

FORUM

Conservation, Class Struggle, or Both: A Response to C.A. Bowers*

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For approximately 20 years, C.A. “Chet” Bowers, a fierce anti-Marxist who seems to have little taste for the socialist tradition, has been a harsh critic of my work and that of Paulo Freire and others who have attempted to develop a pedagogy of the oppressed, which today often goes under the term “critical pedagogy.” While the essay to which I am responding, “Silences and Double Binds: Why the Theories of John Dewey and Paulo Freire Cannot Contribute to Revitalizing the Commons, deals with Bowers’ criticisms of Paulo Freire and John Dewey, I am limiting my remarks to Freire’s work for the interests of space, and also because I am much more familiar with Freire’s work and legacy.

Once a jaded habitu  of caf  Freire who was popular with the bon ton of the educational left, Bowers has transformed Freire into an implacable adversary of tradition and himself into a self-appointed thorn in the side of Freire’s teaching and legacy. And while he has thrust his thorn as deep as possible inside the skin of Freire’s magisterial corpus, it has not resulted in so much as a slight desquamation. That the various apices of critical pedagogy’s influence over the progressive tradition during the last several decades still bear the stamp of Freire’s theoretical work—despite Bowers’ many efforts to discredit him—only seems to raise the choler of our ill-tempered maestro.

The exhausting declamations that comprise Bowers’ often pathetic attempts to limn the “real” Freire for the duped masses of educators who revere him have transformed Freire into a matryoshka doll in which each dimension of his ethnocentrism discovers another more insidious one nested within. And while his near aversion to anything that reflects even the slightest hint of Western epistemologies has served as a roadblock to the development of Bower’s grasp of Freire’s concept of liberation, he has, I am pleased to report, made some definite headway. After all of these years of acting like a cranky old curmudgeon about all things pedagogical, Bowers is clearly making important advances on some crucial issues. Unfortunately, however, he’s up to his same old grandstanding pranks when it comes to some familiar themes, like the cultural imperialism that supposedly soaks to the bone Freire’s storied pedagogy of the oppressed, rendering it little more than a tool of the eurocentric critical theorists.

Let me begin with some comments on what is exceedingly worthwhile and admirable in Bowers’ work. After years of objections to Bower’s early work, I have been pleased to see in his recent work a sophisticated defense of the rights of indigenous peoples to maintain sustainable traditions in opposition to the ravages of capitalism. He clearly understands and respects the indigenous peoples’ movement, which is very much to his credit. Given the legacy of genocide and ecocide wrought by colonization and imperialism under the blood-soaked banner of “progress,” one can hardly imagine not being genuinely in solidarity those who have been and continue to suffer most from capitalism’s esurient attempts to end communal control of the means of subsistence, from the biotechnological re-appropriation of food crops, from the creation of a new mobile and migrant reservoir of labor power and

from efforts to seize land for debt and to destroy all non-market social systems. David Harvey has called this process “accumulation by dispossession,” wherein the problem of overaccumulation is putatively “solved” in new ways by an intensification and fine-tuning of what Marx called “primitive accumulation.” The displacement of peasant populations and the formation of the landless proletariat has accelerated in some countries, where nationalized industries have been privatized and family farming has been taken over by agribusiness, where new forms of slavery proliferates, and where formerly common property resources, such as water, have been privatized and brought within the capitalist logic of accumulation, and where “alternative [indigenous and even, in the case of the United States, petty commodity] forms of production and consumption have been suppressed.”

The destructive effects of mechanization and overproduction, the elimination of the petit-bourgeois and small farmers, the global division of labor, the anarchy of the marketplace—all of these are devastating the commons, as Bowers knows full well. Here in the United States we watch the Bush administration forging its own chains of ecological destruction, dragging them across the planet like some kind of Marley’s ghost drunk on laudanum and transformed into a capitalist colossus, leaving acre-sized furrows in its bloody wake filled with the groans of the dead and dying. And while not all indigenous peoples are as quick as Bowers to close the door on Western knowledge and technology (since in some cases the fight against extermination demands some kind of facility with Western knowledge, at least at this point in the their struggle) there is no question that Bowers’ work on indigenous knowledges and his critique of eurocentrism are welcome. I wish there was more systematic discussion of capitalism in Bowers’ work outside of nonspecific comments on “the market,” “industrial culture,” and the erasure of the commons. But this would require a serious engagement with Marx, which we are not going to see from Bowers.

When it comes to engaging Freire as the bellwether of critical pedagogy, however, Bowers is lost in a mephitic fog. No doubt, he raises several claims worthy of consideration: 1) that the languages of indigenous cultures often encode ways of protecting the environment and animals, 2) that Freire’s belief that all change is linear and progressive might recapitulate a Western colonialist understanding of the world and its peoples, and 3) that Freire’s commitment to “critical reflection” without a grounding in local culture or tradition can too easily become future justifications of technological advancement, war and even geopolitical manipulation. But when he tries to explore these claims, the stalwart critic of ecological destruction mutates into a hobbledehoy with ants in his britches.

International icons such as Paulo Freire should never be regarded as off-limits to honest criticism. Freire’s own pedagogy mandates that his work be critically interrogated. And while there surely are weaknesses to Freire’s work that demand attention, Bowers misses the mark on nearly every objection he raises.

In my opinion, it is Bowers’ often pernicious anti-Marxism that underlies the orogeny of falsehoods comprising his 20-year piling up of excremental attacks against the tradition of critical education in education. In addition, Bowers’ intellectual rendezvous with Freire has resulted in a hypertrophied critique that is more public display than systematic analysis. When it comes to evaluating Freire’s work, Bowers acts like a mulching machine, thinning out the overstock of Freire’s ideas on the pedagogy of the oppressed and leaving few seeds of promise to be harvested.

Let me get right to the point: Freire is not against conservation, he is not against challenging forces of change that might, under the radar of the dominant optic, operate as a form of cultural invasion. Freirean pedagogy, in fact, demands that all forms of change be examined for its “hidden curriculum” or unexamined catechism. Bowers’ assessment, however, unfortunately misreads Freire’s ideas about cultural transmission: because Freire is against the banking approach to education (the “depositing” of knowledge as if the educand [the word Freire uses for “student”] were an “empty vessel”), he therefore must be against cultural transmission altogether. Because Bowers is particularly concerned with the passing on of traditional knowledge from generation to generation, he mistakenly assumes that Freire’s position against the banking method is tantamount to being against cultural diversity (the passing on of local cultural traditions, i.e., the passing on of ancestral knowledge from the elders of the tribe) that would be necessary for more sustainable environmental thinking, or what he calls ecopedagogy.

Yet never once to my knowledge did Freire ever advocate that we should ignore or refuse to learn from previous generations. If anything, Freire has consistently and coherently emphasized that the teacher who is often from a different generation from the learner be, in fact, fully directive in his/her approach (the view that Freire wanted teachers to be simple facilitators in the classroom and not directive pedagogues remains a persistent myth within the liberal educational tradition). What Freire calls for is the creation of a critical disposition towards knowledge in which students and teachers engage critically both traditional as well as oppositional knowledge from the past and present in an act of knowing that involves co-investigation. This includes knowledge and ways of knowing handed down by previous generations. Freire’s ideal of the fully humanized individual who relies upon critical reflection to continually rename the world in no way implies abandoning the mentoring relationships, direct observation and embodied learning provided by the traditional community. Each generation reinterprets the traditions of the last, whether we want to admit it or not. We do best to open a dialogue with students about the environments they live in, rather than by imagining that some sort of ideal tradition will take care of environmental crisis by itself.

Freire’s point was to teach oppressed groups to violate their accommodation to the capitalist law of value in order to contest the validity of both the ruling-class culture imposed upon them from without and the logic of accumulation developed from within the culture of the oppressed classes themselves. Freire’s pedagogy had a great deal to say to the oppressors, as well. Freire reminds us that teaching cannot be reduced to the one-way transmission of the object of knowledge, or a two-way transaction between the teacher and the student. Rather, teaching is a form of dialectical transformation of both the teacher and the student, and this occurs when a teacher knows the content of what is to be taught, and a student learns how to learn. Teaching occurs when educators re-cognize his or her knowing in the knowing of the students.

Freire argues that teachers must challenge students to move beyond their commonsense beliefs and assumptions regarding their self-in-the-world and their self-with-the-world, but they must do so by respecting the commonsense knowledge that students bring into the classroom. Freire notes: “What is impermissible—I repeat myself, now—is disrespect for the knowledge of common sense. What is impermissible is the attempt to

transcend it without starting with it and proceeding by way of it.” Yet at the same time, we have a duty to challenge the students’ feelings of certainty about their own experiential knowledge. Freire asks:

] What kind of educator would I be if I did not feel moved by a powerful impulse to seek, without lying, convincing arguments in defense of the dreams for which I struggle, in defense of the “why” of the hope with which I act as an educator? What is not permissible to be doing is to conceal truths, deny information, impose principles, eviscerate the educands of their freedom, or punish them, no matter by what method, if, for various reasons, they fail to accept my discourse—reject my utopia.

] Freire makes it clear that we must reject a “focalist” approach to students’ experiential knowledge. Instead we must approach a student’s experiential knowledge contextually, inserting our respect for such knowledge “into the larger horizon against which it is generated—the horizon of cultural context, which cannot be understood apart from its class particularities, and this indeed in societies so complex that the characterization of those particularities is less easy to come by.” Students’ experiences must be understood within the contextual and historical specificities in which such experiences are produced. They must be read dialectically against the larger totality in which they are generated. For Freire, the regional emerges from the local, the national emerges from the regional, the continental emerges from the national, and the worldwide emerges from the continental. He warns: “Just as it is a mistake to get stuck in the local, losing our vision of the whole, so also it is a mistake to waft above the whole, renouncing any reference to the local when the whole has emerged.” We are universalists, yes, because we struggle for universal human rights and economic justice worldwide. But we begin from somewhere, from concrete spaces and places where subjectivities are forged and commodified (and we hope de-commodified) and where critical agency is developed in particular and distinct ways. And when Freire speaks of struggling to build a utopia, he is speaking of a concrete as opposed to an abstract utopia, a utopia grounded in the present, always operating “from the tension between the denunciation of a present becoming more and more intolerable, and the “annunciation,” announcement, of a future to be created, built—politically, esthetically, and ethically—by us women and men.” Utopias are always in motion; they are never pre-given; they never exist as blueprints, which would only ensure the “mechanical repetition of the present.” Rather they exist within the movement of history itself, as opportunity and not as determinism. They are never guaranteed.

] Clearly, serious Freirean scholars recognize that Freire’s ideas do not entail the end to cultural transmission, because the alternative to the banking method has to do with what he calls “reconciliation”—reconciling the poles of the contradiction (between teachers and students) so that both simultaneously become teachers and students. Freire specifically attacks the banking method because it is institutionalized for normalizing educands, thus preventing the possibility of diversity. Additionally, Bowers is concerned that eco-sustainable methods that have been developed through multiple cultural practices would be denied in Freire’s conception of reflective thinking, because Freire maintains the idea of linear progress. Freire explicitly rejects the linear progressivism associated with the mechanistic view of historical progress or the vulgar evolutionist approach to development, which considers bourgeois society universally superior to social formations that preceded it. Freire specifically orients reflective thinking towards a resistance to domination. This resistance to domination—and exploitation—is the signal referent behind what counts as social

transformation for Freire and shapes his vision of moving away from “what is” to “what could be,” from the historical present to a future that remains open and as yet unachieved. In fact, Freire’s dialectical approach to social transformation considers both the precapitalist past and the socialist future but as these are mediated by the capitalist present and the current class struggle. Reality, for Freire, is thus scrutinized for the elements of it that are creating and reproducing the system of oppression, and reflective thinking is used to challenge that. By definition, resistance to domination is always an improvement over domination, and Freire does not maintain that all elements of reality and culture need to be changed in order to end domination. Bowers’ goals of ecological sustainability would thus benefit from Freire’s insights, because ecological devastation is a form of cultural domination that should be resisted. One of the ways to resist this form of domination that might be developed through critical reflection would be preserving and even expanding certain cultural practices and traditions.

Freire’s position revolves around the production of critical consciousness through popular education strategies that would redress extant power balances between groups who possessed asymmetrical relations of power and who inhabited the global North and South. This is premised, of course, on the foundational pedagogical idea that the oppressed themselves must frame the cultural interactions that lead to their own liberation and empowerment. Attributing individualistic notions to Freire such as Bowers’ specious claim that Freire promotes a pedagogy that supplies “the form of individualism needed by the industrial culture” is in contradistinction to Freire’s actual work and undercuts and subverts Freire’s emphasis on collectivity in both thought and action. Autonomy, in Freire’s ontological reflections, was not a slight against collectivism but about moving away from being a blind instrument of the ruling class to becoming an initiator of praxis; from being a clerk of capitalism, to becoming an active agent for socialist struggle.

While Freire never systematically dealt with the problems of environmental sustainability, that has in no way prevented educators influenced by Freire with engaging in ecopedagogical work, for instance, work being done in accordance with the Earth Charter. Furthermore the ecological sensitivity of Freire and his associates can be clearly seen in the generative themes that served as the bases of the curricula in the popular public schools to which he helped give rise when he was Secretary of Education in Sao Paulo. Because critical pedagogy is dynamic rather than static, subject to ongoing critical scrutiny, Freire encouraged educators to challenge his ideas and reinvent them in the contextual specificity of their own local, national, and transnational struggles. That doesn’t stop Bowers from gleefully lancing Freire’s work with an embalming tube filled with his usual invective and turning the faucet handle rightward. Bowers has, over the years, developed a singular penchant for ignoring the variegated thought that can be called Freirean as well as the wide range of applications of his work.

So while Bowers makes an important argument about the value of indigenous knowledge, non-capitalist spaces, and protecting and preserving global commons for their ecological values and not exploiting them because of their extractive value, he fails to understand how consistent his argument is with a Marxist, Freirean or even broadly Leftist perspective, which does focus on how people at the grassroots organize socially, politically and even economically to produce environmental and social alternatives. Very often such alternatives draw upon subaltern histories and knowledges. As Peter Mayo, Donaldo Macedo

and others have pointed out, Freire always championed the languages of subaltern groups, and this arises most clearly in his work in Africa when he insisted on the use of Creole as the language of the literacy campaign in Guinea Bissau. This important piece of advice alas fell on deaf ears, since the PAIGC government insisted on using the colonial Portuguese language instead, and as a result, the campaign was an unmitigated disaster. Rather than urging students to reject a community's knowledge and patterns of moral reciprocity that contributed to living more self-sufficient and less consumer-dependent lives, Freire's work is diametrically opposed to this position. Freirean pedagogy is directed at helping individuals and groups discern the difference between what is enabling about the various communities in which they find themselves a part, and what is disabling.

I don't want to ignore the fact that Freire was a product of his own historical circumstances, just as Bowers is himself (isn't his facile reproduction of the nature/culture binary throughout his paper illustrative of his own unconscious indebtedness to a Western episteme?). But it is equally important to recognize that the collective work of environmental activists and thinkers draws on many things: place-based histories and struggles, ideas about culture and nature, and of course, the resilience of traditional knowledge. Donna Houston and other critical geographers, for instance, hold Freire important precisely because his pedagogy provides a "portable framework" for linking knowledge, memory and experience of places and environments to an understanding of the processes and forces that have produced environmental injustice in the first instance. As Donna Houston and I have noted, too much emphasis on culture inevitably leads to relativism at best, and moralizing about the nature of indigeneity by non-Indigenous people at worst. None of this adequately explains how environmental racism, for example, works, how it is tied to the racial and economic history of places and nations, or what kinds of things might be done about it. Can Bowers himself develop his theory of ecojustice, which smacks of unproductive universalisms, without falling prey to his own logic of colonization? Is he not appropriating indigenous knowledges, even if he ultimately has good intentions, for his own purposes? How can he account for over 500 years of colonizing violence other than to blame it on technology and industrialization, for which he provides no concrete historical analysis? He is very quick to criticize and dismiss people who have spent many years working around environmental politics and/or in solidarity with indigenous people (many of them probably readers of *CNS*), because they happen to like or read Freire. This is plain silly.

As Donna Houston and others note: If we do not pay attention to the structures of environmental inequity and the pathways of economic and political dependence they create; if we do not have an understanding of how ostensibly "new" economic and political formations such as neoliberalism (the consequences of which Bowers does briefly address, such as the monetization of land, privatization of resources such as water, and the growing consensus around the world on the need for nuclear power to combat global warming) are produced, then we will not know how to transform them. It is almost beyond comprehension that we would have to clarify here that this project is not about transforming the resistant/resilient knowledges brought to bear on these issues, but that these local and translocal knowledges inform the very grounds upon which to act. Transforming is of course about "remaking," but it does not logically follow that it is about remaking "anew" or remaking everything. And it doesn't logically follow that the critique of "development" in radical theories of capitalism must mirror its dominant economic and historical form by traveling along an evolutionary trajectory.

Grassroots environmental politics and activism often work within a Freirean pedagogy as a tactic for building common ground, common ground that does not exist “in nature” but that which is collectively struggled for and that will be achieved only if the issues of structural inequity, white privilege, land rights, and social class are carefully mapped out. If indigenous people then choose to share their traditions and practices, all to the better. But we should not make this a baseline “requirement” of indigenous participation in global environmental politics. (Many indigenous people have had quite enough of “sharing” their culture, land, and resources with white folk.) Houston advocates critical pedagogy here not only because it produces an alternate archive of anti-capitalist practices but also because it develops this knowledge into concrete practices, which on the ground are diverse, messy and do not always add up—most certainly they do not add up into an evolutionary tale of progress.

Again, as Houston and I have argued, over half the world’s population now live in cities, and even if Bowers’ focus is primarily in the Third World, how does his theory deal with the urban? And what does he make of places already blighted by capitalist disaccumulation? Is there not an important set of links to be made here? What about the connections between environmental in/justice and urban schooling? Bowers has staked his career so much on a critique of Freire and critical pedagogy that it is quite likely he will ignore such questions, as he has been doing for decades.

So while Bowers is now using a critique of neoliberalism to discredit theorists who would use Freire (or Marx) to critique neoliberalism, he fails to engage the Marxist roots of Freire—or Marx himself—to further explore the radical implications of a red-green alliance. The present environmental crisis is going to involve an expanded vision of what can be done to deal with rapid environmental change. For instance, indigenous people are some of the world’s most vulnerable people to climate change and have been adopting practices to mitigate it. But climate change will also have to be dealt with by educators, environmental activists, policy makers, urban planners, school children, scientists, and so on. This will be the collective work of many activists, citizens and scholars. Freire’s work can certainly enable people to learn the remaining sustainable traditions of various tribes and reconstruct their life accordingly in ways that promote peace, endurance, conservation, and harmony. Critical pedagogy can also help indigenous groups partner strategically with Western technology and with non-indigenous radical groups in the peace, environmental, women’s, and other movements to struggle against the forces that seek to assimilate them and/or exterminate them. Bowers’ pessimism on this score leads me to wonder why the MST, the Brazilian movement for landless peasants which includes many indigenous people and which attaches importance to environmental issues in its programs, derive so much inspiration from Freire. I guess they need to rusticate in the hills of Colorado and take lessons from Bowers on the dangers of Western epistemes in Freire’s work.

Critical pedagogy seeks to build a world outside of capital’s law of value, outside of capital’s social form. Such a world would take the form of alternative economic spaces, ecosocialist “preconfigurations” (as Joel Kovel refers to them), economic spaces where capitalist rules of exploitation and accumulation do not temporarily apply. This ecosocialist way forward will, I hope, one day help bring about a permanent alternative to the universe of capitalism—a socialist alternative. What constitutes Bowers’ cultural commons, his own

valued traditions, remains obscure.□

Critical pedagogy, of course, is not only interested in the question of how we arrive at “ecological justice,” but, rather, how we achieve a global, sustainable society. Is it only by returning to “traditional culture” that we will achieve sustainability? In answering such a question we need to examine the question of whether capitalism is at all sustainable. As capitalism falsely advertises itself as an economic formation where capitalist growth is the foundation of increased wealth and prosperity for every individual, we are faced with the reality that it continues to dismantle the Earth’s ecosystems while disrupting climate patterns with (among other things) 85 million barrels per day of oil-burning. The urgent challenge facing critical educators is to figure out how to create an alternative social order once it collapses.

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Progressive teachers in the United States can see their dreams and longings of a world arching towards social and economic justice and sustainability reflected in the mirror of Freire’s pedagogical dream, a dream inspired by a hope born of political struggle and a belief in the ability of the oppressed to transform the world from “what is” to “what could be,” to re-imagine, re-enchant, and recreate the world rather than adapt to it.□The reverse mirror image of such a dream is that which drives the “neutral” pedagogy that neoconservatives are struggling to bring about in the United States. And we all know where that has led.