (social) intervention and action.

Freire's Epistemological Materialism

Throughout his work, Freire regularly expressed his belief that there was a world that existed objectively outside of human consciousness, and in this way he was a

materialist. He talked about this in terms of an "objective social reality" (P. Freire, 1974, 1982a), "objective conditions" (P. Freire, 2004), and more general references to human interaction and transformation of "reality" or the "world" (P. Freire, 1974, 1982a, 1992, 1998b; P. Freire & Macedo, 1987; Shor & Freire, 1987). Additionally Freire (1982b) critiqued subjective, idealist perspectives on reality while affirming his position that an objective reality does indeed exist:

[Subjectivity] starts by denying all concrete, objective reality and declares that the consciousness is the exclusive creator of its own concrete reality... Idealism errs in affirming ideas which are separate from reality govern the historical process. (pp. 146-147)

To be clear, this is not to say that Freire held onto the belief that we know the objective world in a completely objective manner. In his work he attempted to posit a dialectical relationship between the objective world and our subjective understanding and knowledge of that world. For instance, in *Politics and Education* (P. Freire, 1998b), he addresses the issue as follows:

Consciousness and the world cannot be understood separately, in a dichotomized fashion, but rather must be seen in their contradictory relations. Not even consciousness is an arbitrary producer of the world or of objectivity, nor is it a pure reflection of the world. (p. 19)

Philosophically, then, Freire did indeed see an objective world outside of our consciousness, but he recognized that it was a world that we learn through our subjective lenses as human beings (Roberts, 2003).

Another issue concerning Freire's epistemological materialism is whether or not he thought objective reality may actually be known. Without providing much evidence, in their book, *Reading Freire and Habermas*, Morrow and Torres (2002) assert that Freire did not believe that "reality can be directly understood 'in itself'" (p. 34), aligning Freire with a Kantian conception of reality. Lenin (1972) and others (e.g., Bhaskar, 1989) have correctly argued that this position is ultimately philosophically idealist because if you can't know material reality "in itself," then the existence of that reality is left completely to the subjective consciousness to create reality's existence. Contrary to Morrow and Torres' assertion, Freire did indeed maintain a materialist conception of learning. For instance, in one of his earliest works, *Education as a Practice of Freedom*, Freire (1982a) stated that the world was "an objective reality,

independent of oneself, capable of being known" (p. 3). In another early work, *Extension or Communication*, Freire (1982b) constantly refers to the "knowable object" (see, e.g., pgs. 101, 149, 152, 161). This extends into his dialogue with Ira Shor, *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (Shor & Freire, 1987, see pg. 100), and is perhaps best expressed in his *A Pedagogy of Freedom* (P. Freire, 1998a), published posthumously, where Freire asserts that, "Our capacity to learn, the source of our capacity to teach, suggests and implies that we also have a capacity to grasp the substantiveness/essence of the object of our knowledge" (p. 66, emphasis added).

The Freirian Dialectics of Consciousness and Praxis

Freire's conception of human consciousness springs directly from his materialism (Roberts, 2003). Freire (1982a) starts with the idea that human consciousness is distinct because humans, "are not only *in* the world, but *with* the world" (p. 3) and have "the capacity to adapt ... to reality *plus* the critical capacity to make choices and transform that reality" (p. 4). It is this core Marxist conception of human consciousness in dialectical relation with material reality (Au, 2007; Gilbert, 2003; Marx, 1978; Marx & Engels, 1978) that we see shaping Freire's earlier work (P. Freire, 1974, 1982a, 1982b), and it is one that continued into his last writings (P. Freire, 2004). Freire (Davis & Freire, 1981) explains his dialectical materialist epistemology under the concept of *conscientização*, where he explains that,

Only when we understand the 'dialecticity' between consciousness and the world - that is, when we know that we don't have a consciousness here and the world there but, on the contrary, when both of them, the objectivity and the subjectivity, are incarnating dialectically, is it possible to understand what *conscientização* is, and to understand the role of consciousness in the liberation of humanity. (p. 62)

Keeping within the Marxist tradition, and echoing both Vygotsky's (1987) and Lenin's (1975) conceptions of consciousness (Au, 2007), Freire sees "consciousness as consciousness of consciousness" (P. Freire, 1974, p. 107), and that "*Consciousness is intentionality towards the world*" (Davis & Freire, 1981, p. 58, original emphasis).

Additionally Freire recognizes that because humans are part of the world, and that because our consciousness comes from dialectical interaction with that world, other

humans included, ultimately our consciousness is first and foremost a social consciousness (P. Freire & Macedo, 1987, 1995; Roberts, 2003). Thus, for Freire (1982b) "Subjects cannot think alone" and that there "is no longer an 'I think' but 'we think'" (p. 137). Freire unites these conceptualizations to find that, because we are in constant, dialectical, critical reflection with the material and social worlds, and because as humans we have the capacity to act with volition on our critical reflection to change those worlds, we are not totally "determined beings" since we can "reflect critically about [our] conditioning process and go beyond it" (P. Freire, 1998b, p. 20). This process of human critical reflection on the world and taking conscious, transformative action on that world is how Freire conceives of "praxis" (Davis & Freire, 1981; P. Freire, 1974, 1982a, 1982b), which is the core of his epistemology. Freire (1982b) explains that,

[H]uman beings ... are being of 'praxis': of action and of reflection. Humans find themselves marked by the results of their own actions in their relations with the world, and through the action on it. By acting they transform; by transforming they create a reality which conditions their manner of acting. (p. 102)

Praxis, however, requires that humans, both individually and collectively, act as Subjects in the world as opposed to being objects to be acted upon (P. Freire, 1974, 1982a, 1982b). As Subjects, then, humans, who are in a constant state of development, can act to transform their reality and "go on to a *state of being*, in search of *becoming more* fully human" (P. Freire, 1982b, p. 145). By implication, to treat humans as objects, thereby lessening their abilities to act to transform their world, is to dehumanize them (P. Freire, 1982a, p. 5), a state of being which engenders a state of oppression (P. Freire, 1974, p. 28).

Freire is also committed to a dialectical epistemology that asserts that we can know things as integrated totalities (Roberts, 2003) and that we learn through a dialectical process of breaking things down into parts and "retotalizing" them yet again (P. Freire, 1974; P. Freire & Macedo, 1995; Shor & Freire, 1987). He states that:

[W]hat we do when we try to establish a cognitive or epistemological relationship with the object to be known, when we get it into our hands, grasp it, and begin to ask ourselves about it, what we really begin to do is to take it as a *totality*. We then begin to split it into its constituent parts ... In a certain moment, even though we may not have exhausted the process of splitting the object, we try to understand it now in its totality. We try to *retotalize* the totality which we

split! ... The moment of summarizing has to do with this effort of retotalizing of the totality we divided into parts. (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 161)

Additionally, Freire's epistemology frames knowledge as always changing, always developing, as humans seek out causality and critically analyze that same causality in order to improve their epistemological grasp of something (P. Freire, 1982a, 1982b; Roberts, 2003).

In essence, the summary I offer here is an explication of Freire's humanism. For Freire, to be human is to be able to both understand the world and take action to change that world. It is in taking that action, in the movement from being object to subject, where we become full human beings. It is this sense of humanization through praxis that defines Freire's ontology (Glass, 2001; Roberts, 2003) and underlies his epistemology and pedagogy.[ii] As I explain in the next section, Freire's pedagogy extends directly from these epistemological underpinnings.

Freire's Liberatory Pedagogy[iii]

Based on the above analysis, it is clear that Freire is interested in developing a pedagogy that does two things. First it needs to be a pedagogy that enables both students and teachers to develop a critically conscious understanding of their relationship with the world. For instance, he asserts that,

[E]ducation for freedom implies constantly, permanently, the exercise of consciousness turning in on itself in order to discover itself in the relationships with the world, trying to explain the reasons which can make clear the concrete situation people have in the world. (Freire in Davis & Freire, 1981, p. 59)

Second, and intertwined with the first, is that this pedagogy, in developing consciousness, helps enable both the teacher and the student to become Subjects as people who "become consciously aware of [their] context and [their] condition as a human being as Subject ... [and] become an instrument of choice" (P. Freire, 1982a, p. 56). In becoming Subjects, then, both teachers and students are posited as *cognitive* subjects and "critical agents in the act of knowing" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 33). For Freire (1998a) this means that,

[A]ll educational practice requires the existence of 'subjects,' who while teaching, learn. And who in learning also teach. The reciprocal learning between teachers and students is what gives educational practice its gnostic character. (p. 67)

However, to take away a Subject's right to conscious awareness, to "manipulate" them and remove their "right to transform the world," is oppressive, and within Freire's pedagogy, "Education cannot take this road. To be authentic it must be liberating" (P. Freire, 1982b, p. 148). To merely reflect on the world in a critical manner as part of the development of consciousness is not enough, nor is it enough to establish the Subject's right to transform the world, as Freire remarks, "We need praxis or, in other words, we need to transform the reality in which we find ourselves" (Freire in, Davis & Freire, 1981, p. 59). Freire (1982b) quite clearly sums up his vision of what the objective of liberatory pedagogy is:

Any attempt at mass education ... must possess a basic aim: to make it possible for human beings, through the problematizing of the unity being-world (or of human beings in their relations with the world and with other human beings) to penetrate more deeply the *prise de conscience* of the reality in which they exist. This deepening of the *prise de conscience*, which must develop in the action which transforms reality, produces with this action an overlaying of basically sensuous knowledge of reality with that which touches the *raison d'etre* of this reality. People take over the position they have in their *here and now*. This results (and at the same time it produces this) in their discovering their own presence within a totality, within a structure, and not as 'imprisoned' or 'stuck to' the structure or its parts. (p. 107)

Hence, Freire's liberatory pedagogy revolves around the central idea of "praxis," and seeks to be a pedagogy that enables students and teachers to be Subjects who can look at reality, critically reflect upon that reality, and take transformative action to change that reality based upon the original critical reflection, thereby deepening their consciousness and changing the world for the better. Pedagogically, Freire thus advocates a process of problem posing, coding/decoding, and dialogue as a means of developing critical consciousness for social transformation both in the classroom and in the world.

Problem Posing and Decoding

Freire perhaps best sums up why problem-posing education works for a liberatory pedagogy in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (P. Freire, 1974):

In problem-posing education, [humans] develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. Although the dialectical relations of [humans] with the world exist independently of how these relations are perceived (or whether or not they are perceived at all), it is also true that the form of action [humans] adopt is to a large extent a function of how they perceive themselves in the world. (pp. 70-71)

One of the prime reasons for the use of problem-posing, then, is so that humans, as Subjects, can learn that reality is not static or fixed - a core concept of dialectical materialism. This is key to the concept of praxis, because if reality were fixed, then there would be nothing humans could do to transform that reality, regardless of critical reflection. In a static reality, humans would no longer be Subjects because their world would now be fixed and unchangeable, thus making their lives completely determined. This is why Freire roots problem-posing in action itself, where he explains,

The process of problematization implies a critical return to action. It starts from action and returns to it. The process of problematization is basically someone's reflection on a content which results from an act, or reflection on the act itself in order to act better together with others within the framework of reality. There can be no problematization without reality. Discussion about *transcendence* must take its point of departure from discussion on the *here*, which for humans is always a *now* too. (P. Freire, 1982b, p. 154)

Functionally, within Freire's pedagogy, problem-posing happens through a process of coding and decoding reality: "The interlocutor-Subjects, faced with a pedagogical 'codification' (problem-situation) ... concentrate on it, seeking through dialogue the significant comprehension of its meaning" (P. Freire, 1982b, p. 161). This process correlates with Freire's conception of the development of consciousness, where the individual Subject comprehends reality as a totality to be broken down and "retotalized" through analysis. In the case of problem-posing, a "problem-situation" is presented to or raised by the students, and in this moment the "problem-situation" represents a coded totality to be decoded by the students. Thus the coding and

decoding of "problem-situations" becomes a key component of Freire's liberatory pedagogy (for a model of this process, see, Shor, 1992). Freire (1974) also discusses the process of coding/decoding in terms of the development and analysis of what he calls "generative themes." In essence these are themes of life that are generated from "significant dimensions of an individual's contextual reality" (p. 95). Like the coding/decoding process, these "significant dimensions" are analyzed as interacting dimensions of "total reality," which he also refers to as the "thematic universe." Through an investigation of generative themes as part of a larger thematic universe (the totality), humans can be introduced "to a critical form of thinking about their world" (p. 95).

Dialogue

Dialogue is another fundamental aspect of Freire's liberatory pedagogy, and it would be difficult over-emphasize its importance in his conception. In a general sense, Freire sees dialogue as part of the history of the development of human consciousness. He writes,

[d]ialogue must be understood as something taking part in the very historical nature of human beings. It is part of our historical progress in becoming human beings. That is, dialogue is a kind of necessary posture to the extent that humans have become more and more critically communicative beings. Dialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect on the reality as they make and remake it. (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 98)

In this way, through dialogue human beings both know what they know and know what they don't know, and in reflection of this imperfect knowledge, human beings can then improve their knowledge and therefore improve their ability to transform reality (Shor & Freire, 1987). Because dialogue entails active reflection in relation to other human beings, it is fundamentally social, grounded in the material world (society included), and therefore requires critical thinking. It is a type of critical thinking which according to Freire (1974),

... discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and [humans] and admits of no dichotomy between them - thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity - thinking which does not separate itself from action... (pp. 80-81)

Again, Freire's dialectics are apparent here. As he points out, this critical thinking is in fact never ending because reality is in constant transformation, in constant process, and as such, humans are constantly taking action through dialogue with each other and in their interactions with the world.

Epistemologically, then, for Freirian liberatory pedagogy, it is through dialogue about an object of study that, "we try to reveal it, unveil it, see its reasons for being like it is, the political and historical context of the material. This ... is the act of knowing ... " (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 13). This in turn outlines the pedagogical foundation of dialogue, as he explains that,

[S]ince dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's 'depositing' ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be 'consumed' by the discussants ... Because dialogue is an encounter among [humans] who name the world, it must not be a situation where some [humans] name it on behalf of others. (P. Freire, 1974, p. 77)

Hence, if we are in dialogue, we cannot "deposit" our ideas into other people. This would be to treat them as object, determined and manipulated, and take part in what Freire (1974) so appropriately labeled the "banking" method of education. To learn in dialogue means to name the world together with others in a social act, a process which in turn helps you understand it for yourself. Consequently, Freire (1974) posits that, "I cannot think *for* others or *without* others, no one can think *for me* ... Producing and acting upon [our] own ideas - not consuming those of others - must constitute [this] process" (p. 100). In this way, both students and teachers enter into a dialogical relationship as Subjects where both learn (P. Freire, 1998a), where "the flow is in both directions" (P. Freire, 1982b, p. 125). And even though the teacher may in fact "know" more or differently about an object of study, in a dialogical relationship the educator is able to re-know the object through the student's knowing of the object as well (Shor & Freire, 1987). As Freire (1974) explains, it is within the framework of this dialogical pedagogy that teachers and students are in essence remade:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is [themselves] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught

also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (p. 67)

Freirian Pedagogic Authority

However, being remade as "teacher-student with students-teachers" does not suddenly create a completely horizontal relationship where students and teachers are equal. They still maintain their individual identities as dialectical opposites in the process of education. As Freire (1992) writes:

Dialogue between teachers and students does not place them on the same footing professionally ... Teachers and students are not identical...After all, it is a *difference* between them that makes them precisely students or teachers. Were they simply identical, each could be the other. Dialogue is meaningful precisely because the dialogical subjects, the agents in the dialogue, not only retain their identity, but actively defend it, and thus grow together. Precisely on this account, dialogue does not *level* them, does not 'even them out,' reduce them to each other. (p. 101)

Within Freire's pedagogy, then, for the students and teacher to be in dialogue does not impose a false equality on their relationship. To the contrary, in liberatory pedagogy, the teacher in fact maintains authority and directiveness in the learning *process*. For the teacher this means being an *authority* in the classroom but not *authoritarian*. As Freire (1992) explains, "[T]he moment the educator's 'directivity' interferes with the creative, formulative, investigative capacity of the educands, then the necessary directivity is transformed into manipulation, into authoritarianism" (p. 66). To be authoritarian would, after all, be to treat students as objects, and therefore dehumanize them. Liberatory pedagogy, then, requires that teachers negotiate the relationship between freedom and authority in their classroom, and understand that "authority ... has its foundation in the freedom of others" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 91). This means being neither completely hands off or "laissez faire" nor does it mean being authoritarian and dictatorial. Rather, as Freire puts it, liberatory educators have to be "radically democratic" in their pedagogy, which translates into being "responsible and directive" in the classroom while respecting the students' right to come to their own conclusions (P. Freire & Macedo, 1995).

Freire is clear, however, that while the liberatory teacher is, "*Not* directive of the *students*," she or he is "directive of the process" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 46, original

emphasis). In this regard the liberatory teacher knows two things when they begin dialogue with the students: 1) The starting point - which is knowledge of the object of study and 2) "the horizon that she or he wants to get to," where to go with that knowledge (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 103). Consistent with his theory of knowledge, Freire's liberatory pedagogy, like all pedagogies, is enacted in the world and therefore is inherently ideological, political, and decidedly not neutral. Likewise, because knowledge and education are socially situated and negotiated, then liberatory pedagogy is explicitly about social change through the development of critical consciousness. If students, teachers, and knowledge are all dialectically interrelated with the world, and if the point, the "gnosiology," [iv] is to *be* praxis, to be critical reflection in action, then knowledge of the world also implies taking action in the world as well. Hence liberatory pedagogy cannot be contained only within the classroom (P. Freire, 1974; Shor & Freire, 1987), because it implies social action as well. In an excellent discussion in *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (Shor & Freire, 1987), Freire discusses the role of education in social transformation. In his analysis he is clear that schools cannot be the lever of social change, that it takes more than schools and education to be the driving force for social transformation. However he is equally clear that schools and education, because of the key role that they play in the development of critical consciousness, are absolutely essential parts of broader social change - perhaps even a requirement.

Misconceiving Freire's Critical Pedagogy

Thus far I have demonstrated how Freire's conception of critical pedagogy flows directly from a Marxist, dialectical materialist epistemology. In doing so, I have also illustrated how grasping Freire's Marxism allows for a deeper grasp of Freire's pedagogy (Allman, 1999). The importance of the connection between Freire's pedagogy and Marxist epistemology cannot be overstated, because without a firm understanding of the dialectical materialist foundation of Freire's approach to liberatory education, critical misunderstandings manifest. Here I use examples from the edited collection, *Rethinking Freire: Globalization and the Environmental Crisis* (Bowers & Apffel-Marglin, 2005) to illustrate this point.

According to the cover, the contributors to *Rethinking Freire* (Bowers & Apffel-Marglin, 2005) consist of "third world" educators and activists who claim to have

implemented Freire's conception of critical pedagogy in contexts as diverse as India, Peru, and Cambodia, finding it ineffective and even oppressive towards indigenous populations. A critical analysis of their claims, however, finds these authors embody the ways in which a critical misreading of Freire can result from a lack of fully grasping Freire's epistemological foundations. For instance, as part of their arguments, several of these authors claim that Freire's pedagogy promotes individualism (Bowers, 2005; Rasmussen, 2005; Robinson, 2005; Vasquez, 2005). Making this particular claim about Freire's work is not novel (see, e.g., Ellsworth, 1989; Weiler, 1991), and it grows from an understanding of Freire as the ideological descendant of the Western rationalism associated with the European Enlightenment. Such a conception, however, needs to be problematized based on the arguments I've made here. As I explained at length earlier in this paper, Freire's conception of consciousness and transformation is not individual, but social, and that there is no dichotomy between humans and the world around them - other humans included (see, e.g., P. Freire, 1974, 1982b; P. Freire & Macedo, 1995). Thus for Freire there is an ongoing, dialectical, and reflexive relationship between individuals and the world, a social consciousness that, again, as I argue above, recognizes there is no "I think" and only a "we think" (P. Freire, 1982b, p. 137). Any claims that Freire's pedagogy promotes individualism simply does not grasp Freire's dialectical conception of human consciousness as being fundamentally based in human collectivity (Au & Apple, 2007).

Another way in which *Rethinking Freire* (Bowers & Apffel-Marglin, 2005) illustrates the difficulties that arise from not understanding Freire's dialectical materialist epistemology is the way several contributors characterize Freire's relationship between students and teachers. For instance, Bejarano (2005) and Esteva, Stuchul, and Prakash (2005) assert that, within Freire's conception of critical pedagogy, the teachers act as a vanguard of intellectuals that bring the "correct" knowledge to the people. In a related critique, Rasmussen (2005) and Siddhartha (2005) both claim that Freire's pedagogy does not value indigenous knowledge. Both of these critiques essentially charge Freire and his pedagogical model with being elitist, and both of these critiques are fundamentally incorrect. Again, as I outline in detail above, Freire both recognizes that teachers do maintain a specific type of democratic authority in the classroom and that students and teacher are jointly responsible for leadership within the pedagogic relationship (see, e.g., P. Freire, 1974, 1982b, 1992). This again

is a reflection of Freire's dialectical materialist epistemology that sees humans - both teachers and students - both in constant interaction and in constant development, while also recognizing that individuals can only think for themselves.

Further, recognition of the dialectical interaction of the pedagogic relationship does not allow for the teacher to be elitist or to disregard student/indigenous knowledge and perspective (McLaren, 2000).[v] Indeed, for Freire, movement towards critical consciousness *requires* student input and even begins with the student's participation and perspectives. As Freire (1992) explains,

With progressive education, respect for the knowledge of living experience is inserted into the larger horizon against which it is generated ... Respect for popular knowledge, then, necessarily implies respect for cultural context. Educands' concrete localization is the point of departure for the knowledge they create in the world. "Their" world, in the last analysis, is the primary and inescapable face of the world itself. (p. 72)

Indeed, to claim that Freire's conception of liberatory pedagogy justifies the views that teachers are an elite vanguard that deliver the correct knowledge to the people is to claim that Freire advocates a "banking" form of education - a form of education that lies in direct opposition to Freire's pedagogy (Au & Apple, 2007).

Freire himself was well aware of how partial understandings of his pedagogy can lead some, such as those included in the *Rethinking Freire* collection, to negatively view Freire's work. He remarks that:

[O]ne of the reasons that many progressive and liberal educators in the United States have difficulty in comprehending [my] concept ... is not necessarily because they are incapable of understanding the concept. It is perhaps because they have only absorbed the substance of my ideas to a certain degree, while remaining ideologically chained to a position that is anti-Freirian. Thus, by only partially accepting my ideological aspirations, they then develop doubts and questions with respect to specific methods and techniques. In this way they rationalize their total movement away from critically embracing what I represent in terms of theoretical proposals for change and for radical democracy and for history as possibility and for a less discriminatory society and a more humane world. (P. Freire, 1997, p. 328)

Indeed, without a complete grasp of the substance of Freire's ideas, his dialectical materialist epistemology in particular, the contributors to *Rethinking Freire* seem to have rationalized "their total movement away" from Freire's liberatory pedagogy thus

positioning themselves as anti-Freirian through falsely claiming that Freire's pedagogy as oppressive (Au & Apple, 2007).[vi]

Conclusion

In this paper, using a close textual analysis, I have explained how the epistemological commitments of Paulo Freire are steeped within the Marxist, dialectical materialist tradition. Consequently, I have also demonstrated how Freire's conception of critical pedagogy extends directly from this epistemological foundation. The importance of this explication is three-fold. First, it helps illuminate some of the Marxist foundations of Freire's work, a task made necessary both by the appropriation of Freire's work (and subsequent distancing from this radical tradition) by liberal educators in various contexts, and by scholarly-political debates with critical educational theory itself. Second, such an understanding clarifies how Freire's conception of liberatory pedagogy also requires a grasp of his epistemological underpinnings. Examples from the collection, *Rethinking Freire* served to illustrate how a lack of a grasp of these underpinnings leads to misunderstandings, misapplications, and misappropriations of Freire's work (and hence, lead to mistaken critiques as well). Third, and perhaps most importantly, the conceptual work completed here not only deepens our understanding of Freire's pedagogy but also enables all of us to more successfully reinvent and reapply Freire's conception of critical pedagogy in a wide variety of contexts as part of the political project of challenging human oppression around the world.

Notes

[i] In this regard, this paper will focus on the argument that fundamentally Freire embraced a Marxist, dialectical materialist epistemology in his pedagogy and will not include a discussion of Freire's political commitments and whether or not those commitments were "authentically" Marxist. For the purposes of this paper I will explicitly be sidelining much of the political discussion in favor of the philosophical/epistemological one. This requires a focus on the concepts themselves and not on the compatibility of Freire and Marx's other, broader, and much more diverse political analyses. What I must make clear, however, is that this is not an attempt to evacuate the politics from Freire's work (or Marx's for that matter). Freire's life and work was devoted to human liberation from oppression. From his literacy

work with peasants in Brazil and Guinea-Bissau to his speaking and scholarship that has touched most corners of the world, Freire and his work have become symbolic for those of us who see the power and possibility for social justice in the spaces created within education. I share many of the same political commitments with Freire, and this paper is meant to be a testament to the strength of his legacy - one that I clearly feel should be built upon and even improved upon as well.

[ii] While this paper does not take them up as a point of focus, Freire develops his more traditionally humanist sensibilities in his later works where he takes up the role that love and hope, amongst others, play in liberatory pedagogy (see P. Freire, 1992; P. Freire, 1998a; P. Freire, 2004).

[iii] It is important to note that, although detailed explanations of various aspects of Freire's pedagogy have been provided elsewhere (see, e.g., McLaren, 2000), what follows is unique in that it details specific ways in which Freire's pedagogy are an immediate outgrowth of his dialectical materialist epistemology. Thus I seek to reiterate Freire's pedagogy explicitly within the context of his dialectical materialism, which has not been done before.

[iv] "Gnosiology" and "gnosiological" are terms that Freire used regularly in his earlier work to refer to how we judge or value what is worth knowing in our epistemology.

[v] Although I cite McLaren in defense of this particular point, I would like to note that in his text, cited here (pg. 159), McLaren himself succumbs to a lack of application of dialectics in his attack on conceptions of vanguards, which, if understood dialectically and in a Leninist manner, actually correlate with teachers in a Freirian conception (see, Au, 2007, for a discussion of vanguards and teachers).

[vi] A similar argument can be made regarding Ellsworth's (1989) critique of Freire.

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