and identity as relational and contextual within feminist studies, composition studies, and critical pedagogy. We need to become more self-reflexive in our role in the struggle over material bodies, social relations, labor, and power in terms not only of what we say or do not say but also of how we say what we say.


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In the United States, critical education is under siege. On the one hand, conservatives have dominated the public discourse on education in the media and in the universities, making the radicalization of the educational process seem like a utopian fantasy of leftist intellectuals utterly out of touch with "real world" issues. On the other hand, many leftist educational theorists have inadvertently helped "de-politicize" the discourse of critical education through their failure to articulate and organize a cohesive oppositional vision that keeps pace with postmodern concerns while maintaining a pedagogical and political investment in the important liberatory tenets of modernity, such as freedom, democracy, and autonomy. Offering clarity to this muddled discourse, *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Paulo Freire's last book before his death in 1997, offers readers a philosophical treatise concerned with mapping the principles not only of a radical pedagogy, but of what it might mean to live a radicalized life as well. His ideas are markedly different from many articles and books written about "critical" pedagogy in recent years in that his is not a "theoretical" or a methodological work concerned with a specific cultural, social, political, or pedagogical problematic (although these elements are certainly present). Instead, his ideas present, as Stanley Aronowitz states in his introduction, "'principles of evaluation,' where the term evaluation indicates not a fixed set of criteria from which to make superficial measurements of social policies but a series of concepts by which to forge a new educational process."

In brief, Freire's philosophy of education rests on the belief that autonomy is a condition arising from the ethical and responsible engagement with decision making; that we are "unfinished" in our development as human beings; that conscientization—the development of critical
consciousness—is a necessary condition of freedom; that curiosity, both ontological and epistemological, is the keystone of the educational process and the vocation of the human condition; that hope must be understood as a weapon against the fatalism of neoliberal ideologues; that we are conditioned and not determined; that we must not reify knowledge, but critique it; and that an ethics of respect, solidarity, and authority must inform all critical practices of pedagogical intervention. These philosophical concerns root the educational process in the radical democratic sphere, while offering routes—theoretical and practical—toward a political, social, individual, and spiritual horizon not yet known. His philosophy of education cannot and should not be separated from what it means to live as powerful, disciplined, free, and ethical individuals—ethical because of our “capacity to ‘spiritualize’ the world, to make it either beautiful or ugly.”

His philosophy of “unfinishedness” offers a critical component to what has sometimes been considered his unrealistic utopian vision. By recognizing the human condition as unfinished, he subverts the fatalistic determinism of neoliberal politics while providing an ethical referent to an educational philosophy most easily recognized by its belief in freedom, agency, and hope. He states, “I hold that my own unity and identity, in regard to others and the world, constitutes my essential and irrepeatable way of experiencing myself as a cultural, historical, and unfinished being in the world, simultaneously conscious of my unfinishedness.” As such, our unfinishedness constitutes our ethical vocation “to opt, to decide, to struggle, to be political.” We are ethical beings, capable both of transgressing our ethical vocation and of living up to all the possibilities it implies.

But ethics is a loaded term in this neoliberal age of fatalistic and nihilistic relativism. Freire situates ethics as a social and political referent, shifting the pragmatic gaze of neoliberals and postmodernists alike toward the concrete reality of social injustice:

I am speaking of an ethic that is not afraid to condemn the exploitation of labor and the manipulation that makes rumor into truth and truth into mere rumor. To condemn the fabrication of illusions, in which the unprepared become hopelessly trapped and the weak and the defenseless are destroyed. To condemn making promises when one has no intention of keeping one’s word, which causes lying to become an almost necessary way of life. To condemn the calumny of character assassination simply for the joy of it and the fragmentation of the utopia of human solidarity. The ethic of which I seek is that which feels itself betrayed and neglected
by the hypocritical perversion of an elitist purity, an ethic affronted by racial, sexual, and class discrimination. For the sake of this ethic, which is inseparable from educative practices, we should struggle, whether our work is with children, youth, or adults.

Ethics as a political category articulates a certain vision of time and space, mind, body, and spirit, one that understands political praxis as a means to liberation and freedom. Instead of understanding ethics as ahistorical, on the one hand, or hopelessly relativistic, on the other, Freire deploys it politically, as a tool for social engagement and transformation. This move suggests an ethics that is material, action-oriented, and integral to the pedagogical project. In short, it is this kind of ethical politics that must guide personal and collective actions against injustice, oppression, and violence.

Freirean ethics is not characterized by a naive optimism about the future or a simplistic rendering of the social world. Rather, he situates the vocation of becoming within a theory of political engagement, suggesting the real link between critical consciousness and our unfinishedness. By linking these two ideas, Freire is able to argue successfully against the brutality of neoliberalism and its fatalistic determinations of the future and the past:

In the 1960s, when I reflected on these obstacles I called for “conscientization,” not as a panacea but as an attempt at critical awareness of those obstacles and their raison d’être. And, in the face of pragmatic, reactionary, and fatalistic neoliberal philosophizing, I still insist, without falling into the trap of “idealism,” on the absolute necessity of conscientization. In truth, conscientization is a requirement of our human condition. It is one of the roads we have to follow if we are to deepen our awareness of our world, of facts, of events, of the demands of human consciousness to develop our capacity for epistemological curiosity. Far from being alien to our human condition, conscientization is natural to “unfinished” humanity that is aware of its unfinishedness.

For Freire, a pedagogy of “unfinishedness” would understand the human race as a conditioned species, “epistemologically curious” and inserted into “a permanent process of searching.” Our unfinishedness implies a pedagogical and political project that is never ending, yet possible.

This line of reasoning leads Freire to discuss “the radical nature of hope”—that by recognizing our capacity to intervene in the world, to make decisions, we can transform that which is wrong. For Freire
possibility is part of a "concretized" utopianism, while hope becomes the apparatus of transformative teaching and learning. It is in the dialectic of hope that we find possibility; it is in the pedagogical that we find hope. As Freire explains, "In truth, from the point of view of the human condition, hope is an essential component and not an intruder. As such, political and pedagogical praxis becomes a way to orient our unfinishedness in the direction of an ethical freedom and practical hope. He argues, "I am first a being of hope who, for any number of reasons, may thereafter lose hope..." So, for Freire, hope is not only ontological, but also political and pedagogical. For the radical educator, this means not simply acknowledging the value of student experiences, but also rubbing these experiences against the grain of what is, all the while interrogating why it is and how it came to be. It means taking experience as a starting point for the educative process, but then advancing a project of possibility, hope, and transformation that reclaims the legitimacy of what it means to have a political imagination.

In this philosophical context, we are unfinished beings with the right to construct, transform, and invent ourselves as well as the world we want to live in. But we also have an ethical responsibility as social and spiritual beings to intervene in and act against oppression, hardship, and brutality. In short, it is within the creative possibilities of our unfinishedness, within the tension between what we are and what we can become, that Freire's educational philosophy draws its force. If we are unfinished, then the pedagogical task is to be as conscientious and creative as we can be in the development of our minds and bodies so that we can realize not a final end in which we are complete, but new ways of being in and with the world. As Aronowitz concludes in his introduction, "A learner who has reached this point is ready to demand power, which, after all, is the object of any pedagogy of freedom."

Freire's radical principles of unfinishedness, ethics, conscientization, and hope are extremely dangerous to those who advocate the end of history, make a claim of determination against that which is only conditioned, and understand ethics only in so far as it functions to maintain the domination of corporate ideology and the rule of capital. The major transnational forces that continue to "teach" top-down capitalism as the only way to evolve as a global community shy away from his philosophical principles of learning and life because they threaten to emancipate notions like freedom, power, individuality, and success from the logic of the market, moving them into the spheres of democratic authority, social justice, and political action.
For many on the Left, Freire’s philosophical principles represent a dangerous engagement with political and pedagogical authority. Fearing authority and political agency, these progressive educators have understood authority and freedom in one-dimensional terms; that is, authority has been theorized as authoritarian, just as freedom has been construed in its absolute terms as the absence of authority. Although acknowledging the difficulty that the relationship between freedom and authority presents to radical educators and political workers, Freire argues that their relationship needs to be understood as complementary rather than contradictory.

For, Freire authority is not always oppressive and must be seen productively in the service of liberation. Drawing on Erich Fromm’s radical psychology, Freire holds that freedom is not simply freedom from, but should be understood as freedom toward. As such, together they become ethical principles within the sphere of democratic thought: “If [freedom] were without limit it would take me outside the sphere of human action, intervention, or struggle. Limitless freedom is a negation of the human condition of unfinishedness.” This establishes, philosophically, the need to “transmit a sense of limit that can be ethically integrated by freedom itself. The more consciously freedom assumes its necessary limits, the more authority it has, ethically speaking, to continue to struggle in its own name.” Limitless freedom becomes an articulation of domination rather than a critical response to authority. In the pedagogical context, authority must be understood ethically because every act of teaching is an act of intervention; that is, it must be conceived as a way to situate oneself politically while pedagogically “inciting” or “instigating” the students in the classroom.

A teacher is acting ethically when he or she uses his or her authority to learn as well as teach, to uncloak the hidden messages that lie embedded within the normalizing discourse of oppressive regimes so as to be transformed through the interactions he or she has with students. As Freire states, “In the name of the respect I should have toward my students, I do not see why I should omit or hide my political stance by proclaiming a neutral position that does not exist. On the contrary, my role as a teacher is to assent to the students’ right to compare, to choose, to rupture, to decide.” This is why Freire believes that “Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning.” For Freire, teaching and learning are dialectical projects, just as freedom and authority, when thought in complementary terms, become guiding principles toward the radicalization of the democratic sphere.
Lastly, Freire has elevated the notions of respect and humility to radical principles of the educational process. They no longer simply occupy the realm of "civility" or the vernacular; they function, instead, as necessary elements in the radicalization of teaching, learning, and life. As Freire understands it, "Respect for the autonomy and dignity of every person is an ethical imperative and not a favor that we may or may not concede to each other." Particularly relevant today, these notions often are the first to slip outside the discourse of schooling. While students have been criminalized, teachers have been appointed their officers, guards, and disciplinarians. Respect for students is replaced by the judicial power of the school, just as humility is sidelined in favor of superiority. As Freire sees it, "Humility is not made of bureaucratic rituals. Humility expresses, on the contrary, one of the few certainties that I am sure of, namely, that nobody is superior to anyone else. The lack of humility expressed arrogantly in a false superiority of one person over another, of one race over another, of one sex over another, of one class or culture over another, is a transgression of our human vocation to develop." Complicating matters further, students understand respect for teachers to be no more than a capitulation to the oppressive ideology of educational authorities, while teachers must deal with the "absence of the dignity and the respect due to [them] on the part of public or private educational authorities." Freire has no illusions as to the difficulty of upholding and integrating these ideas into teaching. But he concludes that without them, we diminish our capacity to be critical agents and effective teachers.

Paulo Freire has left us with a philosophical manuscript that should be read thoughtfully, for it offers us a series of radically oriented principles of pedagogy and of life. His effort to contextualize his thoughts and concretize his vision while at the same time engaging the sphere of possibility and hope provides a view of the human condition, the educative process, and the political struggle for power as though both ends of a telescope were being looked into simultaneously. It is a perspective that is hard to come by, and even harder to articulate in clear and concise prose. He has shown again why he is one of the most important educational philosophers in the world. With this last book, he provides one of his most important contributions to educational philosophy. By deepening our understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of his educational perspective, we can begin to reenvision what it might mean to radicalize not only the educational process but life itself, and to do so with a praxis of hope, solidarity, political action, "common sense," and, most urgently, humility and respect.